

## Mozart (1756-1791) - Concerto for Flute and Harp

Writing to his father from Paris (1778), Mozart described his fruitless attempts to teach composition to the Duc de Guines' daughter (intriguingly, Mozart considered teaching music a “science”). His father suggested he persist patiently, adding, “. . . should Monsieur le Duc hear some little thing composed by his daughter, he will be beside himself with pleasure”. The implication was “and surely be disposed to increase your fees”, for, in truth, the erstwhile child prodigy was having a torrid time, struggling for every penny. Mozart mentioned that “[the Duc] plays the flute incomparably, and she magnificently on the harp”. The Duc commissioned a concerto, affording Mozart another opportunity to rise in the Duc's estimation. Unfortunately, “estimation” was all: the Duc and his money were not soon parted, while Mozart and Money, it seems, would always mix like wax and water.

The flute and the harp are perennial favourites of the French (think of Ravel!), both supremely sensual in sound, both pure-toned and penetrating - the harp is as near as you'll get to a “plucked flute”. A combination made in heaven for which Mozart, being Mozart, would surely have written music equally “made in heaven”. Is it heretical to suggest that he was not entirely comfortable with this combination? Certainly, it is beautifully crafted music, entirely characteristic of Mozart. Yet it sounds like a “Concerto for Flute and Piano” adapted for harp. So, don't expect any luscious harp glissandi (except possibly in the cadenzas, which Mozart didn't write).

Unusually, all three movements contain cadenzas:

**1. Allegro** No messing - the orchestra immediately deploys both themes (the second announced on horn) of a conventional sonata form. These are re-worked by the soli, an orchestral bridge on the first subject descending into a brief but breezy development. Recapitulation, cadenza, and coda follow with pleasurable inevitability.

**2. Andantino** Ushered in on strings, the subject's short phrases become lyrically extended, these two facets promoting variations which alternate lighter and darker aspects, without either aspect dominating. The soli bloom in the light of considerate orchestral accompaniment. Finally, a cadenza leads to a coda where soli and orchestra dwell on the theme's lyrical side.

**3. Rondeau: allegro** Unusually, the finale demands the most concentration. Mozart, I think, chose the only French marking not in deference to his commissioner, but to underline that this isn't a typical *rondo*. Unusually for Mozart's time, it's more like an arch: A-B-C-D-C-B- [cadenza]-A(coda), because C and D are merely prefaced with hints of A, adding spice to our amusement, or should that be “bemusement”?

That's three “unusually”s, an unusual number of “unusually”s for music once described to me as “tedious”. It's surely a matter of expectations. Mozart wasn't Ravel, but taken on his own terms, you'll discover in his overlapping, weaving and intertwining of the unusual (again!) solo instruments all the enchantment that was ever his gift to offer.

*Composed:*

*Paris,*

*1778.*

The one regret Mozart might have had about composing the Concerto for Flute and Harp was that he was never paid for it. He composed the Concerto for Duc Adrien-Louis de Guines (1735-1806), who was a fine flautist, and his daughter, who was a brilliant harpist. About the daughter Mozart wrote to his father Leopold: "I think I told you in my last letter that the Duc de Guines, whose daughter is my pupil in composition, plays the flute extremely well, and that she plays the harp *magnifique*. She has a great deal of talent and even genius, and in particular a marvelous memory, so that she can play all her pieces, actually about two hundred, by heart." That same year, 1778, the death of Mozart's mother would return him to Salzburg. In 1781, Mozart would leave Salzburg for Vienna, which would be his primary residence for the next ten years until his death in 1791.

There is hardly an orchestral timbre that brings as much refreshment to the ear as the brilliant consonance of flute and harp that launches the first movement. Sweetness and light infuse the music from start to finish. Mozart's inevitable flair for the dramatic intrudes upon the development section of the first movement and a reprise of the rondo theme in the last. Without these turns to the minor and to dissonance, the unrelieved sunny character of the bulk of the composition might grow nearly unbearable.

This Concerto was composed for the home rather than the concert stage. Understandably, there are no duo concertos for this combination by composers who made their careers writing principally for virtuosos of the concert stage. The harp itself had not yet won its place as a standard instrument in the symphony orchestra. Technical improvements in the design of the instrument and the *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830), which features the harp, led to its more frequent use as an orchestral instrument. Yet no later major composer had the inspiration or incentive to write a concerto for flute and harp like Mozart's. If only Mozart had been paid ...

