Wolfgang Amadè Mozart
Piano Concerto No. 12 in A, K.414(385p)

Composed 1782 in Vienna. Date of first performance not known. First BSO performance at Tanglewood:
July 3, 1965, Erich Leinsdorf, cond., Malcolm Frager, piano. Most recent Tanglewood performance:
August 6, 1995, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Seiji Ozawa cond., Leon Fleisher, piano.

One of Mozart’s urgent concerns upon settling permanently in Vienna and entering into the state of
matrimony, which meant that there would soon be children to provide for, was to establish himself
financially. And one of the best ways was to write and play piano concertos, which would serve the double
function of promoting him as composer and performer. Thus began the series of the great Mozart
concertos, starting with three rather modest works composed late in 1782 and early the following year,
identified as Nos. 413, 414, and 415 in the Köchel catalogue. In a letter to his father he described all three
of them in these enthusiastic terms:

These concertos are a happy medium between what is too easy and too difficult; they are very
brilliant, pleasing to the ear, and natural, without being vapid. There are passages here and there from
which connoisseurs alone can derive satisfaction; but these passages are written in such a way that
the less learned cannot fail to be pleased, though without knowing why.

More than just pleasing a diverse audience in performance, Mozart wanted to sell copies of the music, and
the only way he could do that was to make it practical not only for virtuosos appearing in public concert but
also for amateurs. In order to attract this much larger audience of purchasers, Mozart took a leaf from the
Opus 3 concertos of Johann Samuel Schroeter, which he had come to know several years earlier and which
he admired. Schroeter’s trick was to write the orchestra part in such a way that the strings carry all the
essential material, with the winds supplying only color and reinforcement. That way, a concerto could be
played successfully at home by a pianist with a string quartet. That this was Mozart’s intention with this
group of three concertos is demonstrated by his letter to the Parisian publisher Sieber on April 26, 1783: “I
have three piano concertos ready, which can be performed with full orchestra, or with oboes and horns, or
merely a quattro [i.e., with a string quartet].”

There is no evidence that the composer himself ever played K.414 in public, except for the fact that he
wrote two complete sets of cadenzas for the work, although that might only mean that one of his students
played the piece. The earlier group of cadenzas may have been written at about the time of the original
composition; the later set apparently dates from the winter of 1785-86.

Throughout K.414, the keyboard seems to dominate more than it does in those concertos with larger
orchestral complements, as if to compensate in some way for the diminutive ensemble. This appears not
only in the normal “composed” part of the concerto, but also in the “improvised” cadenza-like passages, of
which there are a considerable number—one full cadenza in each of the three movements, as well as an
additional “Eingang” (or “lead-in” to the return) in the middle of the second movement, and two in the final
movement. The slow movement opens with a quotation from a symphony by J.C. Bach, whom Mozart had
met and admired as a child on his first London visit and who had died on New Year’s Day of 1782. The
concluding rondo is a sprightly Allegretto, possibly Mozart’s second solution to the choice of a finale, since
in October 1782 he had already composed a rondo in A that may have been intended for this position.