PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

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

Clarinet Concerto in A Major, K. 622

Mozart composed this concerto between the end of September and mid-November 1791, and it apparently was performed in Vienna shortly afterwards. The orchestra consists of two flutes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-nine minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first performance of Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto was given at the Ravinia Festival on July 25, 1957, with Reginald Kell as soloist and Georg Solti conducting. The Orchestra’s first subscription concert performance was given at Orchestra Hall on May 2, 1963, with Clark Brody as soloist and Walter Hendl conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on October 11 and 12, 1991, with Larry Combs as soloist and Sir Georg Solti conducting. The Orchestra most recently performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on July 15, 2001, with Larry Combs as soloist and Sir Andrew Davis conducting.

This concerto is the last important work Mozart finished before his death. He recorded it in his personal catalog without a date, right after The Magic Flute and La clemenza di Tito. The only later entry is the little Masonic Cantata, dated November 15, 1791. The Requiem, as we know, didn’t make it into the list.

For decades the history of the Requiem was full of ambiguity, while that of the Clarinet Concerto seemed quite clear. But in recent years, as we learned more about the unfinished Requiem, questions about the concerto began to emerge. The Requiem riddles are now largely solved, damaging a fair amount of romantic myth and cinematic drama in the process. But an accurate account of the Clarinet Concerto seems more uncertain today than ever.

Let’s start with Anton Stadler. Mozart tells us that he wrote the concerto for this great virtuoso clarinet player, a close friend, a fellow Mason (although a member of a different lodge), and, on numerous occasions, a spirited gambling companion. Mozart enjoyed Stadler’s friendship and admired his talent, easily accepting that the latter was infinitely more generous and reliable than the former. The musical skill was evidently prodigious: “One would never have thought,” wrote a critic in 1785, “that a clarinet could imitate the human voice to such perfection.” But Sophie Haibel, Mozart’s sister-in-law, remembered Stadler as one of the composer’s “false friends, secret bloodsuckers, and worthless persons who served only to amuse him at the table and intercourse with whom injured his reputation.” Perhaps she had learned from Constanze of the 500 gulden Mozart lent Stadler, a hefty sum that was still unpaid when officials tallied the composer’s estate.

Stadler’s true debt to Mozart is one clarinetists still owe him today: pages upon pages of music as precious as any in the repertory. It’s likely that Mozart first heard Stadler play in March 1784, in a performance of his B-flat wind serenade. The Clarinet Trio, written two years later and supposedly finished in a bowling alley on one of the many occasions when Mozart couldn’t separate music from life, may have been composed with Stadler in mind. By 1789, the year of the magnificent quintet for clarinet and strings, virtually every note Mozart wrote for the instrument, including the added clarinet parts for the great G minor symphony, was written for Stadler.

We now come to the last year of Mozart’s life. In late August 1791, Mozart set off for Prague to supervise the first performances of La clemenza di Tito, accompanied by Stadler, who was to play in the Prague orchestra; Franz Xaver Süssmayr, who would soon inherit the task of finishing the Requiem; and Constanze. Mozart worked on the opera in the coach, writing two virtuoso obbligato solos for Stadler. The
premiere on September 6 was decently received, though the empress Maria Luisa is said to have shouted from her box, "Una porcheria tedesca!" ("German rubbish," to use the imperial translation.) Mozart returned home to Vienna, leaving Stadler behind to accept thunderous applause and cheers from his fellow orchestra members for his big solos each night.

On September 28, Mozart entered *The Magic Flute* in his catalog; the premiere, two nights later in a suburban Viennese theater, was only a partial success. Sometime in the middle of this crazy schedule—two opera premieres in less than a month, plus work on a requiem that had recently been commissioned through a mysterious messenger—Mozart began what would be his last concerto, for Stadler’s clarinet. But there’s no mention of the concerto until October 7, when Mozart wrote to Constanze, who had gone to Baden, boasting that after she left he played two games of billiards, sold his horse for fourteen ducats, sent out for black coffee, and smoked a splendid pipe of tobacco before orchestrating “almost the whole Rondo for Stadler.” A letter dated October 14 (Mozart’s last) describes the evening Mozart took Salieri to see *The Magic Flute*, an outing unfairly embellished in Peter Shaffer’s *Amadeus*. Little more than a month later, Mozart fell ill; he died in less than three weeks.

We come now to the questions, some still unanswered. Around the time Mozart met Anton Stadler, he had begun to play a large new clarinet—today called a basset clarinet, though in Mozart's day it had no particular name. This curious instrument extended the clarinet’s glorious lower register down a major third, reaching four new deep and resonant notes. It seems clear that this is the instrument Mozart had in mind when he wrote both the celebrated quintet and this final concerto.

But by the time the clarinet concerto was published, a decade after Mozart's death, Stadler’s basset clarinet had gone out of favor, and the concerto was printed in a version rewritten for the narrower range of the standard clarinet. Even though a contemporary review argued that this wasn’t the music Mozart wrote, and Stadler was still alive to protest, players and audiences came to accept this revised version. Mozart's autograph score has been lost. There is, however, a fragment, 199 measures long and written entirely in Mozart's hand, of a concerto in G for basset horn (another ancient member of the clarinet family) that nearly duplicates more than half of the first movement of the clarinet concerto.

Apparently Mozart first conceived this music for basset horn, perhaps as early as 1787, and later rewrote and finished it for Stadler’s modified clarinet. We can’t be sure for whom the earlier concerto was intended, nor why he chose to rewrite it for Stadler at one of the most hectic times in his life. But we do know that Mozart had nothing to do with the revised version for standard clarinet—the one, ironically, that generations of musicians have come to know.

Over the past fifty years, a number of musicians have attempted to reconstruct Mozart’s original version for basset clarinet. The differences aren’t extensive—just 53 of the first movement’s 359 measures are in any way affected—and mostly involve simply transposing a particular passage from one octave to another. Sometimes the shape of a line is changed entirely, as the basset clarinet carries a phrase down to its natural conclusion, where the traditional version must circle back up. (See sidebar, page x.)

The concerto is one of Mozart’s most personal creations; like the final piano concerto, it’s as intimate and conversational as chamber music, rather than grand and dramatic. We can’t blame historians—or playwrights for that matter—for suggesting Mozart knew his time was running out, for the music implies as much. The slow movement carries an almost unnatural burden of sadness on its simple phrases. Of the two outer movements, with their endless, natural lyricism, no words are more apt than those H. C. Robbins Landon remembered from Shakespeare: “The heart dances, but not for joy.”

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