Concerto in A major for Clarinet and Orchestra, K.622

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

As a performer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was most famous as a keyboard player; indeed, he was widely acknowledged as one of the finest pianists of his day, and his works for the piano — particularly his concertos — show rare insight into that instrument’s possibilities. He was also a very accomplished string player, having been tutored on the violin by his father, one of the most highly esteemed violin teachers of the Classical period, whose extensive violin treatise stands as an essential historical document. The young Mozart was adept enough to serve as a court violinist in his native Salzburg, but once he left Salzburg for Vienna, in 1781, he seems nearly always to have preferred playing the violin’s alto cousin, the viola, which he often did in chamber music. In general, Mozart was strongly drawn to mid-range instruments (or to the lower ranges of treble-clef instruments), reveling in rich sonorities for their own sake and for their almost vocal qualities of expression. This accounts, to no small extent, for Mozart’s love affair with the clarinet and its lower-pitched sibling the basset horn, which he came to appreciate late in his brief career through the artistry of Anton Stadler.

Anton Stadler (1753–1812) and his brother Johann (also a clarinetist) performed as soloists in Vienna as early as 1773 and at about that time entered the service of the Russian ambassador in that city. They started playing as freelancers at the Viennese Court in 1779, were granted salaried positions in the Imperial Wind Band three years later, and in 1787 were appointed as the regular clarinetists in the Court Orchestra. Anton Stadler belonged to the same Masonic lodge as Mozart and became one of the composer’s closest friends. It seems Stadler’s character may have strayed sometimes toward the unsavory, and it is true that the final accounting of Mozart’s estate made note of a sizable unpaid debt owed to him by Stadler. In any case, Mozart seems to have enjoyed him greatly, and for Stadler he created a handful of supernal works: the Clarinet Trio (from 1786), the Clarinet Quintet (1789), and obbligato parts to arias in La clemenza di Tito (1791), in addition to the Clarinet Concerto.

The instrument for which the Clarinet Concerto was destined was the basset clarinet, essentially a standard clarinet to which Stadler affixed an extension that provided four extra notes in the lowest register, down to written C (sounding “concert-pitch” A, since the basset clarinet was a so-called transposing instrument). Basset clarinets failed to catch on, and by the time this work first appeared in print, in 1801, the publisher felt it would be wise to effect alterations that would make it entirely playable on clarinets without such an extension. Be-

IN SHORT

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna

Work composed: mostly in early October 1791, although he apparently began it in 1789 or 1790 — and possibly as early as 1787

World premiere: October 16, 1791, in Prague, Bohemia, probably with Anton Stadler as soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 15, 1908, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (a New York Philharmonic forebear), Leon Leroy, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 6, 2003, at Snug Harbor, Staten Island, as part of the Concerts in the Parks, Robert Minczuk, conductor, Won-Jin Jo, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 27 minutes
cause Mozart’s autograph is lost, a certain amount of speculation is involved in reconstructing his original version. Nonetheless, this piece is far more commonly heard as a vehicle for the standard clarinet, as it is here, with a number of low-lying passages transposed up an octave or otherwise reworked to bring them within the instrument’s reach.

A chamber-music quality reigns over the entire concerto, thanks in part to the close integration of soloist and orchestra — the clarinet sometimes serves as an accompanist to the violins, and it never plays an extended cadenza — and in part to the restrained sound of the orchestra itself. The trumpets and timpani of Mozart’s most brilliant piano concertos are not found here, and even oboes, the most penetrating of the woodwinds, are absent.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings, in addition to the solo clarinet.

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**Clarinet Cousins**

Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto was written for what should properly be called the basset clarinet. This is not to be confused with the basset horn, which is a tenor version of the standard clarinet. Mozart employed that instrument a good deal and even began to sketch a Basset Horn Concerto in G major for his friend Anton Stadler, perhaps as early as 1789. The fragment of that work (K.621b/584b) corresponds for the most part to the first 199 measures of what would become this A-major Clarinet Concerto.

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**End of the Line**

The Clarinet Concerto was the last major piece Mozart completed. All the other masterpieces of his final year were already behind him: the Piano Concerto in B-flat major (K.595), the String Quintet in E-flat major (K.614), the operas *Die Zauberflöte* and *La Clemenza di Tito*, the gem-like motet “Ave Verum Corpus.” What time remained for Mozart was spent on the short Masonic Cantata (K.623), a separate Masonic song (K.623a), and his poignant and powerful Requiem, which he left far from finished.

In retrospect, this concerto can be viewed as Mozart’s swan song, but he could not have envisioned it as such when he penned it in October 1791, and when it was premiered by his friend Anton Stadler on the 16th of that month. Mozart did not fall ill until about November 20, when he took to his bed with fever, a rash, and swelling of his hands and feet. He died at approximately one o’clock in the early morning of December 5. Not until a week or so before his death would he have had any serious reason to suppose that the end was near, at the age of 35.