

CMS

THE CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER

Notes on the Program

Felix Mendelssohn

Born February 3, 1809 in Hamburg

Died November 4, 1847 in Leipzig

Concertpiece No. 2 for Clarinet, Bass Horn, and Piano, Op. 114

Composed in 1832.

Felix Mendelssohn first met Carl Maria von Weber in May 1821, when Weber descended on Berlin to oversee the premiere of his Romantic opera *Der Freischütz*. Weber was 35; Mendelssohn was 12. Julius Benedict, a pupil of Weber who was assisting with preparations for the opera, vividly recalled in later years seeing “that beautiful youth, with his auburn hair clustering in ringlets round his shoulders, the look of his brilliant clear eyes, and the smile of innocence and candor on his lips.” Benedict went on to record in his memoirs that during their stay Mendelssohn finished a C minor Piano Quartet, which was published as his Opus 1. From his earliest years, Mendelssohn had no shyness about making friendships with the most important people of the day (he enraptured Goethe, then the most revered man in Germany, when they first met later in 1821), and he learned all he could about and from Weber during his Berlin sojourn. It was probably at that time that Mendelssohn first heard of Heinrich Bärmann, the great clarinet virtuoso with the Munich court orchestra for whom Weber had composed two fine concertos and a concertino ten years before. Bärmann was born in Potsdam in 1784, trained at the School of Military Music there, and served in the band of the Prussian Life Guards. He was captured by the French at Jena, escaped, and made his way to Munich, where he obtained a post as a court musician. He later toured through England, France, Italy and Russia, and won wide fame as one of the outstanding clarinet virtuosos of his day. Mendelssohn corresponded with Bärmann, and wrote a Clarinet Sonata for him around 1825.

In September 1831 Mendelssohn arrived in Munich as one stop on his two-year grand tour of Europe. There he composed and premiered his G minor Piano Concerto, and also visited with Heinrich Bärmann and his two clarinet-playing sons, Carl and Heinrich Jr. In October Mendelssohn made an arrangement of Beethoven’s String Quartet in F, Op. 18, No. 1 for two clarinets, bass horn, and bassoon for a musical party at the Bärmanns, and it succeeded so well that he was inspired to write two original *Concertpieces* for clarinet, bass horn, and piano for Heinrich Sr. and Carl the next year, published posthumously as Op. 113 (F minor) and Op. 114 (D minor). Both works are disposed in three movements (fast-slow-fast) and require a masterly technique that serves as testimony to the highly developed skills of the Bärmanns. The opening *Presto* of the *Concertpiece No. 2* is the most dramatic movement in either work; the *Andante* is animated by an incessant, wide-ranging broken-chord accompaniment; and the closing movement is a scintillating showpiece for the paired clarinets.

Quintet No. 2 for Two Violins, Two Violas, and Cello in B-flat major, Op. 87

Trio No. 2 for Piano, Violin, and Cello in C minor, Op. 66

Composed in 1845.

Mendelssohn was almost certainly the most successful musician of the 19th century. His career showed none of the reverses, disappointments, and delays that were the rule for the other great Romantic composers; indeed, it was precisely the overwork and exhaustion to meet the demands for his presence, his performances, and his compositions that led to his untimely death at the age of 38. The most intensely busy time of his life was ushered in by his appointment in 1835 as the administrator, music director, and conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts. In very short order, he raised the quality of musical life in Leipzig to equal that of any city in Europe, and in 1842, he founded the local Conservatory to maintain his standards of excellence. (The school was to be the most highly regarded institution of its kind in the world for the next half century.) In 1841, he was named director of the Music Section of the Academy of Arts in Berlin, a cultural venture newly instituted by King Frederick William IV of Prussia, which required him not only to supervise and conduct a wide variety of programs but also to compose upon royal demand — the incidental music which complements his dazzling 1826 *A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* was sparked by one of Frederick's requests. Mendelssohn toured, guest conducted, and composed incessantly, and on March 28, 1837, took on the additional responsibilities of family life when he married Cécile Jeanrenaud. "A conscientious chronicle of Mendelssohn's next few years would merely weary the reader," noted the late George Marek in his fine biography of the composer. "It would link work with more work, string success after success, place tribute next to tribute, and enumerate an ever larger register of acquaintances and friends."

