

# MOZART

Piano Concertos No. 15 & 27

# MARTIN HELMCHEN

Netherlands Chamber Orchestra

Gordan Nikolic'

## Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791)

### Piano Concerto No. 15 in B flat, K. 450

1. Allegro  
Cadenza: W.A. Mozart
2. Andante
3. Allegro

### Piano Concerto No. 27 in B flat, K. 595

4. Allegro  
Cadenza: W.A. Mozart
5. Larghetto
6. Rondo. Allegro

Martin Helmchen, piano  
Netherlands Chamber Orchestra  
Leader: Gordan Nikolić

Recording venue : NedPho Koepel, Amsterdam  
(The Netherlands, 1/2013)

Executive Producer : Job Maarse  
Recording Producer : Sebastian Stein  
Balance Engineer : Jean-Marie Geijsen  
Editing : Sebastian Stein  
Piano Technician : Ehud Loudar

Total playing-time : 55. 27

The Steinway & Sons grand piano was supplied by Ypma Piano's  
Alkmaar

## Vienna: 'Pianoland'

For the sequel to his first Mozart CD with the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra, pianist Martin Helmchen has once again chosen two strongly contrasting piano concertos in one and the same key: this time, B-flat major. The works are from two entirely different periods in Mozart's life. Piano Concerto No. 15, K. 450 is one of six composed in 1784, three of which were written for two other pianists, Barbara von Ployer and Maria Theresia von Paradis. Together with the Clarinet Concerto, K. 622, Piano Concerto No. 27, K. 595, composed in the same year, 1791, forms Mozart's swansong in the genre and was written in a period when the good old days of his *Akademien* (or concerts) had been consigned to the past.

In 1781, Wolfgang Amadé Mozart took an extremely audacious step for a musician of his day: When, following an angry exchange of words with a dignitary, he summarily had been dismissed as *Kapellmeister* at the archiepiscopal court at Salzburg, he resolved no longer to seek employment, but, rather, to earn his living as a freelance musician. At that time, permanent employment at a court or church was, in terms of social status, the best situation a musician could hope to attain. Further, it meant a steady income. Even Mozart's friend and colleague, Joseph Haydn – without a doubt Europe's leading composer – would, until his death, (at least formally speaking) remain in the service of the Esterházy family. (This did not, incidentally, prevent him from negotiating, in 1779, a new contract with his patron, which permitted him to compose on the instructions of others or from offering his works for publication. He would subsequently even be permitted to undertake long concert tours abroad.)

But whereas Haydn was content with his status at a princely court – a status equivalent to that of a lackey –, for Mozart it was not enough. And that is not surprising, as, since his earliest youth, Mozart had been fêted as a *Wunderkind* at Europe's royal courts and adored by the nobility. In 1770, Pope Clement XIV had even inducted him into the Order of the Golden Spur, which meant that Mozart, as a *Comes palatinus lateranus* (papal count palatine) had a right to the title of 'knight,' and the social status that goes with it. (A well-known portrait of Mozart indeed shows him wearing the insignia of the order, and on a few occasions he in fact signed documents with 'Wolfgang von Mozart,' or 'Mozart ca' [*cavaliere*].) Although Mozart was sure of his status, this had, in his eyes, little to do with his station by birth: "The heart ennobles man, and even if I am not a count, there is perhaps more honour in my body than in

many a count. And, be it a servant or a count, as soon as he insults me, he is nothing more than a scoundrel."

In March 1781, Mozart, incensed, wrote his father, Leopold, that his place at the table was now with the lackeys, something he took as nothing less than an affront. Not surprisingly, the situation in turn escalated, with Mozart ultimately being literally kicked out onto the street. As a result of this incident, Mozart could no longer expect to find employment in Salzburg. Fearing that his son had entirely sidelined himself, Leopold tried to make it clear to him that finding a new boss should be his highest priority. But Vienna beckoned. "It is truly Pianoland here!," Mozart wrote his father ecstatically about the large number of good pianos in the city. He established himself in Vienna and embarked on a career as a freelance musician. Before long, he had carved out a niche for himself with the nobility. He wrote his father about his excellent connections with the *noblesse*: "If you think that I am detested at court and by the nobility and half nobility, just drop a line to Herr von Strad, Countess Thun, Countess Rumbeck, Baroness Waldstätten, Herr von Sonnenfels, Frau von Trattner – *enfin*, to anyone you wish."

Mozart drew his income from four different sources: giving lessons, composition commissions, royalties from works he had published and the proceeds from the ticket sales for his own concerts. The resulting sum was roughly comparable to the earnings of a higher civil servant – in other words: not bad at all. But at the same time, every penny he earned was sorely needed, as all four of these sources of income were to a large extent intrinsically linked to the nobility, and, in order to pursue them, Mozart had to have an appearance suitable to moving in such circles. I.e., to be presentable, it was a prerequisite for him to be dressed in an appropriately fashionable manner, as well as to have his own coach. As a result, he was usually happy if he broke even.

## Public success

The year 1784 was probably Mozart's best year as a 'musical entrepreneur.' In a letter to his father, he provides us with a good look in his diary. From it, we can see that he had a booming practice as a teacher: "My mornings are devoted to my pupils; almost every evening, I must perform." And the latter point was hardly an exaggeration, as, e.g., between 26 February and 3 April, Mozart gave a total of 22 concerts, most of which were private appearances in the palaces of noble patrons. During this period, he played on five consecutive Thursdays at the residence of the Russian ambassador, Prince Gallitzin, and each Monday and Friday at that of Count Johann von Esterházy; he performed at three Saturday concerts organised by Dutch piano virtuoso Georg Friedrich Richter; and as if all of this were not enough, he rented the Trattnerhof room for his own concerts on three consecutive Wednesdays and concertised on two evenings at the Burgtheater. From the correspondence with his father, we can also see how popular he must have been. The above-mentioned Richter had originally wanted to organise six concerts, but his potential subscribers (all members of the nobility) indicated that they were only interested in coming if Mozart also appeared at the concerts. Mozart agreed to appear, but also skilfully cashed in on the situation by in turn giving three concerts of his own in the same room. "On the three last Wednesdays of the fasting period, beginning on 17 March, [I shall give] three concerts in the room of the Trattnerhof in subscription" he writes. "I must, however, also quickly explain how it came that I got the opportunity to give *Akademien* in a private room. The piano virtuoso, Richter, is to give a concert on each of the six Saturdays in the aforementioned room. The nobility agreed to subscribe, but indicated that they were not interested if I did not also play. Herr Richter therefore asked me to promise to play three times, and arranged a subscription for my three concerts, to which everyone promptly subscribed. The first *Akademie*, on 17 March, went well; the room was filled to the brim, and the new concerto which I performed was an extraordinary success, and wherever one goes, one hears the praises of this *Akademie*. Tomorrow, the 21st, should have been my first *Akademie* in the theatre, but Prince Louis Liechtenstein is presenting an opera at his home, and in so doing not only has kidnapped the core of the nobility away from me, but also has robbed me of the best members of my orchestra. Consequently, by means of a printed *Avertissement*, I had it postponed until 1 April." Mozart succeeded in attracting a total of 174 subscribers to the three concerts at the Trattnerhof, each of whom paid 6 florins. The list he

sent to his father reads as a Who's Who of Vienna society: 50% came from the higher nobility, 42% from the lower nobility and 'commercial nobility' (those who had purchased their title) and 8% from the well-to-do middle class. And since new music had to be presented at every concert, Mozart typically continued to compose like mad during intervals, as he explained to his father:

"So you can easily imagine that, as I am required always to play new items, I always have to compose then and there." How solid Mozart's 'music business' was, is confirmed by the fact that, from February 1784 onward, he catalogued his compositions in a 'List of all my Works.' The very first work to be entered in the list was the Piano Concerto in E-flat, K. 449, composed for his pupil, Barbara ('Babette') von Ployer. In the same year, as many as five other piano concertos would, among many other works, be added to the list. Two more concertos were written for other pianists – the Piano Concerto in G, K. 453, for the aforementioned Barbara von Ployer, and that in B-flat, K. 456, for the blind pianist, Maria Theresia von Paradis. The remaining three were intended for the composer's own use and were probably first heard at his *Akademien*, as was the Piano Concerto in B-flat, K. 450, a particularly virtuosic work, in which Mozart drew on all of his possibilities for amazing his audience. And with success, as the concerto was praised by all, including Georg Richter, when he visited Leopold Mozart in Salzburg later that year. Mozart in turn wrote his father: "The concerto which your Herr Richter so praised, is that in B-flat, which is the first I have written in that key, and for which he already complimented me at that time. I am unable to choose between these two concertos – I find both to be concertos that make you sweat. In the final analysis, though, it is that in B-flat which, in terms of difficulty, beats that in D [K. 451]."

