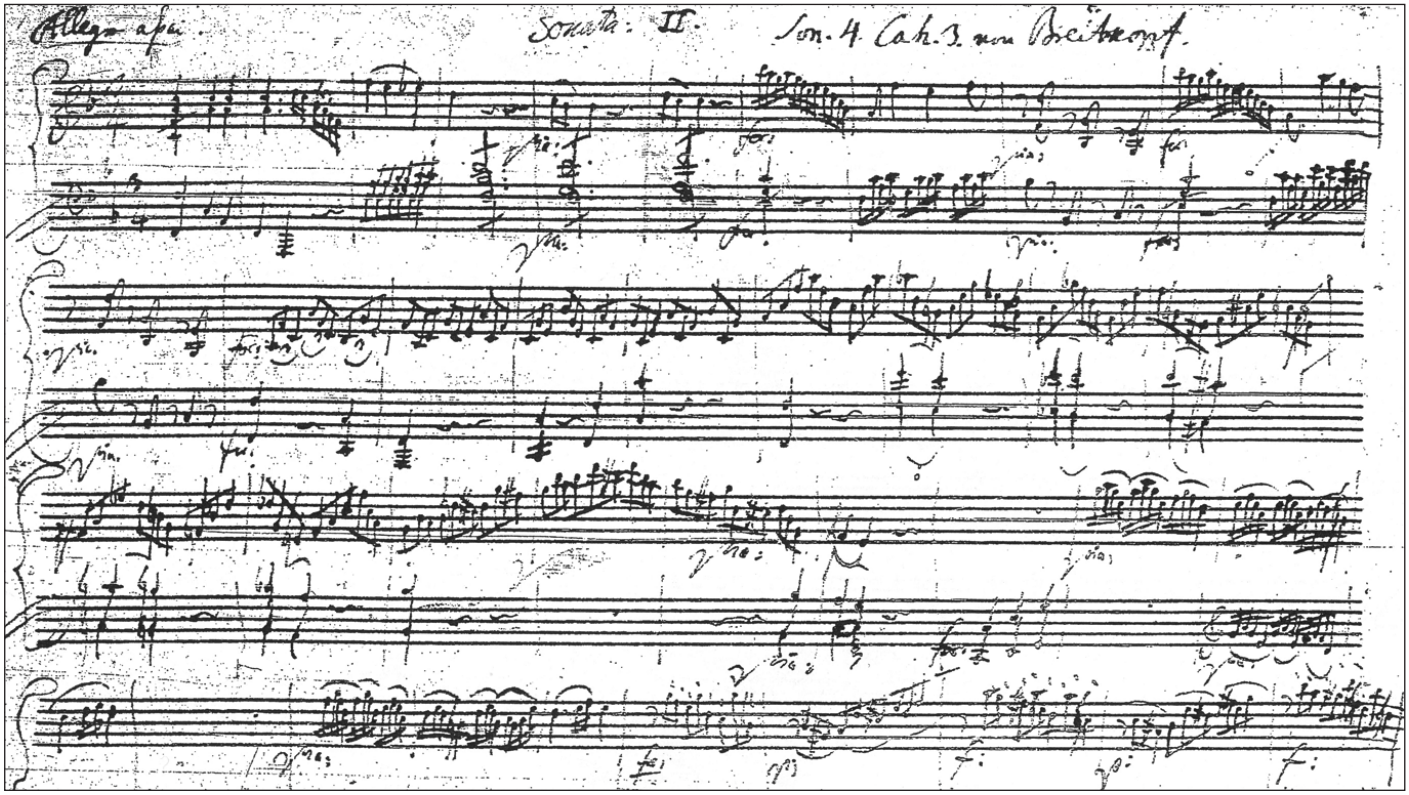

Autograph manuscript of Mozart's Piano Sonata in F Major. Reprinted by permission of Biblioteka Jagiellonska.

An Evening with Robert Levin

Introduction by Lewis Lockwood

This presentation was given at the 1897th Stated Meeting, held at the House of the Academy on December 2, 2005. Robert Levin's presentation included a musical performance of works by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Arnold Schoenberg.

Robert Levin is Dwight P. Robinson, Jr. Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University. He has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 2000.

Lewis Lockwood, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1984, is Fanny Peabody Professor of Music, Emeritus, at Harvard University.

