Piano Concerto No. 17

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756–1791)

Instrumentation: flute, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, strings, solo piano
Performance time: 30 minutes

Background

The most salient and interesting fact about Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 17—and the most charming, at that!—is its nickname, the "starling concerto," an homage to the composer's pet starling. The concerto's celebrated last movement is said to be based on the tuneful whistling of Mozart's avian pet. Possible?

Well, we know that Mozart purchased a starling on May 27, 1784, less than three weeks before his pupil Barbara Ployer first played this concerto at the house of her uncle, who was Salzburg's agent at the imperial court in Vienna. We also know that Mozart adored the bird and made much of its musical abilities. Three years later, when it died, Mozart staged a funeral of sufficient pomp and ceremony to rival a state occasion, with veiled mourners and solemn hymns; the composer himself wrote an elegiac poem for the occasion.

But many analyses, including an online account by Meredith J. West and Andrew P. King, conclude that the starling mimicked Mozart's invented melody, rather than the other way around. When your intrepid annotator consulted an ornithologist on this subject, she confirmed that the species of starling owned by Mozart, sturnus

vulgaris, is a virtual genius of mimicry, with a facility far exceeding that of the more colorful parrot. Mozart is said to have exclaimed "das war schön!" while listening to the beloved bird while working on this concerto. It seems likely that he was admiring its rendition of his own melodies.

By this time Mozart was 28 and had been living in Vienna for about three years. Moving there was a decision he had not taken lightly, and his father, Leopold, looked upon his son's relocation with some trepidation. There were musical commissions to be secured and lessons to be taught, but to get such work required contending with the petty politics of the Viennese court and aristocracy—something resembling a viper's nest. Leopold knew all too well his son's impatience with such matters. So, for that matter, did Amadeus himself. But he was determined to build his career there, and had identified composing and playing piano concertos as a strategy for success. His time in Vienna included some of the most productive years of his brief life, and he would die in that city only seven years later. In 1784 that was a more distant prospect; it was a year of furious activity that included the composition of his Piano Concerto No. 17 and four others, all masterpieces.

When the 25-year-old Mozart arrived in Vienna on March 16, 1681, he was obligated to stay with the entourage of the archbishop of Vienna, sitting at a table above the cooks, but below the valets. Well, most of us have worked for bosses who didn't appreciate us—though few of us possess talents on the level of Mozart's. We know from his voluminous, colorful (and sometimes off-color) correspondence with Leopold and with his sister Nannerl that Mozart was quick to feel resentful of those who underestimated him. It should have been a time for Mozart to cultivate and consolidate favor in court, and to line up business elsewhere in Vienna. But professional obligations held over from Salzburg stood in his way, and the archbishop refused to release him from these requirements. His festering irritation made things worse. On one occasion, an evening of entertainment hosted by the archbishop, Mozart supplied a violin rondo, and an aria and a sonata for himself. His compensation was as modest as the program. Had the archbishop released Mozart to perform for the emperor that same evening, he could have earned the equivalent of half his annual salary in Salzburg.

On May 9, matters seemed to reach a climax. According to Mozart, his meeting that day with the archbishop regarding matters of his employment prompted a torrent of abuse from the archbishop. When Mozart asked to be discharged, the archbishop refused at first, but was eventually released from Salzburg service "with a kick on my arse... by order of our worthy Prince Archbishop," as he wrote to Leopold.

When Leopold came to visit his son for 10 weeks in 1785, things were very different. Though Amadeus' professional standing in Vienna was still subject to petty (and not-so-petty) politics, letters from Leopold to Nannerl show the composer was ensconced in the musical life of the city and in his own household, having married his beloved Constance (another long story, complicated by parental scheming on both sides).

Mozart may have been at pains to show his father an image of prosperous maturity, but he could never have planned the whirlwind of activity that the proud Leopold reported to Nannerl—especially in the face of all his professional commitments. "Since my arrival your brother's fortepiano has been taken at least a dozen times from the house to the theater or to some other house," Leopold wrote her. This hectic succession of performances gave Leopold the chance to hear a number of the great concertos his son had composed in 1784. "I had the great pleasure of hearing all the interplay of the instruments so clearly that for sheer delight tears came to my eyes. When your brother left the stage, the emperor tipped his hat and called out 'Bravo Mozart!' and when he came on to play, there was a great deal of clapping."

What to Listen for

Aside from father Leopold's understandable pride in his son's musical achievements, the letter to Nannerl reflects the fundamental reality of piano concertos for Mozart (and for Beethoven after him): they were showpieces designed to display skill in composition and performance. Dramatic flair was a plus on both counts, and perhaps for this reason, Mozart's 1784 concertos generally open with emphatic, military-sounding introductions. The 17th, however, does not follow this pattern. The concerto opens in a relaxed manner, and as its first movement unfolds, its development has a natural, discursive quality. In fact, Mozart includes some features—an emphatic use of the woodwinds and some adventurous, meandering modulations—that sound natural in his hands, but were actually quite unusual for the time.

In the central movement, the strength of the woodwinds continues in an even more unexpected way, with the conventionally dominant string section abruptly withdrawing shortly after the orchestral discourse begins. The concerto's finale, too, is unusual—built not on a conventional rondo, but rather around five variations on a theme, followed by an energetic presto. Mozart may have had the success of this movement in mind when he composed the equally unusual central movement of his next concerto; it also takes the form of a theme and five variations, eventually arriving at a highly elaborated coda.