

Piano Concerto in F major, K.459

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born

January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died

December 5, 1791, in Vienna

Work composed

1784, completed December 11

World premiere

probably at one of the six subscription concerts that Mozart played at the Mehlgrube Casino in Vienna in February and March of 1785

New York Philharmonic premiere

February 28, 1934, Hans Lange, conductor, Dame Myra Hess, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance

May 4, 1978, Sir Neville Marriner, conductor, Rudolf Firkušny, soloist

Estimated duration

ca. 24 minutes

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart moved to Vienna in 1781 in hopes of making a name for himself in that cultural capital as a composer and as a pianist. He was supremely equipped to do both, and the obvious intersection of these two disciplines came in the composition of piano concertos, works that he composed, in most cases, to spotlight his own talents as a performer.

The catalogue of Mozart's piano concertos neatly chronicles the rise and fall of his popularity as a concert virtuoso. During the 1782–83 season he produced three piano concertos (K.413–415). They

did their trick, and in 1784 he enjoyed enough audience demand to justify the composition of six more concertos (K.449–451, 453, 456, and 459, the last being the work played in this concert). That was the highpoint of Mozart's success on the concert platform. In the following two years (1785 and 1786) he was still able to sell enough tickets for his subscription concerts to merit another three concertos for each (K.466, 467, and 482; K.488, 491, and 503), but after that, Mozart ceased to be the pianistic flavor of the month. He wrote not a single piano concerto in 1787, only one in 1788 (K.537), none in 1789 or 1790, and one last one in 1791, at the beginning of his final year (K.595). These statistics do not tell the complete story of Mozart-as-pianist, to be sure, as he also appeared frequently in performances that did not include premieres of new concertos, but they do reflect the general trajectory of his popularity as a pianist in Viennese concert life.

Mozart signaled the completion of the F-major Piano Concerto (K.459) by entering it into his *Verzeichnüss aller meiner Werke* (*Catalogue of All My Works*) on December 11, 1784. Musicologists widely assume that the work was written for the series of Lenten subscription concerts that the composer held at the Mehlgrube Casino in Vienna on six consecutive Fridays beginning on February 11 and ending on March 18, 1785. However, Mozart was notorious for writing on deadline; he rarely completed a piece a moment before he absolutely needed to. It therefore seems surprising that he should have entered this work into his *Verzeichnüss* on December 11 if it was not to be performed until two months later. For this reason the Mozart scholar Neal Zaslaw has suggested that this concerto may instead have been destined

for an Advent concert that eluded documentation. One point is clear: scholars agree that the piece was first heard sometime in late 1784 or early 1785.

Whenever it was premiered, the F-major Piano Concerto (K.459) is known to have been performed on October 15, 1790, at the Frankfurt Stadttheater, as one of the concertos that Mozart played at festivities celebrating the coronation of Leopold II as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. King Leopold had traveled from Vienna for the coronation and took along a considerable entourage of courtiers, including 17 musicians. Mozart, however, was not among them. He must have been more than a little hurt; after all, he did hold the title of Imperial Chamber Composer, little good that it did him. Notwithstanding his regret, Mozart decided

that he should get himself to Frankfurt, and even pawned some silverware to do so. With so many powerful personages assembling there he felt that he could not miss the opportunity to place himself somewhere near the fringe of the coronation spotlight. He took along two piano concertos to play at his concert, this one (which was by then nearly six years old) and the then more recent Concerto in D major (K.537). No commissions or job offers resulted from this incentive, which Mozart described as “a splendid success from the point of view of honor and glory, but a failure as far as money was concerned.” For indistinct reasons, the D-major Concerto assumed the universal nickname *Coronation* because of its connection to these festivities. The F-major has equal claim to that appellation, and very occasionally one

Listen for ...

Mozart's F-major Concerto (K.459) is strong on charm and short on sentiment, vigorous without being overly muscular, elegantly proportioned throughout its three movements, and generously democratic in its division of labor between soloist and orchestra. The first movement is a cheerful *Allegro* (on the manuscript, at least, though in his *Verzeichnüss* Mozart labeled it *Allegro vivace*) that opens with **one of Mozart's favorite rhythmic figures**, the martial motif of “dum-dum-da-dum-dum,” played by the flute and strings.

Allegro

etc.

This rhythm pervades the first movement, serving to bind its wealth of melodic material into a coherent whole. Arthur Hutchings, in *A Companion to Mozart's Piano Concertos* (1948/50), finds that “165 bars of a movement containing 400 show the presence either of this theme or of its rhythm, and there is further reference to it in one of Mozart's most brilliant cadenzas.”

finds it referred to also as a *Coronation Concerto*, though for the most part it goes through life without a nickname.

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

Cadenzas: In this performance, Mitsuko Uchida plays the cadenzas provided by Mozart.

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A Question of Instrumentation

When Mozart entered his F-major Piano Concerto (K.459) in his *Verzeichnüss* he included an instrumentation list that enumerated not only all the instruments that figure in the autograph score but also two trumpets and timpani (or, as he put it, “2 clarini” and “timpany”). It is possible that he erred when he made this entry, but it is also possible that the work really did have trumpet and timpani parts, perhaps added after the score was originally written and then copied out only in parts, which were later separated from the other materials and ultimately lost.

This would not be a fanciful theory; we know for a fact that this happened with some of Mozart’s other works. Still, with regard to this piece, the idea gives musicologists pause. Mozart did use trumpets and timpani in some of his symphonies and concertos, where they add a measure of festivity and exuberance, but almost in every case those works are in the tonic keys of C, D, or E-flat. It would be uncharacteristic for Mozart to call for these instruments in a work that is set overall in the key of F, which was not a congenial key for period trumpets. Since no trumpet or timpani parts survive, musicologists have been content to leave the instrumentation just as it stands in Mozart’s autograph (and, for that matter, on a second period manuscript in somebody else’s hand but with notations added by Mozart himself), without doctoring it to include parts that may or may not have been intended. These performances follow that practice.



An 18th-century depiction of trumpets and timpani