Lewis Lockwood

On a Friday and Sunday in late April 2001, Robert Levin was scheduled to play the Mozart C Major Piano Concerto, K. 467, and the obbligato piano part to a Mozart Concert Aria part, K. 505, with the Handel and Haydn Society at Boston's Symphony Hall. But on Wednesday of that week, the singer Dominique Labelle had to cancel, and so conductor Christopher Hogwood asked Levin to play K. 386, a Mozart Rondo for Piano and Orchestra, instead. Though Robert Levin had not played this rondo for seven years, he relearned it in a day and a half and played it that Friday evening. All was well, if a little frantic.

The next morning, the Boston Symphony Orchestra called and asked Levin if he could possibly step in to play the Beethoven Fourth Piano Concerto that night since Alfred Brendel, the scheduled pianist, had injured his back. Brendel was also supposed to play the Beethoven Second Concerto, but the BSO magnanimously felt that two concertos was more than they should ask for in an emergency situation, so they would substitute a symphony instead. Levin rushed over to Symphony Hall for a 10:30 a.m. rehearsal and ran through the Fourth Concerto to Seiji Ozawa's satisfaction. Then Seiji said, "You can also do the Second Concerto on Tuesday night, yes?" So Levin played the Beethoven Fourth Concerto with the BSO Saturday night, and went back to the Handel and Haydn Society to play the Mozart concerto and rondo on Sunday afternoon. Then he relearned the Beethoven Second, which he hadn't played in four years, and did both Beethoven concertos with the BSO at the Tuesday concert to loud applause.

This was a single memorable episode in the career of a colleague whom I regard as one of the most gifted and versatile musicians of our time – but it doesn't suggest the full range of his activities. For many years, Robert Levin has appeared as concerto soloist with major orchestras, as well as recital pianist, playing a repertoire that stretches from Bach to Harbison and Wyner. He also plays with chamber music ensembles all over the world and has made many recordings. And he often gives piano concerts with his wife, Ya-Fei Chuang.

As concerto soloist, Levin regularly improvises his cadenzas and adds improvised embellishments, building on years of close study of the performance practices of earlier times.

All his knowledge is balanced by an innate ability to realize the beauty of a Mozartian or Schubertian line. Mozart scholarship knows Robert Levin as a full-time, full-fledged professional colleague, who has written a number of articles and book chapters on Mozart and related subjects, plus liner notes for recordings of works from Bach to Debussy. Wherever you look in Mozart scholarship, Levin is there – articulate, informed, and with a terrifying memory. His completions of unfinished Mozart works are especially well known. They began with his Harvard undergraduate thesis of 1968 entitled "The Unfinished Works of W. A. Mozart." Most recently they include the great Mozart C Minor Mass, K. 427, premiered last January, and the celebrated Mozart Requiem, which has been performed many times. His reconstruction of the Symphonie Concertante for Winds, first heard in Salzburg, is now the standard version.

From my own vantage point as a scholar, I have profited greatly from his insights both in conversations and in his critical reading of my work. When Levin graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard in 1968 at age twenty, Rudolph Serkin invited him to become head of the Theory Department at the Curtis Institute. After five years at Curtis, he went on to full-time teaching positions at SUNY Purchase and at the Staatliche Hochschule für Müsik in Freiburg. In 1993 he returned to Harvard and, a year later, became Dwight P. Robinson, Jr. Professor of the Humanities. Somehow Levin also managed to hold down the all-important role of department head tutor for many years. He regularly coaches chamber music and gives courses on performance and analysis as well as general courses on classical and swing music. Suffice it to say that he is a musician of prodigious talent, an extraordinary colleague, and a remarkably gifted human being.

Robert Levin

One scarcely knows what to do after a buildup like that, so I guess I should proceed to the subject at hand – which, on the one hand, is completely coincidental and, on the other hand, is anything but: Why are the names of two sonatas – Piano Sonata in C Major, K. 279, and Piano Sonata in F Major, K. 280 – printed on your program today?

When we think about Mozart's early sonatas, we might be tempted to regard them as the rather preliminary essays of a composer who is not yet entirely a master. After all, when Mozart wrote these pieces, he was nineteen, and one wonders how seriously one should take the work of a nineteen-year-old. (Of course, if that person's name is Felix Mendelssohn, we ought to take him rather seriously indeed, because anyone who could write the octet at the age of sixteen has pretty much gone, as the people in Kansas City say, about as far as he can go. It is daunting to imagine someone like Mendelssohn, whose achievements were so spectacular by the time he was a mid-teenager – he wrote the *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture and scherzo when he was seventeen – that he spent his maturity in agonizing self-doubt and self-criticism. In fact, he could not bring himself to publish the "Italian" symphony because he thought it simply wasn't good enough. I think we all agree that it's rather good and that we are very happy to hear it frequently.)

K. 279 and K. 280 were the first in a set of six sonatas. It's rather bizarre that they were the first when you consider the fact that, from the age of seven, this little tot was being trumpeted as a great genius, a prodigy of nature who was regularly taken by his father to be presented to all of the courts of Europe, or any place where a snuff box stuffed with gold coins could be taken home as a souvenir. Consider the frontispiece of his Opus One – SONATAS FOR THE HARPSICHORD/ Which can be played with Violin Accompaniment / Dedicated / TO MADAME VICTOIRE / DE FRANCE / By J. G. Wolfgang Mozart of Salzburg / Age 7 / OPUS THE FIRST [1] – or his Opus Two (Agé de neuf ans). He composed these keyboard sonatas with an obbligato violin part, but real sonatas for the keyboard, without an adjunct violin or flute, did not issue from his pen until he was nearly twenty – a very surprising fact.

If Mozart is playing all of the time, what is he playing? Why shouldn't he be playing his own music? When you realize that the first original concerto that Mozart composed dates from his seventeenth year, there are questions that scholars and musicians alike need to ask about the growth of Mozart's vernacular and its connection with practical exigencies.

1 SONATES POUR LE CLAVECIN / Qui peuvent se jouer avec l'Accompagnement de Violin / Dediées / A MADAME VICTOIRE / DE FRANCE / Par J. G. Wolfgang Mozart de Salzbourg / Agé de Sept ans / ŒUVRE PREMIERE.

The manuscript of the six sonatas is a very interesting document indeed. The first movement of the first sonata is missing, but it is known to have been written on a different kind of paper from all of the rest. Apart from that first movement, these six sonatas are written out one after the other: Mozart finishes the last movement of one sonata on the front side of a sheet of paper and goes right on with the next one on the back, suggesting that this was probably not the first time he set this music to paper. In the case of the last sonata, however, there is some indication that, at a certain stage, he began to take more risks about how soon he would write something down. The last sonata begins with quite a bit of the first movement, which he then thoroughly crosses out and replaces with a final version.

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What would cause Mozart to reject part of a composition that is in a relatively polished state? In the case of Mozart, we do not have a plenitude of sketches as we have for Beethoven, where once one has figured out how to read Beethoven's handwriting, one has the opportunity to follow layers of gestation – all sorts of dead ends, blind alleys, improvements, dry runs, new approaches. In a letter to his father about the opera *Idomeneo*, Mozart declared, "Everything is composed, but nothing is written down." But we must be careful about this issue. Eight years after he died, Mozart's widow destroyed about 90 percent of his sketches, feeling that they had no value. (Maybe they had no value to her, but I think we would have liked to look over his shoulder.) The only sketches that survived were for unknown works or sheets that contained ideas for known pieces but also included unidentifiable material.

If one knows how to read these sketches, one often can reconstruct the state of Mozart's writing desk. It becomes clear that while he was working on a particular composition, the piece of paper that survived was to the right of the manuscript. As he worked and encountered a problem, he went over to and scribbled on that extra piece of paper. When he solved the problem, he then transferred the music, in a more polished form, to what were for him both a draft and a final version of the work.

Forensic approaches to Mozart scholarship that have developed in the last twenty or thirty years have enabled us to get a view of the creative process that would have been unimaginable in earlier times. We had relied upon the judgment of the most faithful and enlightened Mozartian of the time, Alfred Einstein, who edited the third edition of the chronological Köchel catalog of Mozart's work – those sacred K numbers we all deal with when confronting Mozart. Einstein was reduced to thinking about twin pieces in the same sort of cycle of creative thought. Having finished a string quartet, for example, Mozart might get an idea for another string quartet.

