

Research

Who Wrote Mozart's First Horn Concerto?

Was it Mozart who wrote Mozart's first horn concerto? Not necessarily, according to musicologist Dr. Benjamin Perl, whose detective work into history reveals another fascinating possibility.



The music-loving public, not surprisingly, believes that the composer who wrote Mozart's Concerto in D Major for Horn and Orchestra (K 412) was of course Mozart. But musicologist Dr. Benjamin Perl, head of the Department of Literature, Language and the Arts at the Open University, had his doubts about the authenticity of this work. To deduce whether Mozart indeed wrote it, he delved into musical history and came up with a plausible theory to explain why someone else entirely may have originally written this popular work.

Whether Mozart and indeed many other composers from an earlier age composed all the works attributed to them has been much disputed over the years, says Dr. Perl. To understand why, it is necessary to go back to the 18th century. Most of the musical works of this period were written by hand and not printed, because printing was very expensive. But that often opened the way to forgery, which was certainly not unknown in that period. Sometimes composers copied the works of other composers and passed them off as their own, or they passed off their own works as the work of more famous composers, in both cases in order to profit from them. There was little legal protection.

"There were several things which made me suspicious about the authenticity of Mozart's concerto," says Dr. Perl. "For one thing, it has only two movements

and not three. Also, researchers have shown that this piece was probably written in the last year of his life, a period in which his deepest and most complex works were written. And yet, the style is simple, unlike the style of later works like *The Magic Flute*. It was difficult for me to accept that a piece lacking depth was written at the same time as other, more complex musical compositions."

Dr. Perl first focused on the musical text itself, by comparing it to Mozart's many other concerti. In style and form, it differed in many ways. The fact that there were only two movements was particularly suspicious, since it was highly unusual for such a concerto to be written in Mozart's time. Such concerti were written about 20 years earlier, usually in France. There is no slow second movement, as would be usual in a concerto, but the first movement is followed by a quick rondo, usually found in the third movement. Though this movement exists in Mozart's handwriting, it is only a fragment. It was completed by the same Francis Xavier Süssmayr who worked on the *Requiem*.

Dr. Perl came to the conclusion that both versions, Mozart's and Süssmayr's, were based on a lost source, and the whole composition written by Mozart was only an arrangement he wrote for a composition written by somebody else. Looking at the handwriting himself, Dr. Perl noticed that the emendations and changes he made are not at all

typical of Mozart. It could well be, then, that this is not an original composition, but a copy of an existing piece, with changes and improvements added.

Delving into history, Dr. Perl sought a contemporary composer who was a friend (since Mozart was unlikely to fix up a piece for someone who was not a friend), a horn player and a composer.

"There is only one person who fits," says Dr. Perl. "That is Joseph Iganx Leitgeb (or Leutgeb), one of the best horn players of his time and a friend of the Mozart family."

Leitgeb was 24 years older than Mozart, which would make the older style of the two movement concerto plausible, and Mozart wrote several works for him. It could be that as he was growing older in 1791, Leitgeb wanted to bring a concerto that he had written up to date and adapt it for himself to play. Mozart may have written two movements and died, leaving the second unfinished, which Süssmayr may then have completed. The original version stayed with Mozart's widow, who assumed it was her husband's work. Whether all that is true is ultimately unverifiable, but it certainly is a strong possibility.

Says Dr. Perl, "Just considering the problem helps us delve more deeply into Mozart's works and learn more about the complexity of musical life in his time."