PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

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

Flute Concerto No. 1 in G Major, K. 313

Mozart composed this concerto in early 1778; the date of the first performance is not known. The orchestra consists of two flutes (in the slow movement only), two oboes, two horns, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-five minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Mozart’s First Flute Concerto were given on November 6, 7, and 9, 1975, with Donald Peck as soloist and Rafael Kubelík conducting.

A lot has been written about Mozart’s dislike of the flute and the lovely music he wrote for it anyway—all based on one parenthetical comment in a letter to his father. It is not unreasonable for a composer of Mozart’s capabilities to write well for an instrument he or she does not particularly admire, but it seems unlikely that Mozart would have composed an opera about its magical power to transform human passion—“The sad will become happy, and the stony-hearted affectionate” the Three Ladies tell Papageno—if he himself did not believe that.

Here is what Mozart actually wrote, in response to his father’s charge that he had lied about completing some flute music commissioned by the wealthy amateur flutist Ferdinand De Jean: “. . . you know that I become quite powerless whenever I am obliged to write for an instrument that I cannot bear.” These are words to weigh carefully, for the correspondence between Mozart and Leopold documents the volatile relationship between a highly ambitious father and a son still struggling to escape his grip; it must be read in that light. More revealing is the music Mozart wrote for the flute, including a number of felicitous passages in the symphonies and piano concertos, the moving lines for the trial by fire in The Magic Flute, and the concertos and quartets written in 1778 for De Jean. It was one of Mozart’s favorite musicians, Johann Baptist Wendling, the principal flutist in Mannheim, who put De Jean in touch with Mozart in the first place. Mozart was friendly with the Wendlings—he often stayed at their house and ate with them when he was in Mannheim—and he even orchestrated one of Wendling’s own flute concertos.

In December 1777, Mozart wrote to his father that he had accepted a commission from De Jean to write “three short, simple concertos and a couple of quartets for the flute.” He was determined to complete the work in two months and made no mention at the time of his aversion to the instrument; no doubt the promised payment of 200 gulden, a sizeable sum, mitigated any inconvenience. In any event, Mozart procrastinated. On February 14 he wrote to his father that he had only finished two concertos and three quartets, and that De Jean had sent only 96 gulden. Leopold immediately realized that Mozart had been fudging the numbers all along; he fired off a letter of accusation. Mozart indignantly replied with a series of lame excuses, including the famous comment that has troubled flute players ever since.

Leopold knew his son well; it appears that Mozart had finished two, not three of the quartets, and the second of the two concertos was in fact a reworking of an earlier oboe concerto. The commission was never completed, and De Jean paid Mozart not a gulden more. Yet with a clever cut-and-paste, corner-cutting approach to composition, Mozart produced music that surely charmed De Jean, and continues to enchant flute players today.

The G major concerto is a bargain at any price. It is not only a work of delectable melody and elegance, but one that shows off the virtuosity of the player as well. (Long ago Alfred Einstein proposed that De Jean found the slow movement too florid, and that Mozart offered as a substitute the Andante, K. 315.)
The concerto is scored for a standard orchestra of strings, oboes, and horns (flutes substitute for oboes in the central Adagio) and cast in the traditional three movements; its unassuming grace, imaginative workmanship, and expressive power, however, are customary only for Mozart.

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

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