When more rarefied specialists put themselves to the task of examining the evidence, several interesting thoughts emerged. For instance, Dr. Wolfgang Plath, a German musicologist who was one of the coeditors of the Complete Works edition of Mozart

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published by Bärenreiter, spent a good deal of his life staring at how Mozart wrote sharps, flats, naturals, and the like. It doesn't sound very promising – it would seem that a flat is a flat and a sharp is a sharp. But Plath discovered sea changes in Mozart's handwriting, just as you would in your handwriting if you went back and looked at the letters that you might have written from camp. Plath was able to find specific moments when Mozart changed the shape of these notations. Once he made that discovery, he could start to sort the autographs, including the undated ones, by the forms of these little sharps and flats.

Meanwhile, Dr. Alan Tyson at Oxford had a different idea. He believed that since music paper was expensive, Mozart tended to use it up in its entirety before he procured more. By contrast, Beethoven didn't seem to be worried about music paper – he used reams of it, putting only three bars on a page and then crossing them out forty times over. Mozart was much more economical, but not as economical as Bach, who, if he had an inch-and-a-half left at the end of a chorus, would squash a recitative, half bar by half bar, into that remaining space at the end of the score.

Tyson's theory was that Mozart used music paper the way most people use postage stamps, that is, we use up the stamps we have before we buy new ones. Sorting out the music paper Mozart used over his entire life, Tyson protocolled the watermark and the distance in millimeters from the top line of music to the bottom line for every paper type he encountered. Then he looked at the number of pieces written on each paper type and hypothesized that the works on each type that are undated probably fall within the same time span as those that are dated. This discovery may not seem terribly remarkable, but some of Mozart's pieces have been redated by as much as ten years by that simple premise. And then consider that one gentleman working at Augsburg in southern Germany and another working at Oxford in England, who were not in regular contact, reached conclusions that are about 99 percent identical.

As you begin to look at how a composer writes, you learn such startling things that you no longer have to nourish useless myths that tend to hide the reality of the creative process. In the winter of 1782 – 1783, Mozart was working on three piano concertos, the ones we now call nos. 11, 12, and 13 – the F Major, K. 413; the A Major, K. 414; and the C Major, K. 415. A few years ago, I was in Kraków looking at the autographs to these three concertos, and I was able to see things that one cannot see on a photocopy or a microfilm, which of course are monochrome. For one, if Mozart was in the middle of writing something with a quill and suddenly decided that he didn't like the note he wrote, he would flick his thumb over the ink and smear it. (He must have had a very black thumb.) Then he would write in the correction and if the correction required more adjustment, he would erase it. On photocopies, you can't see the erasures. Sometimes, you can't even

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see them if you hold the paper up to an incandescent bulb. You would need ultraviolet light, or even infrared light, if you really cared that much. And why shouldn't we? It's rather interesting. But when you see, without the benefit of a magnifying glass or any of the special accoutrements, just the way the ink looks on the page, you can make some astonishing discoveries.

Looking at the manuscripts, I found that each one of these concertos, which consists of three movements, displays four different tints of ink on almost every page. I don't mean, of course, red and blue, or black and green. I mean whatever the chemist happened to mix and whatever happened to be on his table at the time. One was sort of blackish; another was brown-yellow; the third was a lighter shade of brown; and the fourth was gray. What you can see is that Mozart is working in layers. He drafts the entirety of the movement from beginning to end with the primary voices, which are the first violin and the bass line. When the piano comes in, he switches to the piano. If the oboe is going to make a rude retort, he will go to the oboe and write down the rude retort, lest he forget it later, and then return to the main idea again. If he gets into trouble, he goes to the sketch, scribbles a little bit, and then goes back to the main manuscript. He makes a second pass: maybe the second violin will be notated at this stage, or the viola, and perhaps he'll fill in the winds and the brass. Then he'll come back and polish a few things.

On every page, you see each of the layers of this process, from beginning to end, in these four tints of ink. Inescapably, we must come to the conclusion – however regretfully we do it because it doesn't make us feel very good about our own accomplishments – that Mozart is conceiving all nine movements of these three piano concertos at the same time

in his head. He is composing with such a degree of precision that he can write down only the principal ideas, then the next most important ideas, and then the ones that follow, without having to make corrections when he gets to the third level. If he had to transfer the oboe to the bassoon, or the violin to the viola, you could say, "Oh well, it was a good stab," and know then that he had to fix a few mistakes, but you don't find much of that. And this is where the worst news comes: these nine movements of these three pieces were not the only things that Mozart was writing at the time. In effect, the amount of music Mozart was juggling in his brain was alarming. Furthermore, if he heard a piece, he might stick it in the back of his mind and use it ten years later.

