

# Cello Concerto in C major, Hob. VIIb:1

## Joseph Haydn

It is more than a little ironic that Haydn's splendid Cello Concerto in C major, which is today one of his most popular concertos, lay in oblivion for almost two centuries. Haydn did enter it in his *Entwurf-Katalog* (*Draft Catalogue*), an inventory he began around 1765, so the piece must have been written by that year at the latest. This was therefore a work of the composer's first years at the Esterházy Court, which makes sense given the prominent solo-cello writing he employed in some of his other pieces of that time; the well-known Symphonies Nos. 6–8 come immediately to mind, as well as the Symphonies Nos. 13, 31, 36, and 72 — all, despite their eventual numbering, from 1765 or earlier.

The cellist all these works were meant to spotlight was Joseph Franz Weigl, one of the first musicians Haydn hired when he was brought on board by Prince Paul Anton Esterházy. Weigl's contract began on June 1, 1761, and he remained at the court until 1769, leaving to assume the post of principal cello for the Italian Opera at the Kärntnertheater in Vienna. Weigl was a kingpin of Haydn's instrumental ensemble while he was in the Esterházys' employ. His tenure offers an insight into a detail of performance practice: the part he used for performances of Haydn's opera *Lo speziale*, which opened Prince Nikolaus Esterházy's new opera house in Eszterháza (Hungary) in 1768, reveals that, as a member of the continuo group, Weigl played entire chords on his cello when accompanying some passages, rather than just single notes.

The cellist may have kept this concerto in his repertoire, but it was not published. At some point a copyist's manuscript parts landed in the library of the Counts Kolovrat-Krakovský at Radenín Castle in what is now the Czech Republic. Their collection was

deposited in the National Museum of Prague. The parts were uncovered there by musicologist Oldřich Pulkert as recently as 1961.

In the first movement, this work unrolls at a spacious pace, without calling attention to the considerable virtuosity required for its execution. Pairs of oboes and horns add body to the *tutti* sections, although Haydn limits the accompaniment to a string orchestra when the cello is playing. The wisdom of his decision to keep the textures light is confirmed by later cello concertos (by other composers) in which the soloist can be seen playing but can scarcely be heard. Of course, problems of balance between soloist and orchestra are considerably reduced when the “symphonic” forces are hardly larger than a chamber group — as they were when this piece was new. Indeed, the winds remain silent throughout the second movement, an exercise in surpassing elegance, not far removed from the poignant

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## In Short

**Born:** probably March 31, 1732 — since he was baptized on April 1 — in Rohrau, Lower Austria

**Died:** May 31, 1809, in Vienna

**Work composed:** ca. 1765

**World premiere:** probably shortly after it was written at one of the Esterházy Palaces, with the composer conducting and Joseph Franz Weigl as soloist

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** October 19, 1972, Stanisław Skrowaczewski, conductor, János Starker, soloist

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** September 12, 2014, in Shanghai, China, Long Yu, conductor, Jian Wang, soloist

**Estimated duration:** ca. 25 minutes

style cultivated in Berlin by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.

If the technical demands of the first movement are subsumed to the overall effect of the ensemble, the concerto's finale is a veritable tour de force. Following the opening *tutti*, the cello fairly dazzles with its quick scales, which erupt out of notes sustained over several measures. Rapid-fire arpeggios, unrelenting scales, quickly repeated notes,

and very high-lying passage work push the soloist into virtuosic territory. This is a relatively long movement among Haydn's concerto finales and it displays a strong sense of personality, with each return of the *ritornello* offering a distinct character and a momentum of musical interest.

**Instrumentation:** two oboes, two horns, and strings, in addition to the solo cello.

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## Haydn's Concertos

A perusal of Haydn's canon reveals a surprising number of concertos — works that by and large go unheard today. There are two major reasons. Many of such pieces he wrote for his virtuoso musicians during his years as music director for the Esterházy princes are regrettably lost. It appears that he composed now-vanished works spotlighting violin, cello, baryton (a low-voiced, bowed instrument with an extra set of plucked strings that was a favorite of Prince Nikolaus Esterházy), bass, flute, bassoon, and two horns.

Still, many Haydn concertos do exist, and the other reason those are not well known is that few are among his most compelling works. Despite the relish with which he provided his instrumentalists virtuosic passages in his symphonies, Haydn rarely made the most of the dramatic interplay of soloist and orchestra that marks the greatest concertos. There are exceptions, to be sure, and those are the handful of Haydn concertos that remain in the active repertoire today: two cello concertos, the D-major Keyboard Concerto, and, among his late works, his Trumpet Concerto and his Sinfonia concertante for a solo group of oboe, bassoon, violin, and cello.



Example of a baryton, a popular instrument throughout the 18th century