

# Rock me, Amadeus: Two pianists share their thoughts on playing Mozart

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VOICES CONSTANZE

Mozart scholar Hermann Abert, referring directly to the Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra, said, “The pianists share all their melodies, vary each other’s music, interrupt each other, even argue sometimes gently; however, their fraternal agreement is never troubled by serious differences of opinion.”

This statement embodies not only the intrinsic nature of the work itself, but also the collaboration between the two extremely talented pianists who are premiering it on the University of Chicago campus. Svetlana Belsky, Coordinator of Piano Studies at the U of C Department of Music and Jennifer Maxwell, Director of Public Relations for the U of C Department of Music, have a great deal in common. Each of these highly accomplished pianists is a svelte figure of charismatic grace; and interestingly, they happen to be good friends. Here are the duo’s thoughts in regard to their upcoming Mozart collaboration with the University Symphony Orchestra.

**CHICAGO MAROON:** What are your areas of expertise/preferred repertoire? Why?

**Belsky:** Anything and everything that includes interesting musical material. I enjoy playing pieces from many different stylistic periods and try to avoid becoming so highly specialized that I am unwilling to appreciate or to experiment with the subtleties of Mozart as opposed to the more Romantic flair of Franz Liszt.

**Maxwell:** My favorite piece is whatever I am working on currently; each genre of piano repertoire presents its own assets and challenges. Of course, there is more music written for the piano than any other instrument or voice part, so we as pianists are fortunate to have endless choices.

**CHICAGO MAROON:** How do each of you approach new repertoire? In what ways are your practicing/performing habits modified in relation to the challenges of a double piano concerto?

**Belsky:** Because the piano sections in the Mozart are so transparent, we have to agree exactly on stylistic concerns. The bulk of our work was not related to the simple issues such as rhythm or counting, but rather, a matter of unifying our approach to the music: phrasing, dynamics, ornamentation, etc. We also had to adjust to the acoustics of Mandel Hall, which called for us to experiment with the piano lids, up/down, this way/that way, among other things. Eventually, we decided to remove them both, to keep the volume level consistent between the two instruments.

**Maxwell:** We did a great deal of prep work on our own, and then notified each other when we were “officially

able to stumble through the piece together.” Next, we met with the conductor, to receive her musical ideas and input. One of the most difficult problems we encountered was simply attempting to fit two nine-foot Steinways on stage with a very large orchestra. We tried several configurations, some of which, surprisingly, made it impossible to hear each other at all! Our final arrangement places the pianos directly across from each other, one lined up with the cello section, the other with the violins. It’s quite a spectacle!

**CHICAGO MAROON:** What are the specific challenges of this piece? Of Mozart repertoire in general?

**Belsky:** The unison sections are extremely challenging, because we cannot see each other’s hands. There are innumerable fast runs that are unmeasured and consequently dicey to coordinate. The pianists really have to be spiritually in tandem.

**Maxwell:** The logistics of this project have been exhausting, especially because there is only one place on campus (Mandel Hall) with two pianos available for rehearsal. We therefore work at bizarre times deemed inconvenient for all other users of Mandel Hall, and must move the pianos in and out of storage . . . and we are not built for manual labor!

**Belsky & Maxwell:** On that matter, we should mention a couple of people who have been extremely helpful to us: first, Will White,



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Jennifer Maxwell and Svetlana Belsky take a break from rehearsing to mug for Mozart.

who has acted as our rehearsal accompanist/conductor and doubled as piano mover; and Mike Jewell and Ben Boye, the main piano-hefting brawn. In the pragmatic realm, we are merely decorative!

**CHICAGO MAROON:** What is the movement or section within this piece that you most prefer?

**Belsky:** My favorite section is of Jen’s playing, in the second movement: the piano duet with the oboe. She just does it beautifully. It is one of the places in the piece where there is a lot of drama anticipating Mozart’s later theatrics. And the second movement is astoundingly well balanced. It is as if the pianists are commenting on each other, having a true conversation, with punctuation from the orchestra.

**Maxwell:** I love the coda of the third movement – the end – because there is an extremely heinous passage immediately before that I know if I hit spot on, the rest of the concerto will be a party. Really, both pianos have essentially the same musical material, with slight alterations in presentation.

**CHICAGO MAROON:** Outside of this concerto, what are your personal favorite pieces and why?

**Belsky:** I don’t think I can name a favorite! I appreciate different works for different

reasons. I will say that I don’t like the operas *Wozzeck* and *The Rake’s Progress*, because I had to memorize sections of them for my doctoral comprehensive exams. But I appreciate what I have acquired through them. I guess the first piece I remember liking was the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto; my father played it for me, and it turned me on to music. I also listened to Chopin’s *Preludes* performed by Maurizio Pollini when I was six, and that experience inspired me to become a pianist.

**Maxwell:** I adore the Schubert String Quintet with two cellos in C major; it is heavenly. Conversely, the only time I have ever considered suicide was when I first heard Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* in a music history class. It was frightening! And of course, I have always wanted to play this Mozart concerto ever since I heard it featured in the movie *Amadeus*.

After speaking with these pianists, I anticipate a simply divine performance. They shop together, wear the same size, and claim that the hardest thing about rehearsal is for the two of them to stop chatting long enough to actually get to work; qualities that will no doubt serve them well as they embody the convivial spirit of Mozart’s Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra.