

# NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

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The Leni and Peter May Chair

## **Sinfonia concertante in E-flat major for Violin, Viola, and Orchestra, K.364/320d**

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

The genre of the symphonie concertante (often referred to by the Italian form *sinfonia concertante*) was particularly associated with Paris of the late-18th and early-19th centuries, although its popularity in that city spilled over to other musical centers. The form served as a showpiece for multiple soloists, often using seemingly improbable combinations, and, in its classic form, the orchestra played the part of a not very interactive accompanist. Mozart, of course, had a way of breaking molds, and his *Sinfonia concertante* for Violin, Viola, and Orchestra (the Italian term for the genre is commonly used when referring to this piece) has a certain measure of subtle interaction between the soloists and the orchestra. But Mozart was also an astute mimic, and it is clear from this score that he grasped the expectations attached to the genre.

The composer had ample exposure to symphonies concertantes during his extended visit to Paris in 1778, and after returning to Salzburg in January 1779 he set about composing two such works. The first, in A major (K.320e), featured a solo group of violin, viola, and cello, but Mozart abandoned it after 134 measures. The other, in E-flat major (K.364/320d), spotlighted violin and viola, and that is the work performed in this concert. Several of Mozart's other symphonic works with multiple soloists are clustered around this time: the Concerto for Flute and Harp (K.299), written just after his arrival in Paris and premiered in May 1778; a lost *Sinfonia concertante* for Flute, Oboe, Horn, and Bassoon (K.297b), from April 1778; a lost Concerto for Violin, Piano, and Orchestra (K.315f), in late

1778; and the Concerto in E-flat major for Two Pianos and Orchestra (K.365), in early 1779.

Compositions for solo violin and viola were popular in Salzburg at the time, and local composers turned out a notable repertoire for the combination. It's no surprise that Mozart should have selected this dyad for his *Sinfonia concertante*; a few years later, in 1783, he would return to the same combination when he penned two lovely duos (K.423 and K.424) for a commission his friend Michael Haydn had received from the city's archbishop.

### **IN SHORT**

**Born:** January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

**Died:** December 5, 1791, in Vienna

**Work composed:** summer or early autumn 1779, in Salzburg

**World premiere:** unknown

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** February 25, 1917, Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (a forebear of the New York Philharmonic), Alexander Saslavsky, violin, Samuel Lifshey, viola

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:**

December 12, 2009, Christoph von Dohnányi, conductor, Glenn Dicterow, violin, Cynthia Phelps, viola

**Estimated duration:** ca. 30 minutes

The E-flat-major Sinfonia concertante is not mentioned in Mozart's correspondence, perhaps because he composed it while living at home and therefore would have no reason to convey information about it to anyone at a distance. Neither does it figure in other contemporary documents, with the result that information about its premiere is unknown. The autograph manuscript is lost, although drafts of the cadenzas and the last nine measures of the first movement survive; these help confirm that the first published edition was prepared accurately. In

fact, the cadenzas for this piece are the only ones authenticated for any of Mozart's string concertos, making them valuable beyond the role they play in the piece itself.

This work towers above other compositions Mozart produced at the time, and it can be reckoned among his early masterpieces. The key of E-flat major seems to have resonated with a specific character in Mozart's mind, implying a conflation of majesty and warmth that resurfaces time and again in the compositions he set in that key. These include four piano concertos

## Retuning the Viola

In 18th-century Salzburg there reigned a curious tradition of writing solo viola parts in *scordatura*, with the instrument's strings tuned to fundamental pitches that differed from their "normal" ones. In the abandoned A-major Sinfonia concertante for Violin, Viola, and Cello, Mozart had asked for the violist to tune the strings up a full tone, and in this Sinfonia concertante in E-flat major he called for each of the viola's four strings to be tuned a semi-tone higher than normal. (Principal Viola Cynthia Phelps will not retune her instrument for these performances.)

Opinions are split about how to explain the Salzburgers' passion for *scordatura*, but musicologists agree that it was a widespread performance practice. The Mozart biographer Hermann Abert (writing around 1920) maintained that "the purpose was to intensify the tone and to make the playing easier." Tuning a string higher does indeed make the tone brighter, and in the context of Mozart's piece this makes the timbre of the soloists more similar.

However, one has to wonder why Mozart would want to minimize sonic differences in a genre that delighted in them; he could just as easily have written a piece for two violins, as he had five years earlier with his Concertone for Two Violins and Orchestra (K.190). On the other hand, the viola is naturally disposed to blending into textures rather than standing apart, and *scordatura* helps boost it into higher relief against the background orchestra (where the violas tune their strings as accustomed). Alfred Einstein, in his classic biography of Mozart (1945), maintained that the greater stress of the higher tuning would have required the players to replace their usual strings with lighter ones, a substitution that would have further altered the instrument's timbre.

So far as technical ease is concerned, Abert's assertion is arguably true, particularly to the extent that in this context the *scordatura* simplifies the execution of certain double stops. Many modern violists prefer to transpose their part back to E-flat and play with normal tuning. This obviates the weird sensation of playing one note and hearing another, not to mention the worry about tightly pulled strings endangering wooden instruments. On the other hand, Mozart did specify *scordatura* for some reason, even if it's not clear just what that reason was.



Mozart's own viola, an 18th-century model by an anonymous maker, is now owned by the Salzburg Mozarteum, which allows select players to try it each year; the instrument, which toured the U.S. in 2013, has been described as having a dark sound

(K.271, K.365, K.449, and K.482), the Serenade for Wind Octet (K.375), the Horn Quintet (K.407), three horn concertos (K.417, K.447, and K.495), a string quartet (K.428), a piano quartet (K.493), the Clarinet Trio (K.499), Symphony No. 39 (K.543), Divertimento for String Trio (K.563), a string quintet (K.614), and the opera *Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)* (K.620). In this piece, Mozart casts his middle movement in the

relative minor key of C minor, one of the rare instances in which he included a minor-key movement in a major-key concerto — or, in this case, a near-concerto.

**Instrumentation:** two oboes, two horns, and strings, in addition to the solo violin and viola.

## **Cadenzas:** by Mozart

## Listen for ... a Great Theme

The finale of Mozart's *Sinfonia concertante* for Violin and Viola opens with an orchestral introduction (the rondo theme), after which the soloists – violin first, then viola – play a tune of ineluctable charm, marked by little, skipping, short-long figures that musicians know as “Lombardy rhythms” or “Scotch snaps.” This runs its course and deposits us on the doorstep of a great theme.



It's difficult to quantify just what makes a theme great: the inevitability of its contours, its malleability in the face of development – so many things can play a role. The first two sonorities of this passage bespeak grandeur, and from there the melody stretches up even a couple of notes higher to peak before plummeting back down again in a genial tumble of triplets. Then the viola repeats what the violin has just uttered. This episode repeats later in the movement, but this time with the viola taking the lead, and again it makes an extraordinary impression.

The theme is simple, and yet one may find embedded in it the perfect expression of late-18th-century mores. For a moment we are transported to the drawing room of an 18th-century aristocrat. The conversation is clever and cultured, but suddenly all heads turn as one of the assembled eminences – a Voltaire, perhaps, or a Franklin – imparts an observation that towers above the surrounding babble, and then brings the proceedings back to earth with an irrepressible chortle.