PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Wolfgang Mozart – Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor, K. 464

Born January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria.  
Died December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria.

Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor, K. 464

Mozart entered this concerto in his catalog on February 10, 1785, and performed the solo in the premiere the next day in Vienna. The orchestra consists of one flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. At these concerts, Shai Wosner plays Beethoven’s cadenza in the first movement and his own cadenza in the finale. Performance time is approximately thirty-four minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Mozart’s Piano Concerto no. 20 were given at Orchestra Hall on January 14 and 15, 1916, with Ossip Gabrilowitsch as soloist and Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on March 15, 16, and 17, 2007, with Mitsuko Uchida conducting from the keyboard. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on July 6, 1961, with John Browning as soloist and Josef Krips conducting, and most recently on July 8, 2007, with Jonathan Biss as soloist and James Conlon conducting.

This is the Mozart piano concerto that Beethoven admired above all others. It’s the only one he played in public (and the only one for which he wrote cadenzas). Throughout the nineteenth century, it was the sole concerto by Mozart that was regularly performed—its demonic power and dark beauty spoke to musicians who had been raised on Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt. When it was fashionable to dismiss Mozart as an outdated composer with fussy manners and empty charm, this score brought people to their senses. It’s surely one of the most celebrated pieces ever written—“almost as much myth as work of art,” as Charles Rosen put it.
Mozart and Beethoven met for the first time in 1787, two years after this concerto was premiered in Vienna. Beethoven wanted to study with Mozart—he may even have had a few lessons with him at the time. But it wasn’t until 1792, the year after Mozart’s death, that Beethoven settled in Vienna, and so he ended up studying with Haydn instead, finding little comfort—or truth—in Count Waldstein’s famous prophecy that he would “receive Mozart’s spirit from Haydn’s hands.” As a favor to Mozart’s widow Constanze, and as tribute to the composer he most admired, Beethoven played Mozart’s D minor concerto between the acts of La clemenza di Tito at a memorial performance on March 31, 1795, no doubt improvising that night the famous cadenza that he later wrote down. (Mozart’s own cadenzas haven’t survived, although they are mentioned in one of his father’s letters; at these performances, Shai Wosner plays Beethoven’s cadenza in the first movement and his own in the finale.) It’s the only time Beethoven is known to have played one of Mozart’s concertos in public, although he was certainly well acquainted with others and particularly liked the one in C minor.

It’s easy to understand what attracted Beethoven—as well as later nineteenth-century musicians—to this concerto. It belongs to a handful of works by Mozart that suggested he was the earliest great romantic composer. This is his first concerto in a minor key—in itself an unusual, forward-looking choice. Like the terrifying chords that open Don Giovanni (and return when Don Juan is dragged down to hell), or the Lacrimosa from the Requiem (the last music Mozart wrote), the concerto established D minor as the darkest of keys and seemed at first almost to exhaust its tragic potential.

The opening, with its syncopated, throbbing D minor chords, is not about theme or harmony so much as gesture and tension. Like much truly dramatic music, it’s ominously quiet. The piano, surprisingly, doesn’t repeat this music when it enters, but begins with its own highly individual phrases—in fact, the soloist traverses the entire movement without once playing these signature chords. In the same way, the piano’s opening lines—as pure and unadorned as recitative—are not imitated by the orchestra. The relationship between soloist and orchestra had never before been so tense or complex. (When Haydn turned pages at a performance some time after Mozart’s death, Leopold Mozart boasted that this allowed him to appreciate “the artful composition and interweaving, as well as the difficulty of the concerto.”) Their uneasy interplay—sometimes accommodating, occasionally unyielding—is what carries this music into the realm of high drama. This is the first concerto with which Mozart so openly reveals not only the form’s symphonic qualities, but its affinity with the world of opera as well.
The piano alone begins the second movement, a serene romance that brings relief without completely banishing the tragic mood. In particular, an explosive G minor interlude—"the noisy part with the fast triplets," as Leopold called it—recalls the unrest that came before—and will soon return.

When Leopold Mozart arrived in Vienna on February 10, 1785, the day before the premiere of his son’s new D minor concerto, he noted that there was no time to rehearse the finale, since the parts were still being copied. ("Your brother did not even have time to play through the Rondo," he wrote home to Nannerl, "as he had to supervise the copying.") The music shows no sign of haste, however. Charles Rosen even argues that this is the first concerto with outer movements "so strikingly and openly related." Mozart’s care and wisdom are evident everywhere. Once again, it’s the unaccompanied piano that launches the argument, this time with unusual urgency. This isn’t a conventionally cheerful rondo, but a highly charged, forceful conclusion to a tragic work. (In its darkness and power, it anticipates the minor-key finale of Beethoven’s Third Piano Concerto.) Finally, just as the chilling D minor of Don Giovanni ends in the brilliance of D major, so too this drama, in a radiant coda that is the equivalent of the tidy happy ending the eighteenth-century opera stage demanded.

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