

MOZART

PIANO CONCERTOS

No.17 in G Major K.453

No.24 in C Minor K.491



Orli Shaham
David Robertson
St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

MOZART IN CONVERSATION

Orli Shaham, David Robertson, and Elaine Sisman discuss Mozart

Much has been written on Mozart, including on the two piano concertos recorded here. Almost anything one might want to know about both of these concertos can be found either online or through your local library, so rather than repeat others' scholarship to give you some context for these new recordings, we have instead put soloist Orli Shaham, conductor David Robertson, and Mozart expert Elaine Sisman in a room to discuss these concertos from a slightly different perspective. Their conversation—edited, condensed, and contextualized into this format—ranges from ideas on how to listen to Mozart and Mozart's use of variation all the way to how drama and opera informed and permeated everything Mozart penned.

— Peter Dahm Robertson

The Cast:

Elaine Sisman is a *bona fide* academic authority on Mozart's music and history by day. But mostly, you get the sense that she simply thinks Mozart is really cool, and she wants to share that with you. If she told you, "Oh, this is interesting, you'll be glad you read this," you would believe her, rather than bracing yourself to look awake.

Orli Shaham is an accomplished pianist, and most of that is due to her incredible gift for paying attention. That sounds trite, but sustained focus can be very powerful indeed, and in her case, it informs not just musical phrasing and collaboration, but also how she listens to ideas and brings them back into conversation.

David Robertson has a mind that is constantly connecting different ideas, metaphors, and levels of thinking. He makes music in the same thoughtful way: weaving often quite complex parts into a coherent larger narrative that connects every single note across the entire piece.

Mozart's music can be very frustrating. Try explaining Beethoven to someone who's never heard his music before, and you'll probably talk about dramatic symphonies with a big, loud orchestra. If you're explaining Bach, you'll probably talk about complex voices intertwining. Rock music, and you'll talk about a driving beat. But it feels like the most meaningful thing we can say about Mozart's music is that it's, well, Mozart. Many of the pieces are so familiar that it's hard to imagine them any other way. Of course, Mozart was just very good at the basic craft of composing, so what he wrote down is often the perfect version of what it's trying to be. There are no notes too many, but none too few, either. But there's more to it than that. Whatever else Mozart may be, he's somehow Mozart first, and we all have a basic idea in our heads of what that sounds like, without really being able to explain what it means. So whenever we talk about his music, we instinctively look for ways to help us think about his music, to "get into its head."

Orli: *A lot of times we listen to the music and it just makes sense to us*

as music, but we've lost the ability to connect all the different layers of it that Mozart would have had.

David: *We're so distant from the references that a normal audience member would have gotten at the time.*

In other words, we're very far from Vienna in the late 1700s, so to really get into Mozart's music, we may need to listen for particular things, or get ourselves in a particular mindset. When Mozart first played his concertos (he wrote them for himself to perform in public), the public had never heard them before. That sounds obvious, but not only had they never heard them, they had no way of hearing them again unless he played them again—hence the idea of the encore. They didn't grow up with music in the background on the radio or the TV, much less YouTube. If you wanted music, you had to make it, visit it, or pay a musician. What would it feel like to listen to Mozart's music "fresh," and to know that you were listening to modern music? Elaine, who teaches college students, knows that what your ears are expecting and are used to makes a huge difference here. That's why she's interested in finding

out what the frame of reference for an audience of the time would have been, and in trying to understand the music from that angle.

Elaine: *You get context for something like hunting themes. Or everyone danced. You didn't have to be in society to dance. They had public balls with different kind of dances. You could have quotations, where suddenly you'd move into a dance passage. It's not that dissimilar to students knowing AC/DC. And not many of my students know AC/DC, they listen to Kanye!*

One way of addressing the gulf between the 1700s and today is known as Historically Informed Performance. It emerged in the 1960s and 70s, when people started to think seriously about ways to recapture what music sounded like when it was first played. Musicians examined historical treatises on instrument building, performance techniques, and stylistic instruction in an effort to avoid applying more “modern” tastes and techniques to older music. This movement evolved to a point where (just like Mozart), Historically Informed Performance has almost become its own genre, with an instantly recognizable sound.

