NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2023

Joshua Bell Leads the New Jersey Symphony

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Mendelssohn: Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 21

This amazing overture, composed when Mendelssohn was only 17, ranks with his beloved Octet as a stunning masterpiece from a young genius. His first ideas for it occurred on a mild August night when he was outside his family's Berlin garden gazing at stars. Years later, he told the English composer William Sterndale Bennett, "That night I encountered Shakespeare in the garden!" The overture captures the gossamer magic of Shakespeare's comedy, along with its bumptious humor. Although the movement is in sonata form, we are more conscious of Shakespearean subplots than we are of first and second themes, development and recapitulation. The Overture's success derives from atmospheric rather than specifically narrative means. Mendelssohn's incomparably light touch is absolutely perfect for this music.

Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64

In contrast to the early *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture, the Violin Concerto is a work from Mendelssohn's maturity. He sought to compose a violin concerto that would display his friend Ferdinand David's virtuosity and please listeners. Departing boldly from standard concerto form, he succeeded splendidly. The linking of its movements without pause, the unusual placement of the cadenza, and the psychological progression all brand the Violin Concerto as a work of genius. Its delicious melodies have made this concerto "the heart's jewel" among German violin concerti.

Beethoven: Symphony No. 4 in B-flat major, Op. 60

Beethoven's Fourth Symphony has little of the *angst* that pervades some of his other large works. Instead, the B-flat symphony shows us Beethoven's wit and artistry: a mature composer at the height of his powers, but with a twinkle in his eye. His mysterious, hypnotic slow introduction initially baffled audiences in 1806 – but they surely recognized Beethoven's signature style in the symphony's sudden contrasts and masterful woodwind writing. Delectable details abound, such as the teasing games the violins play with the winds in the

trio section of the scherzo. Listen for a whirlwind-fast bassoon solo in Beethoven's joyous finale.

Mendelssohn: Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 21

Felix Mendelssohn
Born: February 3, 1809, in Hamburg, Germany
Died: November 4, 1847, in Leipzig, Germany
Composed: 1826
World Premiere: February 20, 1827 in Stettin, Germany; Karl Loewe conducted
Duration: 12 minutes
Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, ophicleide or bass tuba, timpani and strings

The genesis of Mendelssohn's beloved Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a tale almost as appealing as Shakespeare's play. On a balmy August night in 1826, the Mendelssohn family was entertaining Johann Franz Encke, an astronomer who directed the Berlin Observatory. After dinner, Felix excused himself after dinner for a walk in the garden, to gaze at the stars that had been the primary topic of conversation during the meal. His attention was diverted by the gossamer activity of the summer night. Floral fragrances wafted through the air on gentle breezes. Four such zephyrs are said to have been the origins of the woodwind chords that open and close the overture. The feather-light string figuration taken up by both violin sections is Felix's musical impression of fireflies flickering at nightfall. Years later, he told the English composer William Sterndale Bennett, "That night I encountered Shakespeare in the garden!"

Affinity for the Bard of Avon

Felix had read Shakespeare in German translation and revered him as "the most perfect poet who ever lived." His original intent was to express the spirit of Shakespeare's immortal comedy in a single concert movement. He was only 17 when he composed this flawless overture. The rest of his incidental music did not follow until 1843. Then, at the ripe old age of 34, he decided to expand the overture's themes into a full complement of music to accompany a staged performance of the play.

A new genre: the concert overture

The overture is a fine example of sonata form, consistent with Mendelssohn's penchant for the ideals of the eighteenth century. He controlled the formal apparatus effortlessly. We are more conscious of Shakespearean subplots than we are of first and second themes, development and recapitulation. Robert Schumann considered that, with this work, Mendelssohn had invented a new genre: the programmatic concert-overture. Yet the movement's success derives from atmospheric rather than specifically narrative means.

Mendelssohn's incomparably light touch is absolutely perfect for this music. A lifelong master of the scherzo, he incorporated all the best characteristics of his style into this glorious overture. We have the mysterious, elfin, faerie world of Titania, Oberon, and their minions Puck, Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed. The boisterous good nature of Bottom, Flute, Snout and their cohorts also finds its place in the score, including

the braying of the ass. Nor does Mendelssohn ignore the ultimately noble sentiments of the Athenian nobles, Lysander, Hermia, Demetrius and Helena. Above all, both magic and humor shine forth, happily joined in this miraculous Overture.

Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64

Felix Mendelssohn
Born: February 3, 1809, in Hamburg, Germany
Died: November 4, 1847, in Leipzig, Germany
Composed: 1844; revised in 1850
World Premiere: March 13, 1845, in Leipzig. Ferdinand David was the soloist; the Danish composer Niels Gade conducted the Gewandhaus Orchestra.
Duration: 26 minutes
Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, solo violin and strings

Early in 1856, Johannes Brahms wrote to Clara Schumann from Düsseldorf, while on a concert tour with the violinist Joseph Joachim. Brahms was then twenty-three, and Clara's husband Robert was confined to a mental asylum in Endenich, near Bonn. Schumann had but five months to live. Schumann's contemporary Felix Mendelssohn had been dead for more than eight years and Felix's beloved sister Fanny nearly nine. Brahms and Joachim paid a courtesy call on Mendelssohn's younger sister Rebekah, who was married to Gustav Pieter Lejeune Dirichlet, a prominent German mathematician. Brahms reported to Clara:

> The evening after the concert in Göttingen, we were all at Dirichlet's. I most reluctantly, for I have a veritable dread of all cliquish ways. Joachim naturally played the Mendelssohn Concerto, during which the woman cried a lot. All rooms are hung full of pictures and sculptures of the brother. Even a drawing of him dying was hung there, and it was her brother, after all . . . . I played the Chromatic Fantasy [of Bach], 'which Felix also liked to play so much' and the [Wanderer] Fantasy by Schubert which she did not know and also did not seem to interest her all too much.

