Our concert concludes with one of the great works of Western music. Mozart’s Symphony in C major, K. 551, was the last of three symphonies its author wrote with remarkable speed during the summer of 1788. The origin of this symphonic trilogy — to which the Symphony in E-flat, K. 543, and the famous G-minor Symphony, K. 550, also belong — has been the subject of much debate and speculation among Mozart scholars. It was unusual for the composer to create substantial works without a commission or at least the prospect of a performance, yet no occasion for the presentation of these symphonies is known to have existed. Although several theories have been proposed, we cannot say with certainty why Mozart composed these works. The sobriquet “Jupiter,” by which this work has long been known, did not originate with Mozart but, apparently, with an English publisher in the early 19th century. It seems, however, quite appropriate to the Olympian breadth and majesty of the piece.

The work’s opening exemplifies the expressive duality that so thoroughly informs Mozart’s music and, apparently, reflected something fundamental in his character. The long initial subject begins with brief two-part phrases that start vigorously but turn almost at once pliant and gracious. A second theme offers a similarly complex character. Yet it is the light-hearted and apparently innocuous third melody to which Mozart first turns his attention in the movement’s central “development” section, using its final measure as the subject of a bold contrapuntal passage.

After the exhilarating energy of the opening movement, the second offers music that the eminent Mozart scholar Alfred Einstein called “a broad and deep outpouring of the soul.” There follows a splendid and inventive minuet, enlivened by a skilled yet unobtrusive use of counterpoint.

But it is in the finale that Mozart’s genius for contrapuntal writing fully reveals itself. The famous opening subject gives rise to a succession of subsidiary ideas, which Mozart interweaves in various ways. The closing section of the movement offers a breathtaking integration of thematic material.

What to Listen For
The symphony’s initial subject begins with brief two-part phrases that start vigorously but turn almost at once pliant and gracious. A second theme offers a similarly complex character. Yet it is the light-hearted and apparently innocuous third melody to which Mozart first turns his attention in the opening movement’s central “development” section, using its final measure as the subject of a bold contrapuntal passage.
Contrapuntal textures inform the slow movement and minuet also. None of this, however, prepares us for the wealth of polyphonic invention in the finale. The movement’s famous four-note motif emerges quietly in the violins. As the theme begun by this motif unfolds, Mozart adds to it a pair of counter-subjects: a brief fanfare followed by a descending arabesque figure; and an ascending flourish, first heard in the strings. These subsidiary motifs also embroider the second subject, announced by the violins. After brilliantly elaborating these ideas, Mozart begins the concluding section by presenting the principal melody with the second subject added as a counter-theme. Quickly he adds both of the counter-subjects heard earlier, and for another twenty glorious measures plays all four of these thematic ideas against each other in a magnificent contrapuntal tour de force.

_Scored for 1 flute, 2 oboes and 2 bassoons; 2 horns and 2 trumpets; timpani and strings._