

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Wolfgang Mozart

Born January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria.

Died December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria.

Piano Concerto No. 17 in G Major, K. 453

Mozart composed this concerto in early 1784 and entered it in his catalog on April 12. The first performance was given on June 13 of that year in the Viennese suburb of Döbling. The orchestra consists of one flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings. Mitsuko Uchida plays Mozart's cadenzas. Performance time is approximately thirty-two minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 17 were given at Orchestra Hall on March 4 and 5, 1937, with Dalies Frantz as soloist and Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on March 8 and 10, 2007, with Alfred Brendel as soloist and Roberto Abbado conducting. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on July 14, 1949, with William Kapell as soloist and Fritz Reiner conducting, and most recently on July 17, 2007, with Lang Lang as soloist and Long Yu conducting.

According to Mozart's expense book, on May 27, 1784, he purchased, for 34 Kreuzer, a pet starling that learned to whistle the first five measures of the finale of this concerto. Biographers sometimes confuse which came first, the bird or the tune, although since Mozart had already entered the concerto in his catalog on April 12, it seems clear that the music was finished by then and that it was Mozart who taught the tune to the starling and not the other way around.

Mozart's pet was a member of the *Sturnus vulgaris*, the European starling that now thrives in this country as well. The starling is a virtuoso mimic—the *American Scientist* journal reported a starling repeating verbatim, after hearing it said just once, "Does Hammacher Schlemmer have a toll-free number?"—and it has an uncanny ear for musical patterns. Mozart and his starling agreed on the seventeen-note theme for this concerto finale except that the bird always sang one note sharp and held another too long.

Mozart's popularity with the Viennese concert public can be gauged from the number of piano concertos he wrote each year; 1784 was the peak year, with six new concertos. Those are the first works that Mozart entered in the catalog he started that February—a detailed listing, complete with date, instrumentation, and the opening bars of each new piece of music. Both the first entry, a piano concerto in E-flat (K. 449) and this G major concerto, the fifth item, were written not for Mozart's own use, but for one of his most gifted students, Barbara Ployer, often called Babette. Mozart said she paid him handsomely for it, though its value to musicians through the years can't be rendered in common currency.

Barbara Ployer gave the first performance on June 13 at her family's summer home in the Viennese suburb of Döbling, accompanied by an orchestra her father hired for the occasion. Mozart brought along as his guest the celebrated Italian composer Giovanni Paisiello, whose newest hit, *The Barber of Seville*, had already made Figaro an operatic sensation before either Mozart or Rossini got the chance. Mozart himself took the keyboard part in his Quintet in E-flat for piano and winds—the work that directly precedes the concerto in his catalog—and, as an added attraction, joined Miss Ployer in his two-piano sonata, K. 448. The evening was an upscale entertainment heightened by great music. In the way that Mozart managed better than nearly any composer at any time, this music touches both connoisseur and dilettante alike—it's music of surpassing technical brilliance, but also, in Mozart's own words, "written in such a way that the less learned cannot fail to be pleased, though without knowing why."

The concerto is one of Mozart's finest, evidence that, even at the peak of his career as a virtuoso performer, he was as generous when writing for others as for himself. It was well received by the Ployers' guests, and its success quickly spread beyond the suburban enclave of Döbling. It's one of only six of Mozart's piano concertos which were published during his lifetime. Beethoven may well have picked up the unusual idea of a second theme that travels rapidly through several keys from the first movement of this concerto, since he does the same in his own piano concerto in this key. The entire opening Allegro, a particularly graceful rendering of the military march, is delicate in detail and bold in outline, with surprising dips into E-flat at important junctures.

Harmonic drama plays an even more influential role in the C major slow movement, where several powerful modulations and extensive chromaticism give weight to music of great transparency. This is music infinitely more complicated, more troubled than it at first seems. Even the opening statement from the piano swerves from major to minor, and from simple declamation to passionate outburst.

The finale is a set of variations on the tune the starling sang. The variations grow in complexity and ingenuity until the fourth, which plunges headlong into the minor mode, laden with chromaticism. The final variation, almost a cadenza, leads straight to a comic-opera finale, the official coda. Surely Paisiello, whose talent seldom ventured beyond the opera house, marveled that Mozart could afford to waste on the piano concerto a ready-made opera finale more brilliant than anything yet written for the stage. Mozart, of course, realized that the forms weren't mutually exclusive—the merger of the symphonic and the operatic styles is one of his greatest achievements—and that his well was far from dry—he was merely warming up for his own *Figaro* that, in just two years, would wipe Paisiello's from the stage.

A postscript about the starling. The bird lived with his master for three years (moving with the Mozarts first to the spacious apartment behind Saint Stephen's Cathedral where *The Marriage of Figaro* was composed and later to cheaper quarters in the Landstrasse), witnessing the birth of Carl Thomas, the couple's second son; Wolfgang's bout with a severe kidney infection; the historic night Haydn came to listen to string quartets dedicated to him; the birth, and death just a month later, of a third son; and observing, day and night, the greatest composer of the time working at top form. The starling died on June 4, 1787, inspiring in Mozart an elegy that begins, "A little fool lies here / Whom I held dear" Mozart then bought a canary that he kept in his room until a few hours before his own death.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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