It must have been difficult to be the surviving sister of a young genius who died, like Mozart, in his thirties. Rebekah Mendelssohn Dirichlet's devotion to her brother's memory and music was certainly understandable. At the time, it was widely shared by the general public. In Germany and England, Mendelssohn's music remained especially popular. Joachim, at age twenty-five, clearly had the Violin Concerto in his repertoire and at the ready for this type of impromptu performance. He continued to play the Mendelssohn in public throughout his career, calling it "the heart's jewel" among German violin concertos.

From the year 1835, Felix Mendelssohn planned to compose a violin concerto for Ferdinand David, a Hamburg-born violinist who had studied with Louis Spohr. Mendelssohn and David met in the late 1820s and played chamber music together. By the time David became leader (we would call it concertmaster) of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in 1836, they were close friends and associates. The demands caused by Mendelssohn's growing fame, however, particularly his extensive conducting obligations, forced him to

postpone the concerto project for almost ten years. He completed most of the work on the concerto during the second half of 1844.

It is apparent from surviving correspondence that the composer relied heavily on David's advice. The sketches show extensive revisions to the work. Mendelssohn's letter to David dated December 17, 1844 reveals a great deal about their collaboration:

> Today I must ask you a favor. I have sent the score of the violin concerto to Breitkopf and Haertel and I have lately made several alterations in it with pencil, which can be copied into the parts. I have changed a number of things in the solo part, too, and I hope they are improvements. But I would particularly like to have your opinion about all this before I give up the music irrevocably to the printer. First of all, do you agree with the alteration in the cadenza and its being lengthened in this way? I like it far better, but is the part now written correctly and smoothly? . . . Do not laugh at me too much, I feel ashamed in any case, but I cannot help it; I am just groping around . . . . Thank God that the fellow is through with his concerto! you will say. Excuse my bothering you, but what can I do?

How surprising to find so much anxiety and self-doubt in the composer of such a self-assured composition!

Some critics have castigated Mendelssohn for an alleged flagging of inspiration in his mature works. Certainly that is not the case in the violin concerto. Melodically it is a triumph, overflowing with delicious ideas, all splendidly violinistic and ingeniously developed. In its form, Mendelssohn's concerto was a trendsetter for the balance of the nineteenth century. Foregoing the customary orchestral exposition, he plunges his soloist directly into the fray in the opening measures. Another break from tradition is the unusual -- and unprecedented -- placement of the cadenza at the end of the development section, instead of just before the end of the first movement.

A single bassoon note connects the first movement to the Andante, defusing the agitation and drama of the opening. Emotionally, this rapid transition demands a great deal from both soloist and orchestra. As a unifying device it is the essence of simplicity, and it works. No less satisfying are the latter two movements, seamlessly bound by a glorious transitional passage that eases us into the joyous finale. Before we have even noticed that we have changed key, tempo, and mood, the exuberance of the finale sweeps us up into a maelstrom of irrepressible energy. It is exceptionally difficult not to smile during this movement, one of Mendelssohn's greatest strokes of genius.

Beethoven: Symphony No. 4 in B-flat major, Op. 60

Ludwig van Beethoven
Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany
Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria
Composed: Summer and autumn of 1806
World Premiere: March 1807, in a private performance at the Vienna palace of Prince Lobkowitz

Duration: 34 minutes
Instrumentation: flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings

Slender maiden

Robert Schumann famously referred to the B-flat symphony as “a slender Greek maiden between two Norse giants.” The colossuses he referred to are Beethoven’s Third (“Eroica”) and Fifth Symphonies, which were among Beethoven’s most frequently played orchestral works in Schumann’s day, as they remain today.

Schumann’s “slender Greek maiden” comment should not mislead listeners to anticipate a work lacking in fire or passion. The Fourth symphony is relatively free of the conflict and tortured purpose that dominate the symphonies that preceded and followed it. Composed in 1806, it shares an overall aura of serenity with other major compositions Beethoven completed that year: the Fourth Piano Concerto, Op. 58 and the Violin Concerto, Op. 61. Those two masterworks are a better framework in which to consider the Fourth Symphony.

About the music

Beethoven prepares us for a serious, weighty experience with his expectant slow introduction to the first movement. We anticipate minor mode, but he fools us, launching into a lighthearted Allegro full of delicacy and verve. Syncopation and canon play a major role in this exuberant opener. In the slow movement, an Adagio in E-flat major, Beethoven spins a gloriously long theme out of primarily stepwise motion, adding rhythmic and textural interest through the underlying accompaniment and in the bridge passages. He adds drama with unexpected use of the timpani, so often silent in slow movements.

Cat-and-mouse chases between woodwinds and strings characterize the Scherzo, in which a mischievous, unlikely melodic figure derives from an arpeggiated diminished seventh chord. The intervening trio provides some delightful solo woodwind opportunities. Flute, oboe, clarinet and bassoon each have additional occasions to shine in the finale. Here, Beethoven celebrates his classical heritage with Haydn-esque humor, plus a dash of Beethovenian practical joking thrown in for spice.

Beethoven worked on the Fourth Symphony during summer 1806, completing it in the autumn. In early February 1807, he sold it to Count Franz von Oppersdorf for six months’ private use. Beethoven gave two concerts in the home of either Prince Lichnowsky or Prince Lobkowitz in March, and scholars believe the symphony received its first performance at one of those concerts.

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