Most musicians, and Orli and David are no exception, know that part of their job is to help people listen to music in new ways, either to get at what the music was like when it was first performed, or to get at what has changed over the years, or to get at some deeper level that has stayed the same. But the traditional playing styles and instruments revived by Historically Informed Performance are only one type of strategy for revealing what makes the music special.

David: *You're always doing a historically informed performance. The problem is that it's very easy to become so fixated on aspects of the superficial sound, which is very definitely high-fidelity, late 20th century, early 21st century. That focus on precise sound reproduction is one that's entirely modern. The research into gut strings, and “how do I do the fingering in this kind of particular passage? What does Leopold Mozart say about vibrato?”—all of that is great. But what happens is you focus on the surface of the music rather than the actual building blocks that are causing it to be interesting in the first place.*

Elaine: *This was one of the very*

controversial aspects that was dealt in the big Juilliard conference about Mozart in 1991, on the 200th anniversary of his death. Neal Zaslaw is an expert on symphonies, and he said, "We shouldn't be looking so much at 18th-century instruments as we should be building 18th-century rooms." Because so much of it is the acoustics of the room. One scholar got up and denounced Historically Informed Performance and said, "We're missing some of the most beautiful and stirring performances of the earlier 20th century, with all their vibrato and big modern pianos. Everything's dwindling, in a way."

The instrumentation you hear on these performances is big, and that's a conscious choice. And Orli's piano is modern, and that's a conscious choice, too. Those choices were made based on an interpretive leap of faith about how you will listen to this disc, and how to help you listen to the music in a way that reveals new facets.

Orli: *The hope is to be able to highlight some aspect of the work that hasn't been illuminated in that way before. The work is so rich and there are so many things you could bring out,*

there's no way you could bring them all out in a single performance.

One clue for listening to the performances here is what the recording is "about." Why these two concertos? What are they "about"? In Orli's words, they're "the ones with variations," that is, the only two of Mozart's concertos whose last movements consist of strict variations on a single theme. The theme is played at the beginning of the movement, and is then changed with each repetition. Elaine tells us that this is a pretty common form at the time. What's less common is how far Mozart takes the variations. Mozart is showing his skill in two ways: he's pushing the envelope of how much a composer can get out of a single idea, but also the envelope of what pianists could do technically.

Orli: *There's really nothing scarier for a pianist than a set of variations in a concerto ... There's nothing more scary than, "OK, I have 35 seconds where I'm not playing, and now I have to be totally on. Especially in both of these concertos, suddenly there are sixteenth notes or suddenly there are triplets and they're quite fast. You haven't been moving your fingers for 35 seconds ...*

and there are a lot of accidentals."

Accidentals, generally speaking, indicate in the score where a composer is departing from what you might call "standard harmonic operating procedure." Because accidentals mark changes from an established pattern, pieces laden with them require a good deal more mental effort and alacrity of the fingers to pull off, and composers in Mozart's day exercised restraint about using them.

Elaine: *If you look at reviews of published music at the time, the first question is: How hard is this to play? And if it had a lot of accidentals, they would flag it. In other words, "don't buy this sheet music folks, if this is going to be a trouble spot."*

Orli: *Yeah, well, K.491 has more accidentals than I think Mozart ever put into anything. I don't think I've ever seen anything of his that has so many... it's so chromatic! The passage work in the piano, where he so intricately works out exactly the details of how it's going to get from one note to the other. It's for him to play. Usually when he would do something like that, he wouldn't even bother: "OK, we're*

starting here, finishing there." But here he really wanted to get there with, I guess, the right affect. It seems like that's what he was looking for. It's hard to say, sometimes, whether he was convinced he'd found the right thing.

In these concertos, Mozart wants to get from a musical point A to a musical point B, and variation is his ticket to ride: He starts with a musical theme and, through a progressive series of fairly small changes, moves it into something that feels quite new. This is one use of variation, and in music it's often called "development."

But for Mozart, changes (or variations), whether through accidentals or through embellishment, aren't just a means to a musical end. They happen naturally, as simply playing around. For example, it is hard to find moments in these concertos in which a phrase repeats exactly as it was. We can think of this as a play-by-play view of what's happening in Mozart's musical brain, trying out different ideas and versions, punning and free-associating melodically. This process, of course, gets edited and condensed, and sometimes we

can see this “thinking and trying out” historically and in the manuscript.

