Fall, 2015, T410 · The Classical Concertos
T/R, 11.15–12.30 (MC036)
Prerequisites: T252 or permission of the instructor.

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The concerto is one of the most fascinating genres of the Classical era, presented in contemporary accounts as the most difficult of genres to compose and (for the same reason) the most open to abuse as a vehicle for vacuous, mechanical virtuoso-writing. Mozart’s concertos for piano, violin, clarinet, and horn, in particular, defined the genre’s first high-water mark, and will form the heart of the course. Mozart’s concertos are by no means the whole story of the period, of course. Thus, we shall also examine the genre’s relationship to the Baroque and mid-century galant concerto, the concertos of Haydn and C.P.E. Bach, the genre’s subsequent development by Beethoven, not to mention the “alternative” strands (such as the “London School” in the late-eighteenth century, or the concertos of the French violin school).

Central questions will be: What is the Classical concerto’s stylistic provenance? How much does it owe to Baroque concerto traditions? What is its relationship with operatic practice (buffa or seria)? What might Mozart (or another performer) have actually played? Should we attempt to use eighteenth-century theoretical perspectives, or can the concertos’ formal intricacies only be properly described using modern theoretical apparatuses? What exactly is the nature of the dialogue between sonata-form and concerto practices? How about the dialogue—in a more literal sense—between soloist and orchestra? How do composers satisfy the demand for performative virtuosity and skill, without falling into emptiness or vacuity? And how do the shifting cultural forces of music production around the turn of the nineteenth century (including the rise of the travelling virtuoso, changes in systems of musical patronage, the dominance of the aesthetic of absolute music) affect the concerto genre?

In sum, the Classical concerto must be viewed from multiple vantage points, and we shall assemble these gradually into a holistic perspective. We shall consider contemporaneous theoretical descriptions of concertos alongside modern theoretical methods (of which there are many); we shall undertake close analysis of the scores; we shall consider the thorny questions of performance practice, particularly with respect to cadenzas; and we shall look into issues of manuscript and autograph evidence.

The course will involve regular reading as well as close analytical engagement with particular pieces. The analytical skills and techniques developed in the core curriculum courses up to (and including) T252 will be employed.