Mozart sent the scores of both concertos to his father for them to be copied, while at the same time taking care to ensure that they did not fall into the wrong hands, as many copyists had the practice of making two copies of a score, selling one to the highest bidding publisher. Wishing to retain the sole right to perform the works, he wrote: "I am in no great hurry to get them back. However, absolutely no one must see them. I could already have received 24 ducats for them today, but I find it of greater advantage to me if I retain them for a few years, and only then make them public through engraving." And Mozart remained true to his resolution: The concertos would first be printed

after his death, by Artaria, in Vienna, in 1798. The most conspicuous aspect of the Concerto in B-flat, K. 450, is that, in contrast to a number of previous works in this medium, the winds all have truly independent parts which cannot be dispensed with. This is in contrast to several earlier piano concertos in which the winds often double the strings – commercially speaking, a lucrative option, as it permitted them to be performed using a smaller orchestra, or even a string quartet, as accompaniment. How much more surprising it will then have been for the Vienna audience when the concerto in B-flat opened, not with an orchestral tutti, but with the oboes and bassoons! Their opening motif is in turn answered by the strings. Following the orchestral exposition, the piano makes a theatrical entrance, in quasi-improvisational style, after which a three-way conversation unfolds. The *Andante*, in the form of a theme with two variations, exists in two versions, attesting to the fact that having his hands full did not stop Mozart from taking the time to refine his creations further: Aside from the well-known version, there is also an earlier one (reconstructed by Robert Levin) and which, in the principal theme, exhibits significant deviations, in respect of both harmony and melody. The movement is initially dominated by the piano and strings. It is not until midway through it that the winds make their entrance, contributing a surprising new colour. The finale, for which a flute is added to the woodwinds, features a typical hunt motif in 6/8 metre. The coda appears to ebb away with a piling up of horn fanfares, until a sudden explosion brings the concerto to an end.

From Mozart's references in letters to the Paris Symphony, among other sources, we know how conscious he was of the fact that it was imperative to take his public by surprise if he was to hold their attention, and this B-flat piano concerto, in which he makes generous use of his 'bag of tricks,' was certainly a success. As already mentioned, it was also highly virtuosic, e.g., the hand-crossing employed in it, which at the time was not yet in general use. Richter, too, was forced to concede that he was outclassed, as Mozart proudly wrote: "When I played for him, he watched my fingers, transfixed, and then said at once: 'My God! I must do my utmost not to break out in a sweat, and receive no applause, and you, my friend, do it all effortlessly.' 'Yes,' I said, 'I had to do my best there, as well, namely, to avoid doing my best.'"

## New times, new music

Mozart's heavy schedule for the year, 1784, demonstrates that his jump off the deep end was bearing fruit. It was clearly feasible to earn a good living as a freelance musician – that is, if the winds blow favourably. And, unfortunately, these began to blow differently in the next few years, such that, by the late eighties, Mozart's once booming concert business had fallen into a morass, never to emerge again. There are a range of hypotheses as to why this happened. But in any case, Leopold Mozart's death in 1787 put an abrupt end to our most valuable source of information. It is likely that there was a corresponding decline in Mozart's finances, a decline which can only have been made worse by the illness of his wife, Constanze, which necessitated large expenditures for doctors, medicines and a stay at a health resort. It is thus not surprising that he was so gratified with the title of *Kammermusicus* (or Musician of the Imperial Chamber), which Emperor Joseph II granted him 1787. The title in any case brought with it a yearly emolument of 800 guilders, but this was evidently insufficient to cover the substantial outlays resulting from Mozart's lifestyle, and he increasingly often found it necessary to request loans from friends. Interestingly, in a letter from 1788, Mozart writes his friend and fellow mason, Michael Puchberg, that he will be in a position to repay a loan as soon as his concerts begin at the Casino, even offering Puchberg two free tickets. From this, it could be concluded that this was the last season during which Mozart gave a series of subscription concerts. Unfortunately, however, no other documents have been preserved which could confirm this hypothesis. In any case though, from this point onward, all reports concerning such concert series cease entirely. From 22 concerts per month to none – what was the reason for this collapse of Mozart's concertising activities?

