# Section 1. Musical arts

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## ANALYSIS OF MOZART CONCERTO NO. 26 IN D. MAJOR, K. 537, "CORONATION"

**Abstract.** The piano concerto is a musical genre that Mozart valued highly and was a constant throughout his musical life as he combined dramatic contrast and vocal technique to push the form to a historic pinnacle. K.537 is the penultimate of Mozart's 27 piano concertos. Finished in 1788, it is a late work from the period when his music had begun to fall out of favor with audiences in Vienna, resulting in significantly reduced income. Like most of Mozart's piano concertos, K.537 is in an exhilarating major key, specifically, D major. While the work shows Mozart's consistent creative style, it also includes some changes in his orchestration. Some contemporary and modern commentators have argued that the piece sounds grandiose but empty because its orchestral structure is relatively simple with frequent repetition. However, in terms of the music itself, this lovely and stunning piece merits exploration. Mozart's original intention in composing it has been a subject of discussion. The aim here is to analyze K.537 and provide some background for it.

**Keywords:** Mozart's creation; Special Piano Concerto "Coronation"; Piano Concerto; Analysis; Orchestra.

**Introduction**

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart completed what proved to be a highly controversial work, Concerto No. 26 in D Major, K. 537 "Coronation," on February 24, 1788. This was during his late period in Vienna, when he served as a court chamber music composer for Joseph II, and his concert performances were significantly reduced. As his great popularity seemed to wane, the wealthy were less eager to sponsor him, and he began to encounter financial difficulties.

Mozart had been producing a piano concerto every few months from 1782 to 1785, in which period he transformed and improved his style in the genre. K. 537 is one of only two piano concertos that he wrote during his late period in Vienna. He planned to premiere the concerto during the Lenten season that year, but his declining popularity seems to have left him unable to launch this series of concerts. There is no evidence that K.537 was performed publicly in Vienna in Mozart's lifetime, and it was not performed at all until a year after its completion (Goertzen, 1991, 149) [1].

So, since the public in Vienna had apparently lost interest in Mozart's piano concertos, he had to look for opportunities elsewhere. A letter to his wife implies that the premiere of K. 537 took place at the Court Concert in Dresden on April 14, 1789. Then, in October 1790, the piece was performed at a concert at Leopold II's coronation as Holy Roman Emperor in Frankfurt, earning it the appellation "Coronation

(Keefe, 2001, 659) [2]," which is also fitting because it has marching motifs suggestive of royal splendor. The coronation concert was not, however, well-attended.

**Analysis of K.537**

K.537 is notable for the simplicity of its orchestral composition compared with Mozart's other piano concertos. In particular, the wind part is negligible. Opinions are mixed on this point. The concerto as a genre was an especially effective advertising medium for Mozart, allowing him to display both his ability as a composer and his skills as a performer and conductor. Further, the key of D, with its martial and festive associations, was a good, uncontroversial choice for pampering royal egos (Goertzen, 1991, 150.) [1]. The energy that Mozart put into creating operas in his late period colors the dialogue, the questions and answers, throughout the piece.

