NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2026

Joshua Bell Leads Mendelssohn's "Italian"

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Ludwig van Beethoven: *Egmont* Overture, Op. 84

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) was the most important figure in German literary romanticism. He was also Beethoven's favorite writer. When, in 1809, the director of Vienna's Burgtheater announced the revival of Goethe's *Egmont* with new incidental music, Beethoven was keen to secure the commission. He responded with nine short movements preceded by a splendid overture.

Egmont takes place during the 16th-century Counter-Reformation when the Low Countries were under Spanish Habsburg rule. Count Egmont perceives that the Netherlands will revolt and eventually free itself from Spanish domination. Though his courageous stand costs him his life, his spirit endures to help his people to overthrow their despotic rulers. *Egmont*'s message was fully in keeping with Beethoven's political and intellectual stance.

Egmont's dark, dramatic music is fraught with the destiny of its hero. The opening chords symbolize fate; the flowing string theme of the *Allegro* has a surging forward momentum that carries us with the drama; and the bright coda in F major represents victory over the political oppressors. Such emphasis on programmatic content was innovative and is particularly unusual in Beethoven. It demonstrates a heady romantic streak that comes as a thought-provoking surprise so early in the century.

Camille Saint-Saëns: Violin Concerto No. 3 in B Minor, Op. 61

Camille Saint-Saëns was France's greatest champion of the concerto, and the only Frenchman to excel in the genre during the romantic era. In addition to 10 concertos, he wrote many smaller concerted works, including the beloved Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso (1863) for violin and orchestra. All his mature violin music was written for the Spanish virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate, an elegant player with an astonishing gift for mastering the most challenging difficulties of execution virtually at sight. Saint-Saëns dedicated the Third Concerto to his Spanish friend.

Opus 61 is the most conventional of Saint-Saëns' violin concertos, with both outer movements in sonata form. Violin enters almost immediately. Saint-Saëns dispenses with any orchestral prelude; nor is there any first-movement unaccompanied solo cadenza. The soloist does, however, have ample opportunity to show off. The slow movement is elegant salon music: a gently rocking barcarolle, with pleasant dialogue between the violin and the upper woodwinds.

Saint-Saëns's finale opens with a passage influenced by French and Italian opera style. After a quotation from the first movement, we hear a snappy march with more than a hint of Spanish Gypsy flavor. The second theme, triumphant and noble, has often been compared to Wagner's *Lohengrin*. It occurs first as a string chorale, then returns in the brass. Saint-Saëns proves in this concerto that he was an expert musical entertainer, as well as a skilled composer.

Felix Mendelssohn: Symphony No. 4 in A Major, Op. 90, "Italian"

Writing to his sisters from Italy in 1831, 22-year-old Felix Mendelssohn described his new symphony as "the liveliest thing I have yet done, especially the last movement." From the opening woodwind chirping and the lilt of the first string theme, this symphony sweeps us willingly along in its joyous burble, a mountain brook with gleaming sunlight dappling in endless variety upon its surface.

Mendelssohn's brilliant orchestration illustrates aspects of Italian culture with consummate skill. In particular, his slow movement, because of its walking bass, has been variously likened to a procession of pilgrims such as he would have seen on the roads around Naples, or perhaps a group of monks methodically going about their tasks on foot. The third movement is surely one of the most melodious creations in all the romantic literature and scored with exquisite delicacy; the trio section, with its hunting motif for horns and bassoons, recalls the magical world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The finale is a saltarello, an energetic Italian dance with medieval origins that remained popular in the 19th century. Mendelssohn surprises us by setting it in minor mode. That imaginative stroke is one of the traits that sets this beloved symphony among the masterworks.

Ludwig van Beethoven: *Egmont* Overture, Op. 84

Ludwig van Beethoven
Born: December 16, 1770 in Bonn, Germany
Died: March 26, 1827 in Vienna, Austria
Composed: October 1809–June 1810
World Premiere: June 15, 1810 at the Imperial Court Theatre, Vienna
Duration: 9 minutes
Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, snare drum, and strings

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) was the most important figure in German literary romanticism. He was also Beethoven's favorite writer. Beethoven was well acquainted with Goethe's work, having read both *Faust* and his poetry as a youth in Bonn. He set several of Goethe's poems as songs. Thus in 1809, when the director of Vienna's Burgtheater decided to stage revivals of Goethe's *Egmont* and Friedrich Schiller's *William Tell* with new incidental music for both plays, Beethoven was keen to secure the commission.