Orli: *With all the accidentals, playing these concertos is so difficult. Just to make some decisions about which note did Mozart really intend. The manuscript shows several iterations that he tried. Sometimes it's a leading tone this way, and sometimes it's a leading tone going the other way. Sometimes he crosses it out. It's the only concerto I know where you sometimes will get four lines of what the piano is supposed to be playing. Often, I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but often the piano part was barely even written out.*

Elaine: *Right.*

Orli: *He'd put the low note and then the top note and he would fill it out somehow. But in this one, not only did he write it out, but he painstakingly did several layers of crossing it out, making another decision, going for another ... he had to leave extra lines in the score for all the guess work.*

David: *In operas of course, he writes in a similar way as he does the piano repertoire, where he writes the melody and the bass and then all the rest is*

going to be filled in later. Theoretically this means he can take it to the singers, as with the opera Cosí fan tutte, where we can actually see this process. The original Dorabella says, “Could I not have that many octaves at the start of my singing?” So then he changes it. And you can see that he's done that with various different arias, so it's there in a kind of fluid form.

Elaine: *As far as I know, because it was the last of the three concertos he wrote for the Advent season, he probably had the last spot on the very last Lenten concert. Because that's when the concert season was: Lent and Advent. So April 7th in the theater, the Burgtheater, it was a big deal of a concert. You'd think he'd want to get it right for that. So have you played it with different accidentals?*

Orli: *I have, and actually inadvertently. I grew up with an older edition. Now of course there's the Bärenreiter edition with more corrections in it, but that older edition had some different notes. So I learned the piece in a different version. Then I went and got the facsimile of the autograph and realized where they got it from. It's all in there. It's generally clear what he went with afterwards, but it would be so much*

clearer if there was a first edition that he had taken the time to edit.

The revisions Mozart made to his own score, changing one accidental for another to get the music just right, mirror the process of little cumulative changes that make up musical development within each concerto as a whole: In the same way the structured variations of the final movements build on one another, Mozart's playful changes and embellishments in all other movements also build on one another. It's important to listen for these little changes and embellishments. They're subtle and easy to miss. They don't announce themselves. But without them, these concertos wouldn't work. This is a little subjective, but when listening to the first and third movements of K.453, you can almost hear the theme of the last movement as a variation of the theme of the first. It's this kind of cohesiveness, achieved through variation, that makes the concertos hang together as pieces. Together, they truly are more than the sum of their parts. Their arc is concerto-length, not movement-length, and that arc is both created and revealed

through the variations that make up the concertos. If these ideas of arc and dramatic development sound like they come from the theater, that's because they do.

Orli: *This is something that David was talking about earlier, and it's something that's so important for anyone approaching any work of Mozart's. Mozart always thought dramatically and theatrically first. It's about the stage first, you know? The way he wrote that first melody is a perfect way to set up your scene, whatever that scene is. I feel like these concertos are great examples of opera at the concerto level. For example, with the theme and variations, each one is a little part of a scene and the story's being pushed along.*

Elaine: *One of the people who wrote a treatise on musical genre and form, Heinrich Koch, said that "the concerto is a passionate dialogue in tones." And that "the solo expresses his feelings to the orchestra, which is like the Greek chorus." He referred to an antique Greek tragedy, which of course is where opera comes from: people from around 1600 trying to recreate the power of Greek tragedy.*

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Some of the similarity between operas/dramas and concertos here is that Mozart's work process in a concerto is the same as for an opera: Get the basics down first, and then flesh it out in coordination with the actual performers, as David was describing for the opera *Così fan tutte*, above. Part of it is also that the form of the concerto seems to sort of parallel the form of some operas: in the variation set that ends the first concerto, Mozart more or less "interrupts himself" to write a show-stopping climax, scribbling "finale" over the last section of the movement:

Elaine: *It's almost as if he's saying "A basic Allegretto Variation Finale can't happen. I've got to really rev things up here with the ending." But calling it a finale, writing that in the score when one thinks of the entire last movement as a finale. How can the finale have a finale?*

David: *That's very operatic isn't it? You've set this entire thing up and now it's time to come to a conclusion. He does that both in the Italian and German operas, both in the Abduction from the Seraglio and in the Magic*

Flute, but also in the three operas with librettos by Da Ponte, it's this thing of "OK, we've had all of this and now it's time to really bring it home."

Elaine: *... it just gets faster and faster and faster.*

But the link between opera/theater and concert goes beyond these fairly straight-forward formal parallels.

David: *I think the misunderstanding is that it stays on the surface of "Oh yes, that either the woodwinds or the piano part is the singer," as opposed to looking at the actual structure of these things. For example, in an opera he's very carefully choosing the keys and even sometimes going to remarkably far relations in order to make a particular harmonic point about the quality of that key as opposed to the other key. And then the theme is just being ricocheted around from one tonality to the next. Of course, it fits in all of these, but it has different qualities. I think in the piano concertos as well, even though there isn't a libretto storyline to tell us that "this means this,"*

compares this theatrical emotional structure to the emotional structure of the concertos, which are built by the tiny changes Mozart makes to what is in fact a comparatively small amount of musical material. Following the variations, not just in Mozart's "variation" movements at the end of the concertos but throughout the entire concerto,

allows us to follow that emotional arc. Each of the changes Mozart makes to his themes puts us in a slightly different emotional place, and by listening for those changes, we can feel the concertos' developing drama—we can hear the piece as a new whole, not just as something familiar that "sounds like Mozart."



ORLI SHAHAM, piano

A consummate musician recognized for her grace and vitality, Orli Shaham has established an impressive international reputation as one of today's most gifted pianists. Hailed by critics on four continents, Ms. Shaham is in demand for her prodigious skills and admired for her interpretations of both standard and modern repertoire. *The New York Times* called her a "brilliant pianist," *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* has praised her "wit, passion, delicacy," and *The Chicago Tribune* referred to her as "a first-rate Mozartean."

Orli Shaham's performance schedule brings her to concert halls from Carnegie Hall to the Sydney Opera House and most of the major venues in between, for recitals, chamber music and concerti. Ms. Shaham has performed with nearly every major American orchestra, as well as many in Europe, Asia, and Australia. A frequent guest at summer festivals, her appearances include Tanglewood, Ravinia, Verbier, Mostly Mozart, and Aspen. Equally devoted to the intimate genre

of chamber music, Ms. Shaham serves as curator and performer in Pacific Symphony's chamber music series in Costa Mesa, California.

Ms. Shaham's wide variety of repertoire is reflected in her discography, which includes *Brahms Inspired* (CC15), featuring new works by Brett Dean, Avner Dorman, and Bruce Adolphe alongside music by Brahms and his compositional forefathers, and *American Grace* (CC11) including the world premiere recording of Steven Mackey's piano concerto *Stumble to Grace* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, conducted by David Robertson. Other recordings are *Nigunim, Hebrew Melodies* (CC10) with her brother, the violinist Gil Shaham, which includes the world premiere of *Nigunim* by Avner Dorman, commissioned by Orli and Gil Shaham; Saint-Saens' *Carnival of the Animals* with the pianist Jon Kimura Parker and the San Diego Symphony; and John Adams' *Grand Pianola Music* with pianist Marc-André Hamelin and San Francisco Symphony led by Michael Tilson

Thomas (SFS0063). Orli and Gil Shaham have collaborated on other recordings including *Dvořák for Two*, *The Prokofiev Album* (CC02), and *Mozart in Paris* (CC01).

Driven by a passion to bring classical music to new audiences, Orli Shaham maintains an active active parallel career as a respected broadcaster, music writer, and lecturer. On radio, she has hosted the nationally broadcast *Dial-a-Musician* and *America's Music Festivals* series, and served as artist in residence on National Public Radio's *Performance Today* and as guest host on NPR's *From the Top*.

Inspired by her enthusiasm for introducing young children to the pleasures of music, Ms Shaham created *Orli Shaham's Bach Yard* (formerly *Baby Got Bach*), a series of classical concerts for young children which has a devoted following across the United States.

For more: orlishaham.com



DAVID ROBERTSON, conductor

David Robertson—conductor, artist, thinker, and American musical visionary—occupies some of the most prominent platforms on the international music scene. A highly sought-after podium figure in the world of opera, orchestral music, and new music, Robertson is celebrated worldwide as a champion of contemporary composers, an ingenious and adventurous programmer, and a masterful communicator whose passionate advocacy for the art form is widely recognized.

Robertson has served in numerous artistic leadership positions, such as Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, and a transformative 13-year tenure as Music Director of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, where he solidified its status as among the nation's most enduring and innovative ensembles, established fruitful relationships with a spectrum of artists, and garnered a 2014 Grammy Award for the Nonesuch release of John Adams' *City Noir*. Earlier artistic leadership positions include at

the Orchestre National de Lyon; as a protégé of Pierre Boulez, the Ensemble InterContemporain; as Principal Guest at the BBC Symphony Orchestra; and as a Perspectives Artist at Carnegie Hall, where he has conducted numerous orchestras. He appears regularly with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Czech Philharmonic, Bayerischer Rundfunk, and other major European orchestras and festivals. Robertson continues a longstanding and rich collaboration with the New York Philharmonic and conducts numerous North American orchestras, including the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati and Dallas Symphony Orchestras, and the Juilliard Orchestra, where he serves as Director of Conducting Studies, Distinguished Visiting Professor.

Robertson continues to build upon his deep conducting relationship with The Metropolitan Opera, including James Robinson's premier production of *Porgy and Bess* (2019), and the premier of Phelim McDermott's celebrated production of *Così fan tutte* (2018).

Since his 1996 Met Opera debut, *The Makropulos Case*, he has conducted a breathtaking range of projects, including the Met premiere of John Adams' *The Death of Klinghoffer* (2014); the 2016 revival of Janáček's *Jenůfa*; and many favorites. Robertson has frequent projects at the world's most prestigious opera houses, including La Scala, Théâtre du Châtelet, and San Francisco and Santa Fe Operas.

Robertson is the recipient of numerous musical and artistic awards, and in 2010 was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the Government of France. He is devoted to supporting young musicians and has worked with students at festivals ranging from Aspen to Tanglewood to Lucerne.

For more:
conductordavidrobertson.com



ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Celebrated as one of today's most exciting and enduring orchestras, the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra is the second-oldest orchestra in the United States. Widely considered one of the world's finest, the SLSO maintains its commitment to artistic excellence, educational impact, and community connections—all in service to its mission of enriching lives through the power of music.

In addition to its regular concert performances at Powell Hall, which has been the permanent home of the SLSO for more than 50 years, the orchestra is an integral part of the diverse and vibrant St. Louis community, presenting free education programs and performances throughout the region each year.

The Grammy Award-winning SLSO's impact beyond the St. Louis region is realized through weekly Saturday night concert broadcasts on St. Louis Public Radio, acclaimed recordings, and regular touring activity. A sought-



after artistic partner by preeminent musicians and composers from across the globe, as well as by local and national organizations, the SLSO enjoys a long history of robust and enduring artistic



collaborations that have developed and deepened over the years.

American conductor David Robertson was the 12th Music Director in the orchestra's history

and solidified the SLSO's standing as one of the nation's most vital and innovative ensembles. Robertson's remarkable 13-year tenure with the SLSO concluded in May 2018.

For more: slso.org

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Associate Principal
Tina Ward
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E-FLAT CLARINET

Tina Ward

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**Replacement

***Leave of absence

◇Extra musician

This recording is made possible with the generous assistance
and support of Noémi and Michael Neidorff

Recording Producer and Editor: Erica Brenner
Sound Engineer: Paul Hennerich

Mastering: Paul Blakemore
Piano technician: Barbara Renner
Annotations, interview editing, and contextualization:
Peter Dahm Robertson
For the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra: Erik Finley

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Orli Shaham is a Steinway Artist



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David Robertson, Paul Hennerich
Amy Baird: design and layout

MOZART

Piano Concerto No.17 in G major, K.453

30:01

- | | |
|--------------------|-------|
| 1. i. Allegro | 12:26 |
| 2. ii. Andante | 09:52 |
| 3. iii. Allegretto | 07:43 |

Piano Concerto No.24 in C minor, K.491

29:04

- | | |
|--------------------|-------|
| 4. i. Allegro | 13:16 |
| 5. ii. Larghetto | 07:05 |
| 6. iii. Allegretto | 08:43 |

Orli Shaham, piano

St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

David Robertson, conductor



Total playing time: 59:10

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