

Horn Concerto No. 2 in E-flat major, K.417

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born

January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died

December 5, 1791, in Vienna

Work composed

completed in Vienna on May 27, 1783

World premiere

no information has survived about the early performance history of this concerto

New York Philharmonic premiere

January 27, 1973, Pierre Boulez, conductor, John Cerninaro, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance

May 30, 1998, Kurt Masur, conductor, Philip Myers, soloist

Estimated duration

ca. 13 minutes

All of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's major compositions for horn — the four complete concertos, a Rondo in E-flat major, and the Horn Quintet (K.407/386c) — were written for his friend Joseph Leutgeb or, as Mozart sometimes misspelled it in his letters, "Leitgeb." Leutgeb (1732–1811) had known the Mozart family for many years, since 1762 or 1763 when he began playing with the Court Orchestra in Salzburg, which made him a colleague of Leopold Mozart and his precocious son.

Like young Wolfgang, Leutgeb enjoyed a busy career touring as a popular soloist

in the musical capitals of Europe, but in 1777 he settled in his native Vienna to assume the day-to-day responsibilities of running a cheese shop that his wife had inherited from her father. It seems that he flourished less as a cheesemonger than he had as a concert soloist, and at one point Mozart interceded to beg patience from his own miserly father, who had uncharacteristically extended a loan to their old friend. "I beg you to be patient a little while longer with poor Leutgeb," wrote Wolfgang in May 1782, now also living in Vienna. "If you knew his circumstances and saw how he has to struggle to make ends meet, you would, I am sure, feel sorry for him."

Leutgeb and Mozart remained lifelong friends, and friends of Mozart's knew they would have to endure practical jokes and other crudities from time to time. At the top of the manuscript for the K.417 Horn Concerto, for example, the composer inscribed, "Wolfgang Amadé Mozart has taken pity on Leutgeb, ass, ox, and fool, at Vienna, March 27, 1783." (A word about the date of this inscription in a moment.) The composer related a specific prank in a letter he wrote to his wife on June 25, 1791, of which Leutgeb was almost surely the unnamed victim: a message was sent to him announcing the imminent arrival of a distinguished friend from Rome. Thus forewarned, Mozart continued, "the poor man put on his best Sunday clothes and dressed his hair most splendidly — you can imagine how we made fun of him — it's true, I always need to make a fool of someone."

Back to the matter of the handwritten dedication of his Horn Concerto K.417. It seems to have been missed in earlier catalogues of Mozart's works. In 1862 Ludwig von Köchel completed his *Chronological and Thematic Catalogue of the Complete*

Works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, having made the best of a difficult job. His catalogue has since gone through six editions (and it is poised to appear in a seventh one sometime soon). Each new edition has updated the chronology of Mozart's compositions (and, in some cases, rendered decisions pro or con concerning their authenticity) to reflect subsequent revelations of musicological research. Today we know much more about the historical and bibliographical details of Mozart's music than Köchel did in 1862; accordingly, many of the hallowed "Köchel numbers" that are attached to Mozart's works can no longer be seen as inviolably correct indications of the chronology as revealed by modern research.

Mozart's horn concertos are particularly problematic in this regard. We now know that the earliest of Mozart's complete horn concertos dates from May 1783, and it is

that work that we hear in this concert. It's in E-flat major, and Köchel, missing the composer's inscription and thinking it was the second one Mozart wrote, called it the Horn Concerto No. 2 and assigned it to "K.417" in his catalogue. The next one Mozart wrote was a concerto (also) in E-flat major, composed in June 1786: Köchel thought it was Mozart's Fourth, and assigned it number 495. The "Third" Horn Concerto (again in E-flat major, K.447) may have been written as early as 1783 or as late as 1787–88. Finally, there is the so-called Horn Concerto No. 1 in D major (K.412), which consists of two completed movements from sometime around 1786–88, plus a fragment of a finale from 1791, the composer's final year.

Instrumentation: two oboes, two orchestral horns, and strings, in addition to the solo horn.

The Waldhorn

Mozart composed all of his horn music for an instrument that was later called the Waldhorn or "natural horn" (see below), which refers to the valveless horns of the 18th and early-19th



centuries. The Waldhorn consisted of a metal tube (coiled for convenience) into which replaceable sections, called crooks, could be inserted to effectively increase or decrease the length of the tube overall. Changing crooks was not an instantaneous process, so that in the course of a movement a player was theoretically limited to playing only the notes making up the overtone series above whatever fundamental pitch was sounded when a given crook was installed. Still, intricate movements of the player's hand within the horn's bell (called "stopping") could alter those "harmonics" and achieve more or less complete scales in various registers, opening the door to a solo repertoire that many other wind instruments already enjoyed. Even with the introduction and acceptance of valves that could alter the length of the instrument's tubes (and, thereby, its chromatic possibilities) with the flick of a finger, some composers continued to champion the Waldhorn: as late as 1865 Brahms specified that it should be used in his Horn Trio.