The most obvious explanation would be that the public had grown tired of Mozart's piano performances and found too challenging the ever increasing complexity of the musical structures he served up to his audience, structures which even his colleague, Dittersdorf, found hardly comprehensible. But these will not be the only reasons. The economic recession which the imperial capital was undergoing at the time is likely also to have played a role here. It can be assumed with a high degree of certainty that the nobility and higher middle class were themselves affected by the economic malaise, causing them to economise on luxuries. Musical life migrated increasingly to aristocratic salons, while many a prince dissolved his court music and kept only a small number of musicians in his employ. In addition, at

this time, Austria was suffering heavily as a result of political tensions in neighbouring countries, but especially from its costly war with the Ottoman Empire. Numerous noble officers left Vienna to join their regiments. Others withdrew to their country estates. Mozart clearly did his best to adjust to the new circumstances, concentrating increasingly on chamber music, but this failed to bring about a significant improvement in his finances. The situation changed somewhat following the end of the war in 1790, and from that moment onward, Mozart's financial situation indeed appears to have stabilised. Above all, dancing was *en vogue*, and, as a result, Mozart became the court's supplier of German dances, minuets and contra-dances. Following the successes of the operas *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*, Mozart once again had the ambition to present himself to the Vienna public as a piano virtuoso.

The opportunity for this presented itself on the occasion of an *Akademie* set for 4 March 1791 at Jahn's room. It had been organised by clarinet virtuoso Joseph Beer, who invited Mozart to perform a new piano concerto. To compose his new work, Mozart made use of a number of sketches he had made back in 1788, but which, presumably because no appearances had been in the offing, he had set aside. On 5 January 1791, he added the new piano concerto to his list of his own works. It was to be his last piano concerto, and its première was to be his last public appearance as a pianist.

Someone hearing the first bars of the Piano Concerto in B-flat, K. 595 for the first time, could be forgiven for thinking it is the beginning of an aria. In an introductory measure, the violas and second violins play a slow tremolo, above which the first violins begin a long cantilena, which is however punctuated by a terse falling motif in the winds. The movement's atmosphere – and for that matter, that of the entire work – is for the most part serene and lyrical, introverted and melancholy. It contained far fewer surprises for Mozart's audience than previous works, although its sudden turn to B-flat minor will have brought many a listener to the edge of his seat. The second movement, too, is predominantly contemplative and serene. The concluding rondo, more playful in character, employs the same tune which Mozart a few days later would use in the song, *Sehnsucht nach dem Frühling* (or 'Yearning for Spring'), K. 596.

The pianist, musicologist and writer, Charles Rosen, may have given this concerto its most apt characterisation when he wrote: "Both the last piano concerto and the Clarinet Concerto are private statements: the form is never exploited for exterior effect, the tone is always one of intimacy. The slow movements aspire and attain to a condition of absolute simplicity: the slightest irregularity in the phrase structure of their themes would have appeared like an intrusion. The melodies accept the reduction to an almost perfect symmetry and triumph over all its dangers. It is fitting that Mozart, who perfected as he created the form of the classical concerto, should have made his last use of it so completely personal."

As in the case of the Piano Concerto in B-flat, K. 450, Mozart wrote out cadenzas for this one, as well. It is likely that he did not foresee opportunities opening in the near future to perform it himself frequently. This would explain why he immediately offered the work to Artaria for publication, who placed an announcement of its publication in the *Wiener Zeitung* newspaper of 10 August 1791, together with that of four collections of minuets and German dances. New times were in the offing.

Ronald Vermeulen

*Translation: Nicholas Lakides*