## Mozart: Concerto for Flute & Harp

In 1777 Mozart embarked on a European tour that must have filled him with the highest hopes. His first stop was Munich, where he laid the groundwork for the future by making friends who would eventually persuade the Munich court to commission a major opera (*Idomeneo*) from him. Then it was on to Mannheim, where Mozart delighted in the expertise and camaraderie of the musicians and wrote for four of them his *Sinfonia Concertante* for wind soloists with orchestra. The final leg of the journey took him to Paris. Surely in one of these three great centers of music Mozart must have expected to find long-lasting employment, but it was not to be. He made many contacts and earned a little cash, usually by way of expensive gifts such as gold watches, but he was to be disappointed in his search for a permanent post. To add injury to insult, Mozart's mother, who had accompanied him on this journey, fell ill and died while in Paris.

The Concerto in C for Flute & Harp, K.299, from April of 1778, was written for two of the people Mozart met in France, the Count de Guines and his daughter, both of whom Mozart described as excellent musicians on their respective instruments. At first, he was asked only to provide composition lessons to Mlle de Guines, who proved too unsure of herself to succeed as a composer. At one point, Mozart began a simple minuet and pretended to be unable to complete it, inviting her to do so. She was not up to the task, and in the end Mozart dismissed her as "lazy and stupid." Later, the count asked Mozart to write some music for them. It was perhaps out of his own laziness that Mozart, rather than writing two separate works for father and daughter, opted to get out of the obligation by killing two birds with one musical stone; if so, it is ironic that he always held this concerto in high regard.

In the nineteenth century, flute and harp would become a common pairing (without orchestra, that is), but the combination in Mozart's day was by no means routine. In fact, this was the only music Mozart ever wrote involving the harp. The score was written with its audience in mind: it aims to please the French taste in its gestures, especially in the finale, and the form itself, although not so styled, is essentially that of the *Sinfonia Concertante*, which was all the rage in Paris at that time. The orchestra, besides the strings, calls for pairs of oboes and horns, which remain silent during the slow movement.

It is comforting to know that at this time of tribulation for Mozart, he became reacquainted with his dear old friend Johann Christian Bach. In a letter to his father dated August 27, 1778, Mozart wrote: "You can imagine our joy ... I love him, as you know, from my heart and esteem him..." Mozart left Paris the following month, and the two never met again, for J.C. Bach would die four years later, back in London. Mozart never returned to either city.

At the end of March 1778, [Mozart](#) and his mother, Maria Anna, finally arrived in Paris after a prolonged stay in Mannheim (where [Mozart](#) had fallen in love with Aloysia Weber). On April 5 Maria Anna reported to Leopold (who had to remain in Salzburg) that Wolfgang had received a commission from the flute-playing Duke of Guines and his harpist daughter, who was taking music lessons from the composer. The commission, for a concerto for flute and harp, could hardly have inspired the young composer, who professed a dislike for both solo instruments and generally despised French musical taste, but he delivered the concerto dutifully. The combination of flute and harp, moreover, is a difficult one; "as a duo," notes writer Ethan Mordden, "they sound like a nymph going bonkers in a plashing spring." In spite of all this, however, the work is often played and is a perennial crowd-pleaser. Orchestras have few other opportunities to put their harpists on display in a concerto. Like almost everything else that happened on his trip with his mother to Paris, this concerto caused [Mozart](#) trouble; the Duke failed to pay the composer for it.

In its small forces (the orchestra has only two oboes, two horns, and the standard string ensemble) it is suited for the salon. In line with the standard concerto form, the two soloists wait for the orchestra to present the opening material of the first movement, then take it up in unison. The movement as a whole is most charming in the dialogue-like writing for the flute and harp and in its overflowing lyricism. The second movement is accompanied only by the string section (the violas are divided into two parts for a richer sound). It is warm, uncomplicated, and somewhat florid. The finale is a lively rondo with a veritable parade of attractive tunes. The concerto as a whole, notwithstanding its background, stands as one of the most pleasant mementos of [Mozart's](#) Paris sojourn, which would continue to reverberate stylistically through the rest of his output.