

Symphony in D
Juan Crisóstomo Arriaga (1806–26)

Written: 1825

Duration: 25 minutes

Born exactly fifty years after Mozart, Juan Crisóstomo Arriaga is known as the “Spanish Mozart” or, because he is from Bilbao, even the “Basque Mozart.” Like Mozart, Arriaga was a child prodigy with an ambitious father. Unfortunately, like Mozart, Arriaga also died when he was very young—just shy of his twentieth birthday. Mozart and Arriaga shared two first names: Johannes Chrysostomus or Juan Crisostomo. Unlike Mozart, who completed hundreds of works, left a lasting legacy, and remains famous throughout the world, Arriaga’s output is quite small. Outside of Spain, he is almost forgotten.

Arriaga learned the violin from his father and his older brother. He started composing choral and orchestral works when he was eleven and completed an opera, *Los esclavos felices* (The Happy Slaves), when he was thirteen. (The French music theory teacher Fétis exclaimed, “without any knowledge whatsoever of harmony, Juan Crisóstomo wrote a Spanish opera containing wonderful and completely original ideas.”) When he was fifteen his father sent him to Paris to enroll in the conservatory where he studied violin and theory. Within just a few years, he won prizes for fugue and counterpoint, and when he was eighteen he became the youngest teacher ever appointed at the Conservatoire. Juan was highly competitive. He died of exhaustion two years later.

Arriaga probably heard very little music of Mozart or Beethoven—there were no recordings back then and those masters were very far away—so it is a stretch to say that his music sounds like either of those two. Still, in this *Symphony in D*, you can hear the classical phrasing common to Mozart and Haydn, the sense of drama found in Beethoven, and the long,

spun out melodies of Schubert.

The first movement begins in minor with an extended slow introduction that progresses to a faster section full of urgency. There are vivid dynamic contrasts as well as stark shifts between major and minor. The second movement is happier in tone and melodic through and through. The cheerful third movement has the speed of a Beethoven scherzo, but with gentler rhythmic displacement. The central trio features the flute almost exclusively. The fourth reestablishes the darker, minor mood of the piece, but there are joyful moments as well, especially at the end. With music like this, one wonders what might have been had Arriaga lived longer.

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