Beethoven identified strongly with the message of Goethe's drama and Schiller's *Tell*. His only opera, *Fidelio*,

shares some of both plays' themes, including the perils of political intrigue, nascent nationalism, and liberation from tyranny. But his Viennese colleague Adalbert Gyrowetz was assigned the *Tell* music (which preceded Rossini's opera by two decades). Thus it fell to Beethoven to compose nearly 40 minutes of music for *Egmont*, a drama that was deemed unsuitable for music. Beethoven, of course, proved that opinion wrong.

Historical resonance

Egmont takes place during the 16th-century Counter-Reformation when the Low Countries were under Spanish Habsburg rule. The hero, Count Egmont, perceives that the Netherlands will revolt and eventually free itself from Spanish domination, but his own courageous stand costs him his life. He is executed by the Hapsburg Duke of Alva. His spirit endures to help his people to overthrow the despotic ruler. *Egmont*'s message was fully in keeping with Beethoven's political and intellectual stance. Specifically, it was consistent with his aversion to the Napoleonic juggernaut.

Destiny and drama in nine minutes

His Overture to *Egmont* is a pinnacle of his middle period and a superb example of Beethoven's "heroic" style, much in the same way that both the Fifth Symphony and the "Emperor" Concerto exemplify this rich period in Beethoven's career. He composed the incidental music to *Egmont* on the heels of the "Emperor" Concerto. It preceded the powerful *Quartetto Serioso*, Op. 95, whose dark tonality of F minor it shares. In essence, the overture is a microcosm of Goethe's drama. Formally, it comprises a slow introduction to a sonata-allegro movement; however, Beethoven adjusts sonata form to accommodate aspects of the underlying story.

Beethoven's dark, dramatic music is fraught with the destiny of its hero. The opening chords symbolize fate; the flowing string theme of the *Allegro* has a surging forward momentum that carries us with the drama; and the bright coda in F major represents victory over the political oppressors. Such emphasis on programmatic content was fairly new in 1809 and is particularly unusual in Beethoven. In that sense, it demonstrates a heady romantic streak in Beethoven that comes as a thought-provoking surprise so early in the century.

Camille Saint-Saëns: Violin Concerto No. 3 in B Minor, Op. 61

Camille Saint-Saëns
Born: October 9, 1835 in Paris, France
Died: December 16, 1921 in Algiers, Algeria
Composed: 1880
World Premiere: January 2, 1881 in Paris
Duration: 29 minutes
Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, three trombones, timpani, solo violin, and strings

Symphonic master in a land of opera worshippers

For most of the 19th century, France was Europe's musical capital, and the highest temple of music was the Paris Opéra. Composers from all over Europe sought to have their operas produced in Paris, and French composers looked upon opera as the ultimate accomplishment. Instrumental music received comparatively short shrift in France. The most notable exception was Camille Saint-Saëns, who achieved brilliant success in both opera and instrumental music. He was France's greatest champion of the concerto form, and the only Frenchman to excel in

the genre during the romantic era.

Saint-Saëns composed 10 solo concertos plus many other concerted works, the most famous of which are the Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso (1863) and *Havanaise* (1887), both for violin and orchestra. The B-minor concerto on this program, like all Saint-Saëns' mature violin music, was written for the great Spanish virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate. By all accounts, Sarasate was an elegant violinist with an almost incredible gift for mastering the most challenging difficulties of execution virtually at sight. He played the first performance with the composer in a violin/piano reduction at one of Saint-Saëns' Monday evening soirées in 1880. The public premiere with orchestra followed on New Year's 1881. The composer dedicated the Third Concerto to his Spanish friend.

Mixing convention with innovation

Opus 61 is the most conventional of Saint-Saëns' three violin concertos, with both outer movements in sonata form and a slow movement in A-B-A song form. That stated, it has a number of unusual features. The soloist enters almost immediately with an emphatic and chromatic melody that eventually provides the foundation for elaborate passage work. This immediate entry has precedent in the Mendelssohn concerto, but it is worth noting that Saint-Saëns chose to abandon any orchestral prelude. Similarly, he wrote no first-movement cadenza, although he affords the soloist ample opportunity to show off with rapid scales, arpeggios, and complex passage work.

