Wolfgang Amadè Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Concerto No. 9 in E-flat, K.271


On February 12, 1874, Miss Amy Fay, a young pianist then in her fifth year of living in Germany where she had gone, as they said in those days, to refine her taste and improve her technique, wrote to her family in St. Albans, Vermont:

Deppe wants me to play a Mozart concerto for two pianos with Fräulein Steiniger, the first thing I play in public. Did you know that Mozart wrote twenty concertos for the piano, and that nine of them are masterpieces? Yet nobody plays them. Why? Because they are too hard, Deppe says, and Lebert, the head of the Stuttgart conservatory, told me the same thing at Weimar. I remember that the musical critic of the Atlantic Monthly remarked that “we should regard Mozart’s passages and cadenzas as child’s play, now-a-days.” Child’s play, indeed! That critic, whoever it is, “had better go to school again,” as C. always says!

Actually, counting the concerto for two pianos that Miss Fay prepared with Fräulein Steiniger, and another for three pianos, Mozart wrote twenty-three piano concertos. (This does not take into account his adaptations of sonatas by other composers that he made for his tours between 1765 and 1767.) Most of us, moreover, would have a hard time reducing the number of “masterpieces” to just nine. The series, at any rate, begins with the still seldom heard, inventive, brilliant, if not perfectly equilibrated concerto in D, K.175, of December 1773, and concludes with one of the most familiar of the “masterpieces,” the gently shadowed concerto in B-flat, K.595, completed three weeks before Mozart’s thirty-fifth and last birthday. Mozart’s most intense concentration on the genre occurred in the middle of the 1780s, the peak of his popularity as a composer and as an adult performer. The concerto being played in this concert holds a special place in the sequence, for, after the dashing display of ingenuity of K.175 and the charms of K.238 in B-flat and K.246 in C, it is an all but inconceivable leap forward in ambition and achievement alike. At twenty-one, Mozart is mature.

It all leaves us most curious about Mlle. Jeunehomme—“die jenomy”—whose playing, whose personality, or perhaps whose reputation so stimulated Mozart. But to no avail. She passes through Salzburg and through musical history for just a moment in January 1777, leaving her indiscriminately spelled name attached to the work in which Mozart, as it were, became Mozart, and she disappears again—to France, one imagines, to concerts and teaching, perhaps to marriage and retirement from public life. We know that Mozart himself played “her” concerto at a private concert in Munich on October 4, 1777, and from his sending “Eingänge” (seemingly improvisatory passages leading to the return of a theme) to Nannerl in February 1783 we know that it continued to engage his attention.

The scoring is modest: only pairs of oboes and horns join the strings, something remembered always with surprise because the impression is so firmly of a big concerto. (It is, in fact, Mozart’s longest.) But Mozart uses these restricted resources remarkably: the horn gets to play a melody in unison with the piano, and more than once Mozart explores the uncommon sonority of the keyboard instrument joined only by two oboes. The orchestra’s opening flourish is a formal call to attention. The piano’s response is a delicious impertinence. Normal concerto etiquette after all obliges the soloist to wait until the end of an extended tutti. But the piano’s penchant for playing at unexpected times once established, the whole issue of who plays when becomes the subject of continuing, subtle jokes and surprises.

It was often typical of Mozart to translate the gestures of opera into the context of the concerto. In the slow movement of his Sinfonia concertante for violin and viola, for example, Mozart engages the soloists in impassioned operatic duetting. Here, in the Andantino of this concerto, he presents a scene from some somber tragedy. Strings are muted, violins proceed by close imitation, and the music that prepares the singer’s entrance makes its cadence on the formal full close of an opera seria recitative. The aria is impassioned and complex, the C minor of its beginning soothed occasionally by a gentler music in E-flat major, but it is the gestures of recitative, now pathetic, now stern, that dominate the discourse.

The finale begins in unbuttoned and purling virtuosity, and again we might infer that Mlle. Jeunehomme was an especially elegant executant of trills. One of the virtuosic sweeps down the keyboard and up again leads to the opening of a door onto a world of whose existence we had not expected a reminder: we hear a minuet, music of a new character, a new meter, a new key. Mozart outdoes himself both in his melodic embellishments, so characteristic in their confluence of invention and control, pathos, and grace, and also in the wonderfully piquant
scoring as each strain is repeated with orchestral accompaniment (first violins and the lowest strings pizzicato, but
the former with far more notes; the middle voices sustained, but their tone veiled by mutes). The minuet dissolves
into another cadenza, whence the Presto emerges again to send the music to its runaway close.
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