

# Piano Concerto No. 24 in C minor, K.491

## Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart signaled the completion of his C-minor Piano Concerto by entering it into his *Verzeichnüß aller meiner Werke (Catalogue of All My Works)* on March 24, 1786. He was engaged in writing several other major pieces — in addition to numerous less imposing ones — at about the same time, including his Piano Concerto in A major (K.488, completed on March 2) and his opera *Le nozze di Figaro* (K.492, which would be premiered on May 1). Merely citing these works makes the point that Mozart was at the summit of his creative genius in the spring of 1786. That one could make an analogous claim for other spans in the last decade of his life reminds us of how exorbitant his talent was.

The C-minor Piano Concerto stands a world apart from the charmed piano concertos that immediately preceded it. Wrote the Mozart biographer Alfred Einstein:

It is hard to imagine the expression on the faces of the Viennese public when on 7 April 1786 Mozart played this work at one of his subscription concerts. Perhaps they contented themselves with the *Larghetto*, which moves in regions of the purest and most affecting tranquillity, and has a transcendent simplicity of expression.

The evening was the last in a series of annual benefit concerts (which at the time meant box-office receipts would benefit the composer) that Mozart had been giving in Vienna since 1783. It is possible that on that occasion he also played his A-major Concerto, or maybe all three of his most recent piano concertos (the one in E-flat major, K.482, would have been only a few months old), but no documentation remains to shed light on the details. Whatever other pieces were on the program, one can be sure that

they could only have hoisted into greater relief the distinct character of the C-minor Piano Concerto.

It is not absolutely certain that Mozart played the C-minor Concerto on that date, although the practical logic connecting the completion of such a work to a solo appearance two weeks later is nigh unto impeccable. Mozart's autograph reveals a working style that can be found elsewhere in pieces he wrote to spotlight himself: by and large, the orchestral lines are written out fully, but the piano part sometimes disintegrates into shorthand, as if to merely remind the composer about how his not-yet-notated piece was to proceed. When he eventually got around to "filling out" the piano part, he sometimes found himself trying to cram too many notes into too little space on the physical page. The resulting text has challenged editors ever since with a number of obscurities, including a few conflicting harmonizations.

Even tempo indications are a matter of speculation. The composer clearly marked

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### In Short

**Born:** January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

**Died:** December 5, 1791, in Vienna

**Work composed:** completed March 24, 1786, in Vienna

**World premiere:** probably April 7, 1786, at the Burgtheater in Vienna, with the composer leading from the keyboard

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** November 2, 1941, John Barbirolli, conductor, Robert Casadesu, soloist

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

**Estimated duration:** ca. 31 minutes

the first movement *Allegro* on his manuscript, but the notations of *Larghetto* and *Allegretto* at the beginning of the second and third movements are in a hand other than Mozart's.

This is the only Mozart piano concerto to use both oboes and clarinets; in fact, it employs the largest orchestra he ever used in a piano concerto. It is clear that he planned this piece to be "big" from its very conception, as it is the only one of his large-scale mature works in which he set down the score on manuscript paper pre-ruled to 16 staves, elsewhere preferring 12-staff paper. Mozart uses his forces to splendid effect, employing the winds both as soloists and as a choir to yield a fully symphonic texture. The mature Mozart always made telling use of wind instruments to highlight textures and add

irresistible bits of contrapuntal commentary. Here, especially in the second movement, the entire wind section takes on an almost *concertant* role. At places one is tempted to think of this piece as falling between the cracks of solo concerto and *sinfonia concertante*, much as Mozart's Quintet for Piano and Winds (K.452, written two years earlier) seems almost the hybrid offspring of chamber music and concerto.

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

**Cadenza:** David Fray plays cadenzas by Paul Badura-Skoda.

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## Mozart in a Minor Mood

The brooding darkness of K.491 makes it unique among Mozart's concertos. Only one other is in a minor key — the Piano Concerto in D minor (K.466), of 1785 — and that one, although a favorite of ensuing generations of emotionally susceptible Romantics, actually ends with more than a whiff of major-key merriment. Not so the C-minor, the overriding sentiment of which might be described as despairing. Of course, this is not raw despair that is put on display; one can depend on Mozart to temper it with a certain measure of elegance. In so doing, he renders it all the more poignant.



Mozart with his sister, Nannerl, and father, Leopold, around the piano, ca. 1780