Piano Concerto No. 17

Wolfgang Amadè Mozart  
Born in Salzburg, January 27, 1756  
Died in Vienna, December 5, 1791

Mozart may not have invented the piano concerto, but he was the composer who really made the genre matter. It took him awhile. His earliest piano concertos were arrangements of piano sonatas by J.C. Bach and lesser lights; most likely they were assignments given to the pre-teen composer by his father. The Concerto in D major, K. 175, was Mozart’s first independent piano concerto, which he wrote at age 17. Three more followed early in 1776, before the magnificent “Jenamy” Concerto in E-flat (K. 271) in January 1777, the month of his 21st birthday.

The Mature Concertos  
The Concerto we hear today was the fourth of an astounding series of 12 Mozart composed in Vienna between 1784 and 1786, at the summit of his public career. Recently married to singer Constanze Weber, finally freed—for the most part—from the domination of his father in Salzburg, and soon to be a father himself, Mozart was enjoying new kinds of professional success as a mature musician, one whose gifts clearly went much deeper than his earlier miraculous exploits as a child prodigy.

Piano concertos best allowed Mozart to display the scope of his gifts to the Viennese public. He often performed as the keyboard soloist when the works were premiered, which gave him the chance to shine in the dual roles of composer and pianist. The concertos became his star vehicles as he sought fame during the 1780s and as he presented them at concerts for which he took personal financial responsibility, in the hopes of supporting himself and his growing family.

Mozart occasionally composed piano concertos for use by others, as is the case with his relatively modest Concerto in E-flat (K. 449), written in February 1784 for Barbara (Babette) von Ployer, and the marvelous G-major Concerto (K. 453) we hear today, which dates from a few months later and which was also composed for her. Barbara studied piano with Mozart and he clearly thought highly of her gifts, as later did Haydn, who dedicated a set of variations to her after Mozart’s death.

The G-major Concerto was performed at a concert Barbara’s father, Gottfried Ignaz von Ployer, gave in his home on June 13, 1784. Mozart wrote about the upcoming event in a letter to his father: “Tomorrow Herr Ployer is giving a concert in the country at Döbling, where Fräulein Babette is playing her new concerto in G, and I am performing the quintet; we are then playing together the grand sonata [in D major, K. 448] for two pianos. I am bringing Paisiello in my carriage, as I want him to hear both my pupil and my compositions.” Giovanni Paisiello was a celebrated opera composer at the time, dimly remembered today for his version of The Barber of Seville, to which Mozart’s The Marriage of Figaro is a sequel.

The middle 1780s, when Mozart was in his late 20s, were also the years of his three great Italian operas, those written to texts by Lorenzo da Ponte: Figaro, Don Giovanni, and Così fan tutte. The spirit of these phenomenal works, filled with intrigue, drama, playfulness, and character, often found instrumental expression in the piano concertos of the period. Today this is particularly evident in the final movement—especially the coda—that is imbued with the spirit of comic opera and is one of the wittiest pieces of music Mozart ever wrote.
A Closer Look The first movement Allegro opens with an orchestral presentation of two themes, the first of which, as so often in Mozart’s concertos, has a march-like character, although in this instance gentle rather than militaristic. Soon after the piano solo, a prominent third theme is added. The spirit of this movement is at turns playful, tender, lyrical, song-like, and simply beautiful—the master in top form. When Mozart performed his own concertos, he would improvise cadenzas—the flashy solo sections that occur near the end of some movements—and therefore had no need to write them down. But because Mozart wrote this piece for someone else, he felt called upon to provide cadenzas.

The lengthy second movement (Andante) begins with a delicate string passage before a solo oboe and other woodwinds enter. Mozart provides a leisurely introduction, just as he did to various solemn arias in his operas, before the soloist enters.

“That was lovely!” So Mozart wrote in his expense book on May 27, 1784, after notating the theme that his pet starling sang—the theme, just a bit off, that forms the basis of the delightful final variation movement (Allegretto) of the G-major Piano Concerto. The orchestra first presents the theme, one that bears some resemblance to the music Mozart would write some years later for the bird catcher Papageno in The Magic Flute. The theme is crisply stated by the orchestra in repeated and evenly-balanced sections. Five variations follow, the first prominently featuring the piano against the unobtrusive orchestra, while the second gives the theme to the ensemble with the soloist providing filigree above. An extended Presto finale brings the Concerto to its excited, exciting, and brilliantly playful conclusion.

—Christopher H. Gibbs

Mozart composed the Piano Concerto No. 17 in 1784.

The first complete performances of Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 17 weren’t until January/February 1970, with Sviatoslav Richter as soloist and Eugene Ormandy conducting. The work has been performed only three times since then on subscription concerts; in February 1984 with Radu Lupu and Riccardo Muti, in February 1990 with Emanuel Ax and Klaus Tennstedt/William Smith, and in March/April 2011 with Marc-André Hamelin and Jun Märkl.


The Concerto is scored for an orchestra of solo piano, flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings.

The work runs approximately 32 minutes in performance.

Parallel Events
1784
Mozart
Piano Concerto No. 17
Music
Salieri
*Les Danaïdes*

**Literature**
Kant
“How is Enlightenment?”

**Art**
David
*Oath of the Horatii*

**History**
Treaty of Constantinople