The slow movement is a lovely barcarolle in the remote key of B-flat major. The soloist engages in pleasant dialogue with the upper woodwinds in elegant salon music. A brief cadenza-like passage for violin precedes the coda.

Saint-Saëns' finale is the most interesting movement of the three. It opens with a passage of accompanied recitative that shows how well the composer understood French and Italian operatic style. The music re-introduces material from the first movement, serving as an introductory bridge to the body of the movement: a snappy march in B minor with more than a hint of Spanish Gypsy flavor. The second theme, triumphant and noble, has often been compared to music from Wagner's *Lohengrin*, and Saint-Saëns is an exception among French composers in that he did not reject Wagnerism altogether, but actually admired the German master. The *Lohengrin*-like theme occurs first as a string chorale, then returns in the brass. Saint-Saëns proves in this concerto that he was not only an expert musical entertainer, but also a skilled classicist in form and technique.

Origins of a unique name

The surname Saint-Saëns is surely one of the most problematic in all music. The family name dates to pre-medieval times, probably the sixth century A.D., and is a contraction and corruption of Sanctus Sidonius, Latin for St. Sidonius.

A native of Lyon, Apollinaris Sidonius (full name Caius Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius) lived from 430 to *ca.* 489 A.D. After serving as Senator and Roman Prefect in the Imperial Capital, he retired to Gaul. Eventually, he became a respected bishop in Clermont and sustained a reputation as a classical scholar, orator, and poet. Apollinaris Sidonius remains an important example of late Roman Christianized classical culture. His unsuccessful leadership of the French against the invading Goths led to his subsequent canonization by the Catholic Church.

In the name's modern guise, all three S's are pronounced, and the 'Saint' takes the French pronunciation, with the 't' silent and the compound vowel more like "can't" than "ain't." A rough approximation is "Sanh-Sahnz." (Maybe it's easier to write it!) And Camille, for the record, is a unisex name in France.

Fortunately, Saint-Saëns' music is much easier to listen to than his name is to spell or pronounce.

Felix Mendelssohn: Symphony No. 4 in A Major, Op. 90, "Italian"

Felix Mendelssohn
Born: February 3, 1809 in Hamburg, Germany
Died: November 4, 1847 in Leipzig, Germany
Composed: 1830–1833
World Premiere: May 13, 1833 in London; the composer conducted the Philharmonic Society
Duration: 27 minutes
Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, timpani, and strings

Writing to his sisters from Italy in 1831, 22-year-old Felix Mendelssohn described his new symphony as "the liveliest thing I have yet done, especially the last movement." Ironically, the last movement that so pleased him in the "Italian" Symphony's early stages proved to be a stumbling block. Mendelssohn was never entirely satisfied with the finale to his Fourth Symphony and withheld the work from publication during his lifetime. How difficult for 21st-century listeners to understand, as perfect a jewel as this beloved symphony seems! From the opening woodwind chirping and the lilt of the first string theme, the "Italian" Symphony sweeps us willingly along in its joyous burble, a mountain brook with gleaming sunlight dappling in endless variety upon its surface.

Italian culture delivered with German technique
Brilliantly orchestrated, the "Italian" Symphony is the work of a master. It hardly seems possible that a young man in his early twenties could have composed it. So closely knit are its four movements that it almost seems unjust to single any of them out. But Mendelssohn, the classicist who also successfully embraced the romantic concept of program music, captured several aspects of Italian culture with consummate skill.

A procession of priests, a gorgeous melody, and a brisk Italian dance
In particular, his slow movement, because of its walking bass, has been variously likened to a procession of pilgrims such as he would have seen on the roads around Naples, or perhaps a group of monks methodically going about their tasks on foot. If less explicitly pictorial, the third movement is surely one of the most melodious creations in all the romantic literature and scored with exquisite delicacy; the trio section, with its hunting motif for horns and bassoons, recalls the magical world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The finale that so frustrated Mendelssohn is a saltarello. This energetic and lively Italian dance originated in medieval times but remained popular well into the 19th century. Mendelssohn vividly captures the dance's energy; his genius lies in setting it in minor mode. That imaginative stroke is one of the traits that sets this beloved symphony among the masterworks.