

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Wolfgang Mozart

Born January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria.

Died December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria.

Piano Concerto No. 27 in B-flat Major, K. 595

This concerto is dated January 5, 1791, and Mozart himself introduced it on March 4 of that year in Vienna. The orchestra consists of flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings. At these concerts, Mitsuko Uchida plays the cadenzas by Mozart. Performance time is approximately thirty-one minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performance of Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 27 was given at Orchestra Hall on February 22, 1944, with Artur Schnabel as soloist and Hans Lange conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on April 26, 27, and 28, 2007, with Jeffrey Kahane conducting from the keyboard. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on August 11, 1973, with Alicia de Larrocha as soloist and Lawrence Foster conducting, and most recently on June 26, 2005, with Richard Goode as soloist and James Conlon conducting.

Mozart was the greatest pianist of his time, yet we have very little idea of what it was like to be in the audience when he performed. We can hear Brahms playing his own music on record—the sound is faint and scratchy, but we can tell how he shaped a phrase, how he let a melody flow, how much give-and-take he allowed in the tempo—but no one can tell us how Mozart sounded. There are, of course, the stories of Mozart as a child performer: how he could sight-read, improvise, and play with a facility denied most musicians of any age; how he excelled at the stunts his father devised—playing with a cloth draped over the keys, for example—to amuse royalty. But once the child prodigy matured into a true genius—a more unsettling commodity—and abandoned entertainment for art, it becomes difficult to put our finger on precisely what set Mozart's playing apart from all others.

The eyewitness reports are uniformly enthusiastic but short on facts. We don't know how he looked when he sat at the keyboard—whether he leaped at the keys, as the movies suggest, with adolescent delight. There's scarcely one comment as revealing as Mozart's own about a colleague: "She stalks over the clavier with her long bony fingers in such an odd way." There are other vivid remarks scattered throughout his letters about pianists who grimaced and flopped about while playing, or distorted the music with freewheeling use of rubato, and he once advised his sister to play with "plenty of expression, taste, and fire"—characteristics that apparently governed his own performances. There's one particular phrase of his—"it should flow like oil"—that has helped musicians recognize that discretely picking at Mozart's notes is all wrong. But of technical matters, there's very little; on one occasion Mozart wrote to his father that "everyone is amazed that I can always keep strict time. What the people cannot grasp is that in 'tempo rubato' in an adagio, the left hand should go on playing in strict time." Few musicians whose opinions we might still value have left us detailed descriptions. Muzio Clementi, the famous pianist who was once pitted against Mozart in a contest, later recalled simply that he "had never heard anyone perform with such spirit and grace." Mozart realized his concertizing was a digression, anticipating—as too few of his contemporaries did—the day when he would be known instead for the music he wrote. "I would rather neglect the piano than composition," he told his father in February 1778, "for with me the piano is a sideline, though, thank God, a very good one." Indeed, it was his best source of income for many years, and the neighbors regularly watched, sometimes as often as every other day, while his piano was lowered from his window and carted off to his next engagement.

But by 1791, the last year of his life, Mozart was no longer in great demand as a performer, and he had virtually stopped writing music to play in concert. His own catalog tells the story: between February 1784 and December 1786 he entered twelve piano concertos, but there are none listed in 1787, just one in 1788, and one again in 1791. The B-flat major concerto from that final year is the last piece he played in public.

This concerto was entered in the catalog on January 5, 1791. Mozart introduced it on March 4, at a concert organized by the clarinetist Joseph Bähr which included an appearance by Aloisia Weber Lange, who was Mozart's first love, a former pupil, and now his sister-in-law. (Her husband painted the famous unfinished portrait of Mozart.) We don't know how the work was received. Like two earlier piano concertos in B-flat, this last one is lyrical and intimate rather than grand or dramatic. Here Mozart seems to have found a new clarity that only heightens the expressive quality of the music. The writing has the directness of speech, the simplicity of folk song, and an emotional depth possible only in the greatest art. Though the music begins radiantly in B-flat major—with the accompaniment alone, as the G minor symphony (K. 440) does—Mozart frequently turns to the minor mode. The effect is, as in life itself, that sunlight brings shadow; we know joy only by experiencing sorrow as well. The first two movements in particular understand the complexity of both life and art. Mozart's mastery of detail and technique is so assured that the main theme of the Larghetto returns, little changed, as the second theme of the finale, without calling attention to the fact. The finale is more cheerful, though not entirely carefree. The main theme is similar to the melody of "Sehnsucht nach dem Frühlinge," a lovely song which is listed immediately after the concerto in Mozart's own catalog:

Come, sweet May, and turn
the trees green again,
and make the little violets
bloom for me by the brook.

But Mozart was to enjoy only one more springtime.

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