

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91): Piano Concerto No 23 in A major K488 (1786)

I Allegro

II Adagio

III Allegro Assai

Mozart's years in Vienna saw him reach the height of his powers as he dominated equally as a composer of piano concertos and opera, often drawing on passages from each for the other. Between 1782 and 1786 he introduced 15 concertos, most of which he premiered himself, producing only two more thereafter, in 1787 and 1791. This was a period, moreover of intense social, political and cultural change throughout northern Europe, of which Vienna and Prague were the musical centres. It was, too, the point at which the technological development of the piano to keep pace with the increasingly sophisticated techniques of keyboard players, made it the most significant instrument for solo performance, superseding the harpsichord and flute, which had dominated the previous two decades. Mozart himself was engaged in the ultimately unsuccessful attempt to move from dependence on a patron to autonomy as both composer and performer, following his inner voices rather than the institutional requirements and occupational obligations of a post-feudal court post to express his creative imagination. The parlous condition of a freelance musician at that time, however, meant acceding to bourgeois public taste, which could in its different way be just as constraining on artistic freedom as the demands of court patronage. Mozart was clearly aware of this, writing to his father in late 1782 about three piano concertos that he was composing (K413 in F major, K414 in A major and K415 in C major) that they "are a happy medium between what is too easy and too difficult; they are very brilliant, pleasing to the ear, and natural, without being vapid. There are passages here and there from which the connoisseurs alone can derive satisfaction; but these passages are written in such a way that the less learned cannot fail to be pleased, though without knowing why". Some eighteen months later he wrote, again to his father, after a successful series of subscription concerts: "The first concert...went off very well. The hall was overflowing; and the new concerto I played (possibly K449) won extraordinary applause. Everywhere I go I hear praises of that concert".

Since Bach, the keyboard concerto was the form in which composers were able to showcase their virtuoso talents and new compositional ideas through their distinctive styles of playing. By the mid-1780's in Vienna the concerto as a musical idea had come to resonate with contemporary enlightenment ideas of liberal individualism and toleration and the related discourses on moral versus political law that characterised the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere at the core of the civil society of later western modernity. The tension between the individual and society which was the central relational process of this emerging social structure was given reflexive expression for musical audiences in the engaging dialogue between soloist and orchestra that constitutes the concerto form. To an extent dialogic engagement of this kind is true of all the performing arts and indicates their sociological importance as representations of the structures of feeling that underwrite the gradual articulation of new social and cultural forms whenever and wherever they begin to emerge. In north-western Europe at this time, performance of a concerto modelled the tensions surrounding the emergence of individual self-consciousness and its subjective interrelation with the norms of socio-cultural collectivity, exploring and mediating the necessary relations between them as a dialogue of divergence, conflict, (re-)engagement and resolution. More than a metaphor, the concerto form provided audiences with a template for the production of cultural knowledge about social relations. Concerto performances served to instruct listeners and spectators – whether 'connoisseurs' or 'the less learned' - in the artistry of the quest for cooperation between

the individual and society. For Daniel Barenboim, it is this quality that makes Mozart's piano music "a really impressive model for democratic living: everything is integrated into it. The leading voice and the secondary voice always both have something to say...there's always someone opposite, a commentary, a second person".

Balancing these tensions was vital to Mozart in order for him to satisfy public taste with his piano concertos – his income depended on his being able to do so. Yet the drive towards creative innovation which had brought him to this point in his career led him to produce, at times, innovative works of such complex intensity that they suggest indifference to what might give pleasure to his potential audiences, setting up within his own oeuvre a version of the very tension in the wider culture which it reflected so effectively. This evening's work, K488, one of three which he wrote in the winter and spring of 1785-6, can justifiably be regarded as representing the peak of his writing for solo piano and orchestra at the high point of his golden years in Vienna. The critic Alfred Einstein has written that it gives "the impression that he felt he had perhaps gone too far, had given the Viennese public credit for too much, had overstepped the boundaries of 'social' music". Indeed, Mozart seemed to recognise this himself when exhorting his childhood patron, the Prince von Furstenburg, to whom he had sent a copy, "not to let it out of your hands (since) I keep (it) for myself or a very small circle of music-lovers and connoisseurs, which cannot therefore be possibly known elsewhere as it is not even known in Vienna". Einstein suggests that it was at this point that Mozart "saw the favour of the public waning and sought to win it back with works that would be sure of success" - which may be one reason for the sudden falling-off of his compositions for piano in the last five years of his life. Although he remained productive and continued to be based in Vienna, he travelled widely, especially to Prague, and focussed his work increasingly on opera, and compositions for other instruments.

Yet it is difficult not to see this work as exemplary in striking the 'happy medium' that Mozart had found with the concertos composed at the beginning of his time in Vienna. It sustains a beautiful, movingly balanced dialogue between soloist and accompanying orchestra. The former expresses their feelings to the orchestra, which signals, through short, interspersed phrases, at times its acceptance, even approval, whilst at others implying questions or gently raising cautious reservations as the narrative of their collaboration proceeds. In the opening allegro, the orchestra begins briskly with characteristic flow before the piano introduces the first theme, starting a careful development through solo passages before beginning a dialogue of fluctuating but gradually growing intensity with the orchestra. A second theme is then introduced on the piano, complementing the first and similarly alternating with the orchestra, then leading through a series of cadenza which lead to the orchestra's gentle close. The soloist opens the adagio with a quiet, almost hesitant pensiveness, a contrast to the preceding allegro which is complemented by its uniquely wistful setting in F sharp minor. The pattern of initiation and response is inverted here, with the soloist setting both the gradual pace and the introspectively interrogative tone, to which the orchestra responds with supportive reflection. Perhaps buoyed by this, the soloist opens the final movement with an assertive change of tempo – allegro assai, initiating a confident elaboration of the conversation with the orchestra. This develops through the soloist's calmly consistent virtuosic technical display, evoking sympathetically integrated orchestral responses, building on thematic variations underwritten by consolidating orchestral textures to reach a triumphantly decisive conclusion. Catherine Borner says of this concerto that, as with so much of Mozart, it is open to interpretation in performance as both optimistic and saddening, though her own understanding and preference is for the former. She says she enjoys particularly the lovely dialogues with the orchestra through which the concerto proceeds and is often reminded when playing it of *The Marriage of Figaro*: Mozart completed both works in the same year and would certainly have been working on

them simultaneously, no doubt exploring overlapping musical ideas. The opera was premiered at the Vienna *Burgtheater* on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1786.