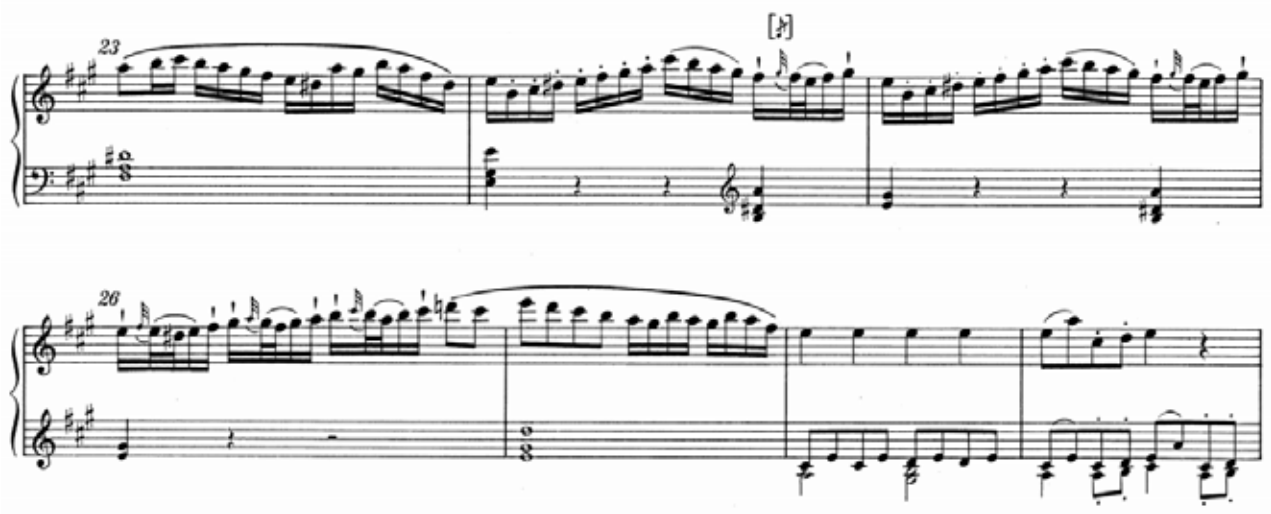
In terms of tempo, K.537 uses the traditional "fast-slow-fast" pattern typical of classical-period orchestral work. The first movement is in a conventional sonata form. At the beginning of the movement, the orchestra plays a solemn and joyful ceremonial melody ranging from light to heavy, creating a festive atmosphere full of brightness, joy, and anticipation. Also, the first theme debuts against the background of continuous bass, marching like a solemn and ornate honor guard drawing closer to the crowd.

After the opening theme, the orchestra section continues to perform brilliantly until the first violin introduces the elegant and playful second theme with a solo in measure 38, which other strings adorn like a well-dressed noblewoman gracefully honoring the beneficiaries of the celebration. The contrast between the two themes is consistent with classical-period sonata form. The pleasure of the first movement of the concerto is then heightened by the alternation of the heroic masculine first theme then alternates with the lively and lovely feminine second theme (Keefe, 2002, 664) [2].

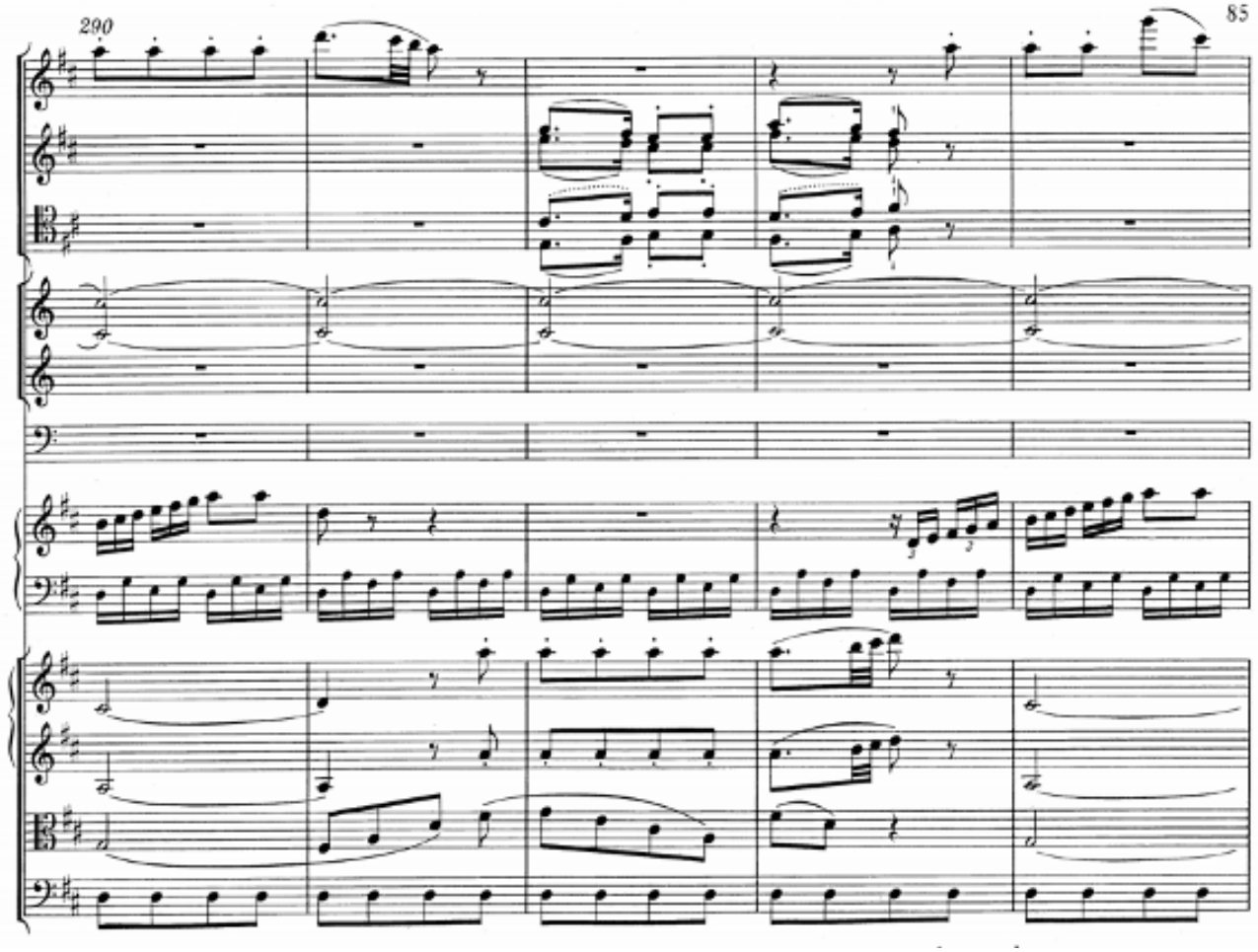
After the first appearance of the second theme, the tutti continues in D major. Mozart restricts the use of wind instruments in measures 104 to 215 while strings and piano dominate. The exposition of the first movement ends at the half cadence in measures 163–164. The key then temporarily changes to A major, and the piano introduces the new A major second theme, with the development starting immediately. In his other later works, Mozart sometimes changed to minor keys in the fast tone group during the piano part, lending the music a richer and fuller range of emotions. The development section ends in measure 292, at which point the key returns to D major.

The recapitulation starts with the movement's first theme, the tutti receiving the melody. The presentation of the piano part in the recapitulation differs slightly from that in the exposition. The piano and orchestra next repeat the second theme several times, deepening the impact of this elegant melody. The occasional piano triplets enrich the music with respect to timing, serving to intensify the climax. The latter half of the recapitulation features many $16^{th}$–note runs in waves that likewise contribute to the drama. The interweaving of the orchestra and piano further enhances the musical tension and contrast. Once the piano solo ends, the key changes from A major to D major again, and the orchestra ends the first movement quickly with a concise progression around the D major chord.

The second movement is a larghetto in a straight three-part "A B A" form. The melody of the soothing, elegant theme is first introduced with a piano solo. The orchestra then emphasizes the theme in an echo-like manner that often recurs later in this movement and in the third movement. This style of composition enhances the richness of the harmonic layers as well as the drama. There are no wind instruments in the latter part of the second movement; in measures 44 to 97, only strings accompany the new melodies, and the sensitive piano lead contrasts with the front and rear aspects. Also, the left-hand part of the piano section in this piece is simpler than those of Mozart's other piano concertos (see Example 1). As the score shows, the left hand of the piano part in the first, second, and third movements often appears with short, direct chords.




Example 1. Many of the left-hand parts are simple chords (second movement, measures 23–29) [3]




Example 2. Dialogue of wind and strings (third movement, measures 290–294) [3]

The form of the third movement somewhat resembles a sonata (which would be ABA" B'A, to be precise). The movement has the theme and subtheme, but the B section is shorter than that of a sonata and does not build the drama in the development section as is the case with a sonata. The A

section indeed returns soon after the B section, developing into a virtuosic area leading into the final cadenza. This movement, then, is close to but does not exactly conform to the standard sonata form. The wind instruments return in the third movement, being not only squared up in chords but also reused in melodic dialogs (Goertzen, 1991, 157) [1]. In the last few minutes, a conversation develops between the string and wind instruments (Example 2), the strings repeat the first theme softly several times, and the final movement ends with the interweaving of the piano and orchestra.

