Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809–1847)

Mendelssohn the symphonist

The Romantic and the Classical are finely balanced in Mendelssohn's music: not just because he lived in one of those transition al periods beloved of historians, but also because of his own artistic background and personality. A gifted water-colourist himself, and an engaging letter-writer, he had an acute sensitivity to visual and literary stimuli; like others of his time, he was particularly susceptible to dramatic scenery and its historical associations. And, more than any of his predecessors, he sought ways of expressing his response s to these stimuli in musical terms, most notably of course in his concert overtures, forerunners of Liszt's symphonic poems, but also in some of his symphonies. In the realm of musical form, he was a pioneer, like his older contemporaries Weber and Spohr, of methods of linking the movements of a work together into a continuous and cohesive whole: again, an approach which was to have a great deal of influence on later 19th-century music. But at the same time he was out of sympathy with much of the new music of his own day, and instinctively drawn to the Classical tradition of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven (who died when he was 18); and, through the influence of his principal teacher in his Berlin childhood, Zelter, he also developed a passionate interest which was most unusual for his time in the music of earlier periods, above all that of Bach. As for the emphasis on self-expression which is the touchstone of Romanticism, we know that Mendelssohn abhorred the vehemence of that arch-Romantic Berlioz both in his person and in his music, and we may be confident that he could never have written a semi-autobiographical *Symphonie Fantastique*. All the same, it is clear from the accounts of his family and friends that he had a much more volatile temperament than the image of bland saintliness fostered by the Victorians would suggest; and if deep emotion rarely finds overt expression in his music, then there are many hints that it lies only just below the surface.

Symphony no. 1 in C minor, op. 11

1. Allegro molto
2. Andante
3. Menuetto. Allegro molto
4. Allegro con fuoco

Mendelssohn served his apprenticeship as a symphonist at a remarkably early age, in the series of twelve Symphonies (and one isolated movement) for string orchestra which he composed between the ages of 12 and 14: astonishingly assured works in their brilliant string writing, and especially – the Bach influence already making itself felt – their confident mastery of counterpoint. The successor to these pieces was a Symphony in C minor for full orchestra which Mendelssohn composed in 1824, when he was 15: on the manuscript he called it "Sinfonia Nr. XIII", but when he published it in 1834 it was as *symphony no. 1*. The young composer's command of instrumental technique is here extended with apparent ease to the wind section, and his contrapuntal skill is demonstrated in such passages as the forceful development section of the finale. There are, hardly surprisingly, many echoes of other composers: Beethoven and Weber in the first Allegro; Spohr in the chromatic harmonies and easy modulations to distant keys of the E flat major Andante; above all, in the main themes of the outer movements and the principal section of the Minuet, the Mozart of the great G minor Symphony. There are one or two experiments which perhaps fail to come off: the long, static melody which floats on top of the harmonies in the Trio of the Minuet (a Schubertian effect, though Schubert's orchestral music

would not have been known at this time); or the stretch of pure accompaniment which precedes the clarinet's second subject in the finale. But there are also moments, like the perfectly turned cadential phrases for the woodwind near the beginning of the first movement, which sound totally characteristic of Mendelssohn at any age, and which make listening to this Symphony a fascinating experience for admirers of his mature works.

Symphony no. 3 in A minor, op. 56 "Scottish"

1. Andante con moto – Allegro un poco agitato
2. Vivace non troppo
3. Adagio
4. Allegro vivacissimo – Allegro maestoso assai

Earlier on his Scottish trip, Mendelssohn had visited Holyrood House in Edinburgh. In a letter to his family, he described "the palace where Queen Mary lived and loved", and continued: "The chapel beside it has now lost its roof. It is overgrown with grass and ivy, and at the broken altar Mary was crowned Queen of Scotland. Everything is ruined, decayed and open to the sky. I believe I have found there the beginning of my Scottish Symphony." The work thus conceived was to have an even longer gestation period than that of the *Hebrides* Overture: Mendelssohn worked on it in 1830 and '31, but only returned to it and completed it as his *symphony no. 3* in A minor in January 1842; it was published the following year with a dedication to Queen Victoria.

The Symphony makes no attempt at detailed narrative or tone-painting, but suggests the atmosphere of Scottish legend, with hints of tribal warfare, not only in the finale, which Mendelssohn described as an *Allegro guerriero*, but also in the sternly martial fanfares which interrupt the serene flow of the Adagio. Scottish influences have also been detected in some of the melodic material, in particular in the bubbling scherzo (which like the Scherzo of the Octet is a 2/4 movement, and a continuous one). Formally, the *Scottish* Symphony is Mendelssohn's most ambitious attempt at a continuous and integrated symphonic structure. The four movements are played without a break: the slow introduction to the first movement recurs briefly at the end of the movement to link it to the scherzo; and the slow movement begins with a passage which effects a transition from the key of the scherzo, F major, to its own key, A major. In addition, although there is no thoroughgoing Lisztian "transformation of themes", there is at least a family resemblance connecting some of the main ideas of the work: the brooding melody of the slow introduction (which is presumably the idea which came to Mendelssohn at Holyrood); the restless first theme of the subsequent Allegro; the oboe's second subject in the finale; and the restrained but affirmative melody of the major-key coda.

Symphony no. 5 in D major, op. 107 "Reformation"

1. Andante – Allegro con fuoco
2. Allegro vivace
3. Andante
4. Choral »Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott«. Andante con moto – Allegro maestoso

Mendelssohn composed his *symphony no. 5* in D major, the Reformation, in Berlin in 1829 and '30, after his return from his tour of Britain. It was intended to celebrate the tercentenary of the Diet of Augsburg of 1530, which established the central statement of faith of the Lutheran church, the Augsburg Confession; but it was not performed until 1832, and not published until after the composer's death. The choice of subject is an indication of Mendelssohn's devout Lutheran faith (although descended from a famous Jewish family, he had had a Christian baptism and upbringing); but that this was not a narrowly sectarian faith is emphasized by his use in the Symphony with equal reverence of the Catholic "Dresden Amen" (later used by Wagner in *Parsifal*) and Luther's own hymn

Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott. The "Dresden Amen" is first heard in the slow introduction; its unexpected return at the end of the development section of the stormy D minor Allegro, followed by