

Sunday, March 24, 2024, 3pm
Zellerbach Hall

Mahler Chamber Orchestra
Mitsuko Uchida, *piano and director*
José Maria Blumenschein, *concertmaster and leader*

PROGRAM

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART (1756–1791) Piano Concerto No. 17 in G major, K. 453
(1784)
Allegro
Andante
Allegretto – Presto

Jörg WIDMANN (b. 1973) Chorale Quartet, Version for flute,
oboe, bassoon, celesta (ad lib.)
and string orchestra
(US Premiere, 2003/2020)

INTERMISSION

MOZART Piano Concerto No. 22 in E-flat major, K. 482
(1785)
Allegro
Andante
Allegro

*Cal Performances is committed to fostering a welcoming, inclusive, and safe environment for all—
one that honors our venues as places of respite, openness, and respect.
Please see the Community Agreements section on our Policies page for more information.*



Above: Mahler Chamber Orchestra with Mitsuko Uchida. Photo by Geoffroy Schied.
Below: Mahler Chamber Orchestra. Photo by Molina Visuals.



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

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

Most of Mozart's piano concertos were written to show off his own keyboard virtuosity, but from time to time he created a concerto for one of his best pupils to play. The most stunning example of these "gift" concertos is the Piano Concerto in G major, K. 453, composed for Barbara "Babette" Ployer, the talented daughter of a wealthy Salzburg merchant who had moved to Vienna.

The year 1784 was one of spectacular creativity for the composer: in the first three months, he wrote four superb piano concertos, Nos. 14 (also written for Babette Ployer), 15, 16 and 17. The last of these was completed in April 1784 and premiered at a soirée at the Ployer household on June 10, 1784, along with a performance of the Sonata for Two Pianos, K. 448, played by Babette and Mozart

The fact that Mozart needed to make the soloist's part here a bit easier than those he wrote for himself did not in any way limit the greatness of this concerto. It is a rich and subtle work, characterized by constantly shifting shades of emotional color. And never before had Mozart so successfully integrated orchestra and soloist. He used his modest resources (remember this work was written for home performance) of one flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings plus piano with the utmost beauty, skill, and imagination. And here we have the first example of the composer's magical writing for woodwinds, which would so characterize his late piano concertos.

The first movement, is not the typical brilliant opener, but something much more complex: an interplay of light and shadow. Touches of pathos and drama will creep in unexpectedly, as will the minor mode in this G major sonata form. The woodwinds tend to provide the harmonic shadows, especially

in the development section, which begins with a dialogue between winds playing a five-note ascending and descending motive and the piano following their arc with flowing triplets.

The Andante in C major is perhaps the most remarkable of all three movements. It is an expansive meditation shaped by five appearances (in strings, in piano, in woodwinds, in piano again, finally in woodwinds) of a five-measure theme that, each time, halts abruptly on the dominant. It is a question, seemingly a profound one, in search of an answer. However, the responsive episodes provide none, as the soloist and orchestra probe minor keys and deepen the mystery. Finally, after the woodwinds pose the question in a despairing fashion for the final time, the piano provides the answer—the resolution to the theme—and it is one of perfect simplicity.

The last movement is as witty as any rondo finale Mozart ever wrote, but instead it takes the form of a theme with five variations and a *Presto* finale. The theme is a perky, two-part bird tune, and indeed Mozart had purchased a pet starling that could sing its opening phrase. (Mozart so loved this starling that when it died in 1787 he buried it with ceremonial rites in his garden and wrote a little poem for its epitaph.) After the five wonderfully contrasted variations finishing with a bold, bravura one for the whole ensemble, the tempo accelerates to *Presto* for a big wrap-up in the comic-opera spirit of *The Marriage of Figaro*. The chirpy little theme tries several times to make an appearance, but is laughed off the stage. As Cuthbert Girdlestone writes: "The concerto finishes abruptly, in the highest of spirits, after hacking up beyond all hope of repair the unfortunate theme, the last shreds of which, as the curtain falls, woodwind and piano are merrily throwing to and fro."

