

PROGRAM NOTES by Paul Schiavo

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Violin Concerto No. 3 in G major, K. 216

Work composed: 1775

World premiere: Unknown. Mozart may have performed the work, with the Salzburg Court Orchestra, of which he was a member, but there is no record of that performance. As noted below, the composer did play the work on at least one subsequent occasion.

On October 23, 1777, Mozart wrote to his father, describing an informal concert at a monastery near Augsburg, which he was visiting: "During the meal we had some music. ... I played my Strassburg Concerto, which went like oil. Everyone praised my beautiful, pure tone." Mozart's reference to this work as his "Strassburg Concerto" derives from a dance melody appearing in its final movement, a popular tune called "The Strassburger."

Mozart wrote this concerto, better known as his Violin Concerto in G Major, K. 216, in September 1775, a year in which he created at least three other works of this kind. The composer, an excellent violinist in his youth, may have played the piece on several occasions, though we know of only one performance.

As do so many of the compositions from Mozart's late adolescence, this one conveys a feeling of almost carefree assurance. Ideas seem to flow from the composer's pen so abundantly that he scarcely has time to develop each one properly. Mozart's prodigal invention is a conspicuous feature of the opening movement. After presenting a series of attractive melodic ideas in the initial orchestral statement, he entrusts the introduction of still more material to the soloist. Remarkably, Mozart manages to mold this surfeit of material into a coherent and satisfying whole.

Alfred Einstein, the eminent Mozart scholar, described the concerto's second movement as "an Adagio that seems to have fallen straight from heaven." As often with his concertos, Mozart cast the finale as a rondo, a form that has, as we have seen, a recurring main theme appearing in alternations with contrasting material. The latter include the "Strassburger" melody that Mozart alluded to in his letter from Augsburg.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The bright character of the first movement derives from themes that often seem to entail varieties of musical laughter. This remains true even when, in the middle of the movement, the harmonies turn to the darker minor mode. Late in the movement there is a conspicuous pause for a cadenza, the all but obligatory solo fantasy for the featured instrument. The second movement's aural colors and textures seem almost ethereal, with the orchestral violins muted, the low strings playing pizzicato, and flutes replacing the oboes used in the rest of the concerto.

The finale's rondo theme, stated by the orchestra at the outset, presents irresistibly cheery music in lilting rhythms. There follows the first of several contrasting episodes, with some athletic passagework for the soloist, then an abbreviated recurrence of the rondo idea. A second episode brings a minor-key excursion, while the third begins with a bitter-sweet little arietta over pizzicato accompaniment from the orchestral strings. Quite suddenly, however, Mozart turns to a merry dance-like tune, this being the "Strassburger" melody.

*Scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 horns and strings.*

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