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Mozart keyboard sonata performed at a concert in Calcutta (6 May 1790)

David Black

***Calcutta Chronicle and General Advertiser* Nr. 224 (Thu 6 May 1790)**

A GRAND CONCERT
Vocal and Instrumental,
FOR THE BENEFIT OF
Mr. MILLER,
WILL BE PERFORMED,
At the Old Court House,
To-morrow, Friday, the 7th Instant.

Mr. MILLER is sorry that he has been necessitated to postpone his Concert till that day.

Tickets, at twelve rupees each, to be had of Mr. Miller, Boltitonaah [?], and at the Circulating Library.

Tickets of the 3d of May will be admitted.

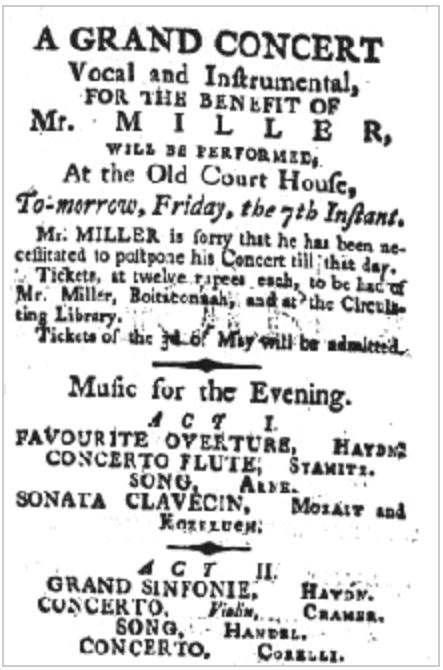
– ✦ –

Music for the Evening.
ACT I.
FAVOURITE OVERTURE, HAYDN.
CONCERTO FLUTE, STAMITZ.
SONG, ARNE.
SONATA CLAVECIN, MOZART and KOZELUCH.

–✦–

ACT II.
GRAND SINFONIE, HAYDN.
CONCERTO, *Violin,* CRAMER.
SONG, HANDEL.
CONCERTO, CORELLI.

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Commentary

Around 1782, William Edward Miller (1766–1839) arrived in London from Doncaster intending to study with the famous violinist Wilhelm Cramer. After leading a profligate lifestyle exhibiting "every species of extravagance and dissipation" (Dixon 1842, 15), Miller sailed for India at the age of eighteen. Arriving in Calcutta in 1789, he attempted to mount concerts, initially in partnership with William Hamilton Bird and the Russian violinist and adventurer Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedeff (Woodfield 2000, 69).

The earliest indication that Miller was planning the above concert is found in a report in the *Calcutta Chronicle* on 15 April 1790:

> We are truly happy to hear that a grand Concert, vocal and instrumental, will soon be performed, under the direction of Mr. Miller, whose taste and judgement in the science of music, cannot fail to please. The best professors have promised their assistance, and both the bands will be engaged. The Theatre, we hear, is the place appointed for this desirable performance, and the music will be superior to any ever yet performed in the settlement.

A week later, the newspaper reported that Miller now had a date for his concert:

> Mr. Miller's concert is announced for Monday the 3d of May, but we hear that it is at present uncertain whether it is to be at the theatre or not. Much however, is expected from the abilities of this gentleman, and the general approbation already given to his choice in the selection of the music, by those who have been acquainted therewith, seems to bid fair for its being the first performance of the kind ever attempted in this country.

On 29 April the paper announced that the concert was now to be held on 6 May. On that day, however, the above notice appeared postponing the concert yet again to the following evening, with the venue now the Old Court House. The paper noted approvingly:

> Mr. Miller’s grand Concert is announced for to-morrow evening, and if we may be allowed to judge by the bill of fare published this morning, we may safely aver that it promises to be a most capital performance. The lovers of harmony in this settlement, have ever been known to stand forth in the encouragement of merit; and we hope, and believe, that on this occasion we shall experience another instance of similar liberality.

Perhaps because of the confusion over the date, the attendance at the concert was low, as the *Chronicle* reported on 13 May: “The concert on Thursday last was much more thinly attended than was generally expected; and it is said that Mr. Miller has lost considerably by the evening’s performance.” After a failed business deal, Miller returned to England in 1791. He initially resumed a performing career but eventually abandoned music as a “worldly snare” and became a Wesleyan minister.

There is no way of identifying the specific works on the program or the soloist for Mozart’s "sonata clavecin” from the little information provided. However, the sonata may have been played by Miller himself; according to his friend Thomas Tatham, soon after his arrival in India “Mr. Miller was introduced to an organ in some place of worship, where, through a display of his talent upon that instrument, he was brought into notice among some of the higher circles; and, as a consequence, he became a celebrated instructor of music amongst the first ranks of society” (Dixon 1842, 17). The identity of the two “bands” that Miller hired for the concert is uncertain, but one may be the “Calcutta Band”, an orchestra said to have been formed in the second half of the 1780s (Head 1985, 551).

This concert is a very early instance of Mozart’s music in performance outside Europe, following closely from the first known American Mozart performance in Philadelphia in December 1786. The “Old Court House” in Calcutta was used for public gatherings and entertainments; it was demolished in 1792 and the site is occupied by what is now the Roman Catholic Church of the Lord Jesus.

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