Jörg Widmann

Chorale Quartet, Version for flute, oboe, bassoon, celesta (ad lib.) and string orchestra (US Premiere, 2003/2020)

Born in Munich in 1973, Jörg Widmann is a fine example of a musical polymath. He began his studies with the clarinet and remains today a sought-after orchestral soloist and chamber music partner. But he is also an accomplished pianist, particularly glorying in the music of Schumann, as well as a conductor. As an academic, he has pursued an esteemed career as a professor of both clarinet and composition at the University of Music Freiburg and its Institute for New Music. And, of course, he is a composer, who has been lauded with quantities of prestigious prizes, including the Hindemith Prize, Ernst von Siemens Prize, Arnold Schoenberg Prize, and Stoeger Prize.

Though he has now written many works for large forces—notably the oratorio *ARCHE*, which had its world premiere in January 2017 at the opening of the spectacular Elbphilharmonie Hall in Hamburg—Widmann stresses that his deepest love is for chamber music. Devoting much of his attention to that category, he has composed eight string quartets, each very different from the others.

The work we'll hear tonight began life in 2003 as Widmann's Second String Quartet, the *Choralquartett*, inspired by Haydn's late quartet masterpiece *The Seven Last Words of Christ*. But now we'll encounter it in new garb: as a work for chamber orchestra (flute, oboe, bassoon, celesta, and string orchestra), commissioned by Carnegie Hall along with the Kozerthaus Dortmund and Kölnmusik in Germany. This version had its world premiere on January 31, 2020 by the Mahler Chamber Orchestra under Mitsuko Uchida's baton in Pamplona, Spain.

Though Jörg Widmann's music sounds as contemporary as tomorrow, he says it all

emerges from his reverence and total engagement with the great classics of the Austro-German tradition. But as he's also commented in a recent interview, "Sound itself is so important to me, even before structure. When I begin composing, there is so much of an outburst of emotion, colors, imagination." The form only follows later. So in the beginning of the *Choralquartett*, we hear fragments of tonal melody and harmonic progressions, but we soon encounter patches of silence, interspersed with unpitched noise produced by extended instrumental techniques. This work is an adventure in sound, both traditional musical sounds and non-traditional, and how it emerges and retreats back into silence. And it is a work of harrowing emotions.

Here is Widmann's commentary:

My second string quartet consists of a single slow movement. Although the work makes no concrete reference to Joseph Haydn's *Seven Last Words*, it would be inconceivable without prior knowledge of this composition. Haydn's sequence of movements, which (with the exception of the concluding earthquake) are all in slow tempi, still provokes a feeling of shocking urgency in our time. For me, even more disturbing is the calm, composed, and serene acceptance of death in the Haydn work ...

In my examination of crucifixion themes, the "path" and the "final journey" were ... the essential expressions. My work begins at the end of the path. These are all final tones, phrases from the past, which originated from nowhere and do not lead anywhere. The horrifying friction and abrasion of skin on wood forms a central theme and is associated through silence with tonal choral elements. I am interested in investigating how, through the course of the work, sound effects no longer represent desolation and tonal elements no longer represent confidence.

Mozart**Piano Concerto No. 22 in E-flat major,
K. 482**

Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 22 in E-flat major was premiered on December 23, 1785 at a special subscription concert to open Vienna's 1785–86 winter season. It had been preceded by two of Mozart's most original and unconventional concertos: K. 466 in D minor and K. 467 in C major. Cuthbert Girdlestone in his guide to the Mozart piano concertos surmises that with this concerto the composer may have consciously returned to a more popular, ingratiating style, lest he get too far ahead of his audience. With its courtly opening flourish and ceremonial trumpets and drums, K. 482's first movement is in the grand style that his upper-crust audience would have appreciated. The beginning of the third movement also sounds like the light-as-air rondo frolic that would have sent his public away happy. But, interestingly, it was the poignant and sublimely beautiful second movement—the most original of the three—that prompted his first audience to demand an encore.

Mozart's superb writing for the woodwinds plays a crucial supporting role to the piano throughout. For the first time in his concertos, Mozart employed his favorite wind instrument, a pair of clarinets, to replace the customary oboes. Undoubtedly, their fruity, sometimes plaintive tones inspired him to new heights.

The leisurely, expansive first movement opens with a regal flourish and then unfurls a wonderful variety of melodies. And when the piano enters, it hardly bothers with the orchestra's themes; instead, it has plenty of

ideas of its own to introduce and develop, as well as streams of rapid passagework. After a short but dramatic development section, the recapitulation of the opening music is treated with great originality. Now the piano is willing to play the orchestra's themes, but only on its own ingenious terms.

The crown of this queen of concertos is the magnificent C-minor slow movement: a rueful but not tragic meditation on life's sorrows. There is pain but also a calm acceptance that suffering is part of humanity's lot. This is a mood we encounter often in Mozart's music as he grew older; about this time, he happened to write to his father that he'd come to accept the prospect of death, even an early death, without fear.

With its playful, almost simple-minded theme, the finale suggests it is going to be just another of those lightweight rondo finales that late-18th-century audiences loved. But Mozart has some surprises in store, and the biggest is the interpolation of a slower-tempo minuet interlude midway through the movement. This elegant wind-dominated music returns us partway to the poignant mood of the second movement. And Mozart has yet a final surprise for the concerto's last moment: a trick ending in which the piano wanders off for one last flight of fancy.

—Janet E. Bedell © 2024

Janet E. Bedell is a program annotator and feature writer who writes for Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Los Angeles Opera, Caramoor Festival of the Arts, and other musical organizations.

Since its creation in 1997, the **Mahler Chamber Orchestra** (MCO) has continuously kept shaping its distinct sound, independent artistic identity, and agile and democratic structure. To this day, the MCO is still governed by its musicians in collaboration with its managing office.

Claudio Abbado, the founding mentor of the Orchestra, inspired the ensemble to develop a philosophy that is based on the power of listening and communication—both as a structure and musically. This philosophy is called, the “Sound of Listening.” Through the transformative power of listening, the MCO goes beyond the conventional expectations of what an orchestra can do, pushing the boundaries of its artistry and exploring new realms of musical expression.

This synergetic approach to music-making is enriched by engaging with Artistic Partners, creating multiyear projects that explore diverse artistic themes. Pianists Mitsuko Uchida and Yuja Wang, violinist Pekka Kuusisto, Conductor Laureate Daniel Harding, Artistic Advisor Daniele Gatti, and Artistic Partner for Immersive Experiences Henrik Oppermann/Schallgeber inspire and give shape to the orchestra. Further close collaborations are undertaken with prominent musicians including George Benjamin, Andris Nelsons, and Patricia Kopatchinskaja.

The orchestra brings together 27 different nationalities and has reached live audiences across 40 countries on five continents. It connects with a global community through residencies at New York’s Carnegie Hall, London’s Southbank Centre, the Lucerne Festival, Salzburg’s Mozartwoche, and Festival de Saint-Denis. The MCO is a frequent guest at Philharmonie Berlin, Hamburg’s Elbphilharmonie, the Musikverein Vienna, and Beethovenfest Bonn, and regularly tours Iberian and Asian regions.

In the field of outreach and education, the MCO’s flagship projects include: MCO

Academy, where MCO members share their passion and expertise with the next generation of orchestral musicians in collaboration with Orchesterzentrum|NRW and undertake concert residencies at Konzerthaus Dortmund, the Kölner Philharmonie, and the Philharmonie Essen; *Feel the Music*, which opens the world of music to deaf and hard-of-hearing children, encouraging a whole-body sensory experience; and *Welcome Home*: a concert about finding the place where you belong, in which school groups are invited on a multicultural journey, fostering introspection and contemplation on the theme of “Belonging.” These endeavors highlight the MCO’s commitment to enriching lives through music and promoting inclusivity.

In collaboration with Artistic Partner for Immersive Experiences Henrik Oppermann/Schallgeber, the MCO has introduced three virtual reality concert experiences. These immersive installations transport listeners into the heart of diverse musical styles and orchestral arrangements, creating an intimate connection with the music. Starting in the 2023–24 season, these installations will venture out on independent journeys, making appearances at Beethovenfest Bonn, Museumsnacht Dortmund, Fratopia Frankfurt, and Princeton University.

