

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Concerto No. 15 in B-flat major for Piano and Orchestra, K. 450 (1784)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Vienna, March 15, 1784

Home of Thomas Johann von Trattner

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, conductor

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 24 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns and strings

When Mozart returned to Vienna in November 1783 from his visit to Salzburg to try (vainly) to convince his father of the wisdom of his recent marriage and the suitability of his new wife, his head was full of plans for an opera buffa on a libretto by Abbé G.B. Varesco. However, Mozart sketched only eight numbers before abandoning *L'oca del Cairo* ("The Goose of Cairo," assembled, with other music from Mozart's uncompleted operas, by the Swiss composer Hans Erismann in 1952 into the three-act *Don Pedro*) because, he informed Papa Leopold in Salzburg, "I have works which at the moment are bringing in money." The money was to come from a series of subscription concerts he had scheduled for the Lenten season, when the Church's proscription of opera and theater performances made Vienna's halls available for instrumental programs.

Mozart's personal happiness and public popularity were at their zeniths in 1784. He shared a comfortable apartment with Constanze, and they were looking forward to the birth of their second child in September. Since settling in Vienna nearly three years before, he had acquired a reputation as the finest pianist in town as well as a talented composer — so great was the demand for his performances in the concert halls and the houses of the aristocracy that he played 22 concerts between February 26th and April 3rd. This hectic schedule alone would have been enough to fully occupy any solo performer, but the Viennese audiences also expected that, as he noted, "I must play some new works and therefore I must compose." In addition, many of his mornings were given over to teaching, with the remaining cracks in his schedule devoted to carrying on a quite merry social life. "Have I not enough to do? I do not think I can get rusty at this rate," he wrote in a letter to Leopold, with which he also proudly enclosed a list of his performances.

Mozart arranged for his Lenten concerts of 1784 to be given at a salon in the residence of the court printer and publisher, Johann Thomas von Trattner (Frau Therese von Trattner was a piano student of Mozart and the dedicatee of the Sonata and Fantasia in C minor, K. 457 and 475), on the last three Wednesdays of the season — March 17th, 24th and 31st — and he was overjoyed to have as subscribers 174 the most genteel representatives of the Austrian aristocracy, the worlds of finance, government and scholarship, foreign diplomats and other wealthy patrons of music. He boasted to Leopold that the number of his supporters was thirty more than the combined total of those for two rival series, despite the high admission price of six florins for his three concerts — well over \$100 at today's rates. For this glittering *assemblage*, Mozart put forward his best effort, creating four new concertos (K. 449, 450, 451, 453) within just eight weeks, a feat that Alfred Einstein called "in no way less extraordinary than the miracle of the three symphonies of 1788." Of the first concert, Mozart reported, "The hall was jammed full, and the new Concerto I played (K. 449) was extraordinarily well liked. Wherever I go, I hear praises of this concert." It was a time of satisfaction such as would never come to Mozart again, a time when the music he wrote not only pleased his own sensibility, but also that of his audiences, who preferred, according the 18th-century English music historian Charles Burney, "clearness and propriety; whatever is graceful, elegant and tender." Within only two years, however, his music had grown beyond the conservative Viennese taste for mere entertainment to express the deep emotions that at first puzzled and ultimately repelled his early patrons. Twelve of his last fourteen piano concertos were written between 1784 and 1786, the years when his local popularity crested. During the remaining five years of his life, he composed only two more, and he could not muster enough subscribers to present either of them at a concert of his own in Vienna.

The prominent place given to the winds in the B-flat Concerto is announced immediately at the beginning of the opening movement with a phrase that could herald a divertimento or serenade just as comfortably as a concerto. The orchestral introduction comprises this first theme, played in conversation by the winds and strings, a limpid, lyrical strain built around the weak beats of the measure, and a forceful cadential motive. The pianist enters with some sweeping figurations before playing the opening theme in elaboration. Mozart, melodically fecund as ever, substituted a graceful new keyboard theme for the weak-beat motive of the orchestral introduction to provide contrast. The orchestra alone negotiates the closing cadential theme as a transition to the fantasia-like

section of keyboard display at the center of the movement. All of the earlier thematic material is reprised in the closing portions of the movement. The final measures also include the customary pause for a solo cadenza for which the performer may choose to use the cadenzas that Mozart himself left for this Concerto, which are, according to the pianist/scholar Charles Rosen, the most elaborate, brilliant and powerful that he ever wrote down.

The second movement is a lovely set of variations on a theme whose two phrases are given in alternation, first by the orchestra, then repeated by the piano. Unlike the flashing brilliance of the outer movements, the solo part here is sometimes almost epigrammatic in its sparseness. The finale is a sparkling sonata-rondo built on a hunting theme in jogging 6/8 meter.