Notes on the Program
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Piano Concerto in E-flat major, K.482
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

When Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart established himself in Vienna in 1781, he did so hoping to make a name as a composer and as a pianist. He was supremely equipped to do both. The obvious intersection of Mozart’s two disciplines came in the composition of piano concertos, works he wrote, in most cases, to spotlight his own talents as a performer. This was nothing new to his Vienna years; by that time, he had already composed six piano concertos (including those for two and for three pianos), not to mention a handful of others that were essentially piano-and-orchestra arrangements of movements by other composers. But with his arrival in Vienna, Mozart’s livelihood depended on such pieces to a degree it had not before, and as his acclaim as a performer increased, so did his production of piano concertos.

The catalogue of his works in that genre neatly chronicles the rise and fall of Mozart’s popularity as a concert musician. During the 1782–83 season he produced three piano concertos (K.413–415). They did the trick, and in 1784 he enjoyed enough audience demand to justify the composition of six more (K.449–451, 453, 456, and 459). That was the high point of Mozart’s success on the concert platform, but in each of the following two years (1785 and 1786) he was still able to sell enough tickets for his subscription concerts to merit another three concertos (K.466, 467, and 482; K.488, 491, and 503). After that, Mozart ceased to be the pianistic flavor of the month; he wrote not a single piano concerto in 1787, one in 1788 (K.537), none in 1789 or 1790, and one last effort (K.595) in 1791, at the beginning of his final year. These statistics don’t 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; still, they do mirror the general trajectory of his popularity as a pianist in Viennese concert life.

Mozart signaled the completion of the E-flat major Piano Concerto (K.482) by entering it into his Verzeichnüss aller meiner Werke (Catalogue of All My Works) on December 16, 1785, when he was already busy composing his opera Le nozze di Figaro (which would be premiered the following May). It was the last of his three piano concertos of 1785, a year in which he played in some 20 concerts; the two that preceded it, the D-minor and the C-major (with its immensely famous slow movement), are among his most played today.

The Concerto in E-flat major remains perhaps more in the domain of connoisseurs, who esteem it not a groschen less than its

In Short

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria
Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna
Work composed: 1785, with the score dated December 16 of that year
World premiere: apparently December 23, 1785, between the acts of Dittersdorf’s oratorio Ester, in Vienna
New York Philharmonic premiere: March 5, 1925, Willem Mengelberg, conductor, Wanda Landowska, soloist
Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: April 24, 2018, Christoph Eschenbach, conductor, Till Fellner, soloist
Estimated duration: ca. 34 minutes
immediate predecessors. It glows with a rich infusion of woodwind colors. This was the first of Mozart’s piano concertos to include clarinets in its orchestration; the composer was apparently so pleased with the result that he promptly re-scored his A-major Concerto (K.488, which he had already begun) to include them, too. Overall, this is a particularly elegant work, filled with ornate, often complicated, writing for the soloist, yet completely unostentatious in its natural sense of aristocratic poise. In the indispensable book *Mozart and his Piano Concertos* (1948 / 64), Cuthbert Girdlestone observed: “Of all his concertos, this one is the queeni-est. Combining grace and majesty, the music unfolds like a sovereign in progress.”

There is no need to express preference for one movement of this piece over the others, since each offers joys both abundant and unique. Nonetheless, the Andante, a melancholy and expressive set of variations in C minor, seems to have touched its first listeners most deeply. In January 1786 Mozart’s father, Leopold, wrote to his daughter (the composer’s sister), Nannerl, to pass along this report:

I have had a reply from your brother in which he says that he gave without much preparation three subscription concerts to 120 subscribers, that he composed for this purpose a new piano concerto in E-flat, in which (a rather unusual occurrence!) he had to repeat the Andante.

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

**Cadenzas:** Jeffrey Kahane performs his own cadenzas in these performances.

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**The New York Philharmonic Connection**

Mozart’s entire catalogue of music seems ubiquitous today, but that was not always the case. For example, the New York Philharmonic premiere of his Piano Concerto in E-flat major, K.482, did not take place until 1925. The soloist was Wanda Landowska (1879–1959), a French-Polish musician best known for bringing renewed interest to the harpsichord and for helping to usher in the period instrument movement. Landowska had made her Philharmonic debut on that instrument in 1923, performing works by J.S. Bach, Handel, and Purcell, and her next appearance, in February 1924, found her doing double duty, playing a Bach harpsichord concerto followed by Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 20.

The *New York Times* critic Olin Downes devoted almost three-quarters of its review of the Philharmonic’s March 5, 1925, concert to Landowska’s performance of Mozart’s Piano Concerto, K.482, writing that she had interpreted a composition which belongs to Mozart’s greatest period, and which contains pages of the rarest beauty, with a self-abnegation, a depth of feeling and a purity of style past praise. ... The purely technical problems were disposed of with such finish and authority that the listener soon forgot that they existed: he became absorbed in the incomparable ease and sparkle and song of the performance.

— The Editors