Mozart consistently juggles contrapuntal patterns and switches the voice and recombination to add a series of changes that enrich his concertos. These exhibitions and landscape spaces present the virtuosity itself as a "topic" that showcases Mozart's skillful composition (Ivanovitch, 2008, 215) [4]. However, in this particular piece, while Mozart used the traditional classical music form, he did not apply his traditional instrumentation to the orchestra. He often skillfully employed woodwinds for harmony and melody, but he was reluctant to do so in K.537. Two reasons seem plausible. On the one hand, Mozart was not entirely sure where the piece would be performed when he composed it once his original plan to premiere it in the Lenten season failed to materialize. At that point, though, he still expected that it would be performed in Vienna. Further, concert pianos were easy enough to buy while a great deal of luck was necessary to engage a high-quality wind ensemble, so he may have been concerned about the quality of the performance. On the other hand, Mozart's sparing use of woodwinds may reflect his waning popularity. Thus, looking for broad audience appeal, he employed gorgeous acoustics and an easy-to-remember melody, rendering the piece more accessible than his other concertos. The piece, of course, failed to prevent Mozart's tragic fate, but the nickname "Coronation" proves that it had a certain propaganda effect.

While acknowledging its excellence in terms of sound and performance, critics generally argue that K.537 suffers from too little interaction between the winds and piano and the lack of independence for the winds (Girdlestone, 1948, 462) [5]. Girdlestone described the piece as "one of the poorest and emptiest," scorning its "irrelevant virtuosity (Girdlestone, 1948, 456) [5]," assigning it to the "second rank," and regretting that "the string accompaniment to the piano is quickly sketched in without the felicities that we have come to expect (Forman, 1971, 237, 243) [6]." Hutchings was only a bit more restrained in his criticism of K.537, which he called "not a member of the progressing series" and impoverished compared with previous works, concluding that "one can only regret that Mozart stooped so low (Hutchings, 1950, 185, 188) [7]."

Nevertheless, there are reasons for rejecting the assessment of K.537 as a step backward for Mozart in composing concertos. The piece certainly differs from his early mature style, but it could represent an effort to evolve in his writing style or to do something new with the concerto form. Thus, Charles Rosen affirmed that "We cannot listen to it [K. 537] with the same expectations that we have for the other works." In Rosen's eyes, the piece is "revolutionary," and, if it seems flawed given the general understanding of the piano concerto at the time, from a perspective beyond this context, it can be regarded as a great classical piano concerto with a touch of romanticism (Rosen, 1971, 259–260) [8]. Indeed, the fact that this concerto has been widely performed since Mozart's time is proof of its quality. Without demeaning its orchestration, the music is superb.

In recent years, well-known pianists and orchestras have continued to perform K.537, including Murray Perahia and the English Chamber Orchestra. Their rendering is outstanding, with Perahia's neat technique and emotional playing highlighting Mozart's brilliant playfulness. Mitsuko Uchida's version with the English Chamber Orchestra is also excellent. Her performance is delicate and steady, full of joy, and lovely. So it is that modern audiences are as fond of the piece as they are of Mozart's other piano concertos, and some even consider it their favorite.

**Conclusions**

K.537, then, is a piano concerto with a traditional form and tempo plan. It maintains Mozart's bright and cheerful musical style and operatic dramatic dialogue elements while featuring distinctive piano and orchestral settings. Though the concerto has been controversial and criticized for flaws in the deployment of the winds, it is undeniably a landmark from a musical point of view. The value of an orchestral work cannot be judged based solely on the complexity of its setting; rather, the presentation of the overall music idea is more important. Perhaps Mozart's style would have continued to evolve had he lived longer, with this late concerto serving as the turning point.

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