Mendelssohn won a tiny hiatus from the press of his accumulating duties when he took a leave of absence from his post at the Gewandhaus during the 1844-1845 season. His friend Niels Gade, the Danish composer and conductor who is generally acknowledged as the founder of the modern school of Scandinavian composition, was engaged as his replacement. Before his sabbatical began, however, Mendelssohn had to fulfill a commitment to conduct the London Philharmonic Society Orchestra in a series of concerts during the late spring of 1844. He arrived in England in May, and proposed to perform there Schubert's C major Symphony (No. 9, "The Great"), which he had given its premiere at the Gewandhaus five years before, but the players derided the lengthy and difficult finale so uproariously that he withdrew the work, and refused to serve up his own popular *Ruy Blas Overture* to the London audiences as recompense. The rest of his English engagement, however, created the spectacular success that marked each of his other eight visits to that country: he conducted Beethoven's Violin Concerto with Joachim as soloist, presented the whole of his recent *Midsummer Night's Dream* music, served as soloist in his own G major Piano Concerto, and participated in endless rounds of social engagements and chamber music soirées. Mendelssohn returned to Germany in July to conduct a music festival in Zweibrücken. The balance of the summer was spent in rest and composition at his home in Frankfurt, his main project at that time being the completion of his long-gestating Violin Concerto for the concertmaster of the Gewandhaus Orchestra, Ferdinand David. He fulfilled some obligations in Berlin during the autumn, most notably a performance of his oratorio *St. Paul* given on the order of King Frederick, and then announced that he was cutting back significantly on his duties at the Academy. By the beginning of 1845, he had finally managed to clear his schedule sufficiently to devote himself to composition, and he made significant progress on his oratorio *Elijah*, scheduled for its premiere at the Birmingham Festival the following year, and completed the String Quintet in B-flat major (Op. 87) and the C minor Piano Trio (Op. 66). In the autumn, the King of Saxony convinced him to return to his post at the Gewandhaus. His frantic pace of life was reactivated; he was dead within two years. Except for the F minor String Quartet (Op. 80), the Trio and Quintet of 1845 were the last important chamber works of Mendelssohn's career.

The B-flat major Quintet, composed at Bad Soden during the summer of 1845, followed by almost two decades Mendelssohn's only other specimen of the form (Op. 18, in A major), written at the same time as the *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* in 1826, when he was just seventeen. The outer movements attempt to maintain a sunny prospect, but their moods are darkened throughout by extensive chromaticism and anxious rhythmic figurations. The

haunted *Scherzando* and the longing *Adagio*, both in minor keys, maintain the unsettled emotions of the Quintet through the middle movements. The main theme of the opening *Allegro*, composed mostly of broken triadic gestures, is initiated by the first violin above a tremulous accompaniment in the lower strings. The complementary subject, consisting of a smooth falling phrase and a little turn figure, is first given softly in close harmonies by the violins and first viola. The development section examines both themes at some length before leading to the recapitulation, which begins with the heightened recall of the opening triadic motive. The second movement serves as the Quintet's scherzo, though it is not one of those elfin creations in tripping rhythms of which Mendelssohn was the unparalleled master, but rather a sedate, precisely etched essay in moderate tempo, the sort of intermezzo which Brahms was fond of using for the same formal purpose in his large works. The *Adagio*, structured in two large stanzas with the second being an elaboration of the first, plumbs the deepest emotions of the Quintet, though it turns to a brighter major key for its serene closing measures. The bustling finale is a sonata form based on a dashing main theme presented at the outset by the violin and an arching second theme first entrusted to the violas in tandem.

* * *

The Piano Trio No. 2 was dedicated to Louis Spohr, the renowned violinist and conductor who, around 1820, was among the first maestros to threaten orchestral musicians from the podium with a pointed wooden stick rather than a violin bow or a bare hand. Mendelssohn, who had been a friend since meeting Spohr as a teenager in Berlin, followed this extraordinary practice, and wielded the revolutionary baton for his epochal revival of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829 and in all of his concerts thereafter. Something of Spohr's sturdy Classical Romanticism is heard in the Trio. In his study of the chamber music, John Horton noted of the work's opening movement, "Mendelssohn never wrote a stronger sonata-form allegro." The urgent, rising and falling phrases of the main theme, announced by the piano, generate a subsequent arch-shaped melody for the violin, which is given above the keyboard's restless accompaniment. A sweeping subject sung in duet by violin and cello in a brighter tonality serves as the second theme. These motives are elaborated with immense skill and deep emotion as the movement unfolds to create a powerful utterance in which some commentators have detected the influence of Beethoven's tempestuous *Coriolan Overture*.