Now I want to return to the two sonatas I mentioned at the beginning. What is interesting about them is that they reveal Mozart as a young man of disarming self-confidence. The first, the Sonata in C Major, is what I would call a "seat of the pants" affair. The first movement is a series of random little ideas following Mozart's whim; it barely has a structure. It's only the charm of the whole thing – the ease of the rhetoric – that makes you willing to listen to his chatter. Likewise, in the second movement of the piece, a more *cantabile* piece, there's a volatile sense that

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the piece will go where it's supposed to go, from the first key to the second key, and come back as well-behaved pieces of music should do in the eighteenth century. But there is also a sense that he might just turn to the left if the whim so strikes him. A few times, you actually hear him do so. The last movement is an irreverent, absolutely rapscallion romp.

I'm going to play this piece very disrespectfully because I think it's time to listen to this music in the off-the-cuff manner in which, I think, it was really devised. We've embalmed this music for two hundred years and made it pretty. When we make it beautiful, it becomes something as decorative and as lovely as a paperweight that someone gives you for Christmas; after a few weeks, you don't even notice it. Or the Hummel porcelain figurine that sits on one of your upper shelves; only when a visitor takes note of it does it get your attention. We have done something like that to Mozart. One of my friends in Boston says that he's ashamed when he listens to Mozart on a local classical radio station because the 9:00 a.m. time block signals that you are listening to an hour of relaxing music. Did Michelangelo, did Rembrandt, did Shakespeare want you to relax? Or did they want to turn your insides out and tell you something about your own deepest terrors and desires? No, this music, even if Mozart was nineteen, is not about relaxation. In contemplating these early sonatas, I think the point is to realize their manic quality. It is a lot easier to play them calmly; they sound perfectly fine. But you won't have any sense of the level of fever that's going on in Mozart's imagination.

(Robert Levin performs K. 279.)

While I was growing up in New York, I had the great pleasure of playing for about ten years with Felix Galimir. I consider him one of my most important teachers, although the way I studied with him was to play chamber music with him, a privilege that simply defies rational explanation. At one point I suggested that our chamber group might play the Webern transcription of the Schoenberg First Chamber Symphony in the upcoming season. Most of the time, Felix was not terribly enthusiastic about my suggestions, but his eyes glowed with that one. He said, "Now that's a good idea." When I came into the first rehearsal, he said, "Guess when I last played this piece." I said, "I don't know, Felix, when did you last play it?" I knew I was being set up. "At the premiere."

In the days of Felix, first in Vienna and later in America, there was something known as the Krasner sandwich. It consisted of having beloved classics on the outer edges of a concert program with a challenging contemporary work in the middle. It owes its name to the violinist Louis Krasner, Felix's brother-in-law, who lived and taught in Boston for many years. I would like to propose such a Krasner sandwich tonight in honor of my dear friends Dorothea and Reinhold Brinkmann, interpolating Arnold Schoenberg's

One of the most fascinating advantages of gravitating back and forth between scholarship and performance is that one constantly seeks the practical consequences of one's intellectual discoveries.

Six Little Piano Pieces (*Sechs kleine Klavierstücke*), op. 19, between the two Mozart sonatas. Like the sorbet that cleanses the palate between the fish and the meat course, Schoenberg's dazzling miniatures, in the most varied character, are also in every way the true successors of Mozart's mercurial compositions.

(Robert Levin performs Schoenberg Op. 19 and Mozart K. 280.)

One of the most fascinating advantages of gravitating back and forth between scholarship and performance is that one constantly seeks the practical consequences of one's intellectual discoveries. You could call much of what you have heard tonight an interpretation – or misinterpretation, if you like – and dismiss it that way. But the argument that I'd like to make is that everything that goes on in what I play is something that I see in the piece. In fact, Liszt wrote a famous sonata called *Après une lecture du Dante* – the famous Dante sonata. Liszt read Dante and, in a fever pitch, wrote music that drew upon his reading of Dante. What I have shown you tonight is what I have found in my reading of Mozart. ■

Robert Levin and Lewis Lockwood (Harvard University)

Roy Glauber (Harvard University) and James Carroll (Boston, MA)

Joseph Pedlosky (Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution), Eugene Skolnikoff (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), and Carl Wunsch (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)