

Notes on the Program

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Piano Concerto No. 17 in G major, K.453

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

In the winter of 1784, just after passing his 28th birthday, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart decided to get organized. He had already composed something in the neighborhood of 450 pieces, ranging from simple dance movements to full-length operas — his oeuvre was so impressive that he must have had difficulty keeping track of it all. So it was that in February 1784 he acquired a notebook, placed an inscription on the front cover reading *Verzeichnüss aller meiner Werke (Catalogue of All My Works)*, and started recording an entry for every new composition he completed. On the left-hand pages he inscribed a title or other description of the piece, the date he finished it, and its orchestration; on the facing right-hand pages (which he pre-ruled with musical staves), a short score of the opening measures to serve as an aide-mémoire. From then until the end of his life the notebook was Mozart's steady companion; he penned the last entry, for *Eine kleine Freimäurer-Kantate*, only three weeks before his death at the age of 35. That piece brought him to the bottom of the 29th pair of pages. The 14 pairs of empty pages that follow constitute the saddest reading in music history, the naked staves standing as especially poignant laments for what might have been.

Mozart's very first entry in the book was recorded on February 9, 1784, documenting his Piano Concerto in E-flat major (K.449). Five works fit onto that first page, all told covering about ten weeks of work: following the E-flat-major Concerto came the Piano Concerto in B-flat major (K.450), one in D major (K.451), the Quintet for Piano and Winds (K.452), and, at the bottom of the page, the

Piano Concerto in G major (K.453). It is a remarkable roster even by Mozart's standard, comprising five unimpeachable masterpieces of the piano repertoire. Two further keyboard concertos would follow before 1784 was out, making that Mozart's most productive year ever in that genre, and another six would enter the catalogue by the end of 1786.

During this period Mozart was the most admired pianist in Vienna. On March 3, 1784, he sent his father a schedule of his current performing engagements at various private residences and theaters in Vienna. For March alone they numbered 19 appearances, and the subscriber list for a series of three concerts he produced in a private hall reads like

IN SHORT

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna

Work composed: 1784, completed on April 10 of that year

World premiere: Possibly on April 29, 1784, at Vienna's Kärntnerthor Theater, with the composer at the keyboard; the first documented performance was on June 13, 1784, at the home of Mozart's pupil Barbara Ployer (at Döbling, later annexed into Vienna), who appeared as soloist on that occasion

New York Philharmonic premiere: April 23, 1921, Ernő von Dohnányi, conductor and soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: October 21, 2014, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Lang Lang, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 30 minutes

a Who's Who of 174 Viennese aristocrats. The cultural elite of Mozart's adopted city clearly were embracing its current superstar.

The first documented performance of the G-major Concerto took place on June 13, 1784, at the country home of the family of Mozart's piano pupil Babette Ployer, who was the soloist on that occasion (though Mozart himself may have already played the work in public, at a concert on April 29 at Vienna's Kärntnerthor Theater, attended by no less an eminence than Emperor Joseph II). The piece was finished a couple of weeks earlier, and it seems logical that the composer would have programmed

his latest concerto on that occasion; but lacking firm accounts of that event, the possibility remains a matter of speculation.

Instrumentation: flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

Cadenzas: Two distinct pairs of cadenzas for the first and second movements have come down from more or less Mozart's day, only one of which is unquestionably by the composer; those are the cadenzas Jeffrey Kahane uses in this performance.

Listen for ... the Starling's Song



Half of the last movement of Mozart's G-major Piano Concerto (K.453) unrolls as a set of five wide-ranging variations on an immediately memorable tune. A delightful anecdote relating to this melody finds confirmation in a book of expenses Mozart kept briefly in his organizational zeal. On May 27, 1784, he noted that he paid 34 Kreuzer for a starling that he taught to whistle this tune almost correctly. The starling consistently held one note too long and sang a couple of others sharp; the composer actually inscribed the bird's version in his expense book, along with the notation "Das war schön!" — "That was lovely!"



The starling lived another three years, and when it chirped its last Mozart penned a brief rhyming epitaph and invited his friends to participate in a mock requiem at the avian burial.