The following *Andante* is an extended *Lied* in which the piano often serves as interlocutor for the tandem flights of the strings. The movement is laid out in a smoothly flowing three-part form whose middle section is marked by a heightened animation and a sense of adventurous harmonic peregrination. The gossamer *Scherzo* is musical featherstitching such as has never been as well accomplished by any other composer — Mendelssohn is simply incomparable in evoking this elfin world of nocturnal wisps and fairy wonder. The finale is built from two contrasting thematic elements: a vivacious principal subject which is launched by a leaping interval from the cello, and a broad chorale melody introduced in a chordal setting by the piano. The main theme returns for a vigorous working-out before the chorale melody, traced by Eric Werner to the hymn *Vor Deinem Thron* ("Before Your Throne") from the *Geneva Psalter* of 1551, is summoned in a grand, nearly orchestral guise to cap this masterwork of Mendelssohn's fullest maturity.

Selections from Songs Without Words for Piano

Though Felix Mendelssohn was the great Classicist among the prominent early Romantic composers, he was not immune to the new modes of musical expression gaining currency during his time. Among the most important of those innovative genres was the character piece for piano, which Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, and a battalion of lesser lights made the platform for some of their most ardent and adventurous creative endeavors. Such flamboyance was not congenial to Mendelssohn, however, and his contributions to the literature of the character

piece were more elegant and emotionally restrained than those of his colleagues, the spiritual progeny of Beethoven's *Bagatelles* and Schubert's *Impromptus* rather than Schumann's *Carnaval* or Liszt's *Don Juan Fantasy*. About half of Mendelssohn's hundred or so character pieces were collected together in his eight volumes of *Songs Without Words*. Though, as Busoni, George Bernard Shaw, and others have observed, their elegant style and purity of line challenge the greatest of performers, the *Songs Without Words* were intended primarily for the 19th-century's burgeoning home music market for convivial rendition around the parlor piano. (It was then *de rigueur* for the daughter of every proper household in England and northern Europe to acquire sufficient piano skills to delight family and guests at a post-prandial entertainment.) Appropriately, several of the *Songs Without Words* were created as friendly musical missives — the very first was written in 1828 as a birthday present for Mendelssohn's beloved sister Fanny; one three years later celebrated the birth of her son, and another (the famous *Spring Song*) was presented as a thank-you gift to his host family on a visit to London in 1842. Every few years, Mendelssohn would gather up a half-dozen of these little blossoms of his genius and issue them to an eager market in his continuing series of *Songs Without Words*; six sets were published during his lifetime, two posthumously. The *Songs Without Words* were among the most widely known of Mendelssohn's works during the 19th century, and they were responsible in no small part for his great popularity, especially in England, where he reigned as Queen Victoria's favorite composer.

Mendelssohn seems to have been the first to call a piano piece a "Song Without Words," indicating both this music's small scale and its essential lyricism. He gave evocative titles to a few — *Venetian Gondola Song*, *Spinning Song*, *Duetto*, *Spring Song* — and later music lovers tacked on many more of less relevance, but he seems to have been wary of too much specificity in attaching words to music. When asked in 1812 by Marc André Souchay, a relative of his wife in Lübeck, about his opinion concerning the suggestive qualities of music, he sent a now-famous reply: "People usually complain that music is so ambiguous; that they are doubtful as to what they should think when they hear it, whereas everyone understands words. For me, it is just the reverse. It is the words that seem so ambiguous, so indefinite, so open to misunderstanding in comparison with real music, which fills one's soul with a thousand better things than words. To me, the music I love does not express thoughts too indefinite to be put into words, but too definite.... The word remains ambiguous; but in music, we understand each other perfectly."

Duetto, Op. 38, No. 6 (1837) is a warm melody suspended above a rippling background whose phrases are echoed between the piano's soprano and baritone ranges.

The ardent lyricism and expressive urgency of the Song in F-sharp minor, Op. 67, No. 2, suggest a Neapolitan folk song.

The melancholy *Venetian Gondola Song*, Op. 30, No. 6, is one of three barcarolles that Mendelssohn included in the *Songs Without Words*, souvenirs of his travels in Italy.

Op. 53, No. 2 in E-flat major is music of wistful longing through into expressive relief by an anxious central episode.

The untitled Op. 62, No. 1 (1844) is a quietly expressive reverie.

The untitled Op. 38, No. 2 in C minor has a sort of expressive urgency reminiscent of Schumann's early piano cycles.

The *Bee's Wedding*, Op. 67, No. 4 of 1845 (a Victorian accretion; the composer's original title was *Spinning Song*) is one of Mendelssohn's inimitable gossamer scherzos.