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

Violin Concerto No. 4 in D Major, K. 218

Mozart composed this concerto in October 1775, in Salzburg. The date of the first performance is not known. The orchestra consists of two oboes, two horns, and strings. Performance time is twenty-five minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Mozart’s Fourth Violin Concerto were given at Orchestra Hall on March 22 and 23, 1912, with Hugo Kortchak as soloist and Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on November 30, December 1, 2, and 3, 2000, with Robert Chen as soloist and Daniel Barenboim conducting. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on July 3, 1935, with Jascha Heifetz as soloist and Eugene Ormandy conducting, and most recently on June 28, 1991, with Gil Shaham as soloist and James Levine conducting.

Wolfgang had a little violin that he got as a present in Vienna . . ." So begins one of the most celebrated anecdotes about the young Mozart, a child in everything but musical talent. Johann Andreas Schachtner, a friend of the family, continues:

We were going to play trios, Papa [Leopold] playing the bass with his viola, Wenzl the first violin, and I was to play the second violin. Wolfgang had asked to be allowed to play the second violin, but Papa refused him this foolish request, because he had not yet had the least instruction in the violin, and Papa thought he could not possibly play anything. Wolfgang said, “You don’t need to have studied in order to play second violin,” and when Papa insisted that he should go away and not bother us any more, Wolfgang began to weep bitterly and stamped off with his little violin. I asked them to let him play with me. Papa eventually said, “Play with Herr Schachtner, but so softly that we can’t hear you, or you will have to go.” And so it was. Wolfgang played with me. I soon noticed with astonishment that I was quite superfluous. I quietly put my violin down, and looked at your Papa; tears of wonder and comfort ran down his cheeks at this scene.

Schachtner places the evening in January of 1763; Wolfgang turned seven that month. It astonished even Leopold, who never can be said to have underestimated his son’s talent. The full range of Mozart’s abilities still amazes us today, even though we know he played the clavier, with grace and fluency, at four; began to compose at five; and went on to write music of an emotional depth and cerebral level often at odds with his age and behavior and comprehensible only as the work of absolute genius.

A month after Wolfgang played with Herr Schachtner, Mozart performed on both violin and harpsichord in concert for the Salzburg court. From then on he played second fiddle to no one. Often during the 1770s, Mozart appeared as a violin soloist in Salzburg, Vienna, Augsburg, and Munich. In 1777, he wrote home to his father from Munich, “I played as if I were the greatest fiddler in all of Europe.” Leopold wrote back that if he would only apply himself, he might indeed sound like the first violinist of Europe, and pointed out that “many people do not even know that you play the violin, since you have been known from childhood as a keyboard player.” Shortly after that, Wolfgang dropped the violin in favor of the keyboard for concertizing—and the viola for playing chamber music—partly to spite his father, who had made his name as a violinist and who had published an influential and popular treatise on violin playing the year his son was born. Wolfgang rightly knew that he was the more precious product of 1756.
Although Mozart wrote music for solo violin throughout his career—sonatas, sets of variations, mini-concertos embedded within orchestral serenades—the centerpiece of this output is the set of five concertos he composed in the mid-1770s in Salzburg and no doubt designed to perform himself. It used to be assumed that these five works were written in the span of just eight months—the earliest is dated April 14, 1775, on the autograph; the last December 20, 1775. But recent scholarship suggests that the last two digits of those dates were tampered with more than once, first adjusting them to read 1780, and then to 1775. It now seems likely that the last four do date from 1775, but the first concerto may have been written as early as 1773. In any event, all five concertos are early Mozart—they predate his first significant piano concerto, in E-flat major (K. 271), by more than a year—but they are not immature works in any sense. In Mozart’s hands—hands that enriched and transformed virtually every form they touched—even these five works composed in a relatively short span of time demonstrate growth in his understanding of the concerto. The last three, which mark an advance over the more decorative first two, have long been part of the repertory.

In the opening movement of the D major concerto, the fourth in the series, Mozart takes pains to find new ways of keeping the soloist in the spotlight. The effect is one of undisguised virtuosity allied to thoughtful and expressive writing, a hallmark of the great piano concertos yet to come. The “singing” slow movement, by way of contrast, offers pure, unforced lyricism—a quiet aria of contentment between two dazzling ensembles. The finale cuts back and forth between graceful dancelike music and a spirited jig—this varied scenario itself interrupted once by an unexpected folk song.

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