Each summer, the MCO forms the core group of the Lucerne Festival Orchestra. Collaborations with Conductor Laureate Daniel Harding and Artistic Advisor Daniele Gatti bring the MCO to numerous prestigious festivals and concert halls in Europe. This season, the partnership with Mitsuko Uchida spans three continents and includes a residency at the Ojai Music Festival in California. The first project with the MCO’s newest Artistic Partner Yuja Wang took place in January, with a program that crosses musical styles. In 2024, the orchestra will fulfil its inaugural year as Artistic Di-

rector of Musikwoche Hitzacker, in the company of violinist Alina Ibragimova. MCO debuts are made by conductors Maxim Emelyanychev and Sir Simon Rattle, and cellist Kian Soltani.

For a biography of Mitsuko Uchida, please see page 10d.



José Franch-Balaster

José Maria Blumenschein, a native of Freiburg, Germany and born of Brazilian parents, currently serves as First Concertmaster of the WDR Radio Symphony

Orchestra in Cologne after having served as Associate Concertmaster of the Philadelphia Orchestra for three seasons. During his tenure with WDR, he also took two seasons off to perform as First Concertmaster of the Vienna State Opera and Philharmonic. He has been working with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra since 2021 and has

been concertmaster of the orchestra since March 2023.

As a passionate leader he regularly performs with a selection of European orchestras and ensembles that includes the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Bayreuth Festival Orchestra, Chamber Orchestra of Europe, London Symphony Orchestra, Bayerische Staatsoper, Dresden Staatskapelle, and NDR Radio Orchestra.

Blumenschein is also a founding member of Kammermusik Köln, a chamber music series in Cologne founded by members of WDR Radio, Gürzenich Orchestra and Cologne Conservatory to be the first all-year chamber music series.

Born in 1985, Blumenschein received his first violin lesson at the age of four in Freiburg, Germany, at the Pflüger Institute for Highly Gifted Children. In 1990, he began studies with Vera Kramarowa in Mannheim. In 2001, Blumenschein was accepted by the Curtis Institute of Music, where he studied with conductor and violinist Joseph Silverstein and served as concertmaster of the Curtis Symphony Orchestra.

Cal Performances is committed to fostering a welcoming, inclusive, and safe environment for all—one that honors our venues as places of respite, openness, and respect.

Please see the Community Agreements section on our Policies page for more information.

Mahler Chamber Orchestra

VIOLIN

José Maria Blumenschein* (Germany)

May Kunstovny (Austria)

Hildegard Niebuhr (Germany)

Alexandra Preucil (USA)

Timothy Summers (USA)

Nicola Bruzzo (Italy)

Hwa-Won Rimmer Pyun (Germany)

Geoffroy Schied (France)

Johannes Lörstad** (Sweden)

Christian Heubes (Germany)

Paulien Holthuis (Netherlands)

Nanni Malm (Austria)

Fjodor Selzer (Germany)

Michiel Commandeur (Netherlands)

Stephanie Baubin (Austria)

VIOLA

Béatrice Muthélet** (France)

Yannick Dondelinger (Great Britain)

Benjamin Newton (Great Britain)

Justin Caulley (USA)

Frida Siegrist Oliver (Norway/
Switzerland)

CELLO

Frank-Michael Guthmann** (Germany)

Stefan Faludi (Germany)

Moritz Weigert (Germany)

Jonathan Weigle (Germany)

DOUBLE BASS

Rodrigo Moro Martín** (Spain)

Naomi Shaham (Israel)

Johane Gonzalez Seijas (Spain)

FLUTE

Joshua Smith (USA)

OBOE

Andrey Godik (Russia)

Emma Schied (Great Britain)

CLARINET

Vicente Alberola (Spain)

Daniel González Penas (Spain)

BASSOON

Andrea Cellacchi (Italy)

Chiara Santi (Italy)

HORN

José Vicente Castelló (Spain)

Monica Berenguer Caro (Spain)

TRUMPET

Christopher Dicken (Great Britain)

Florian Kirner (Germany)

TIMPANI & PERCUSSION

Martin Piechotta (Germany)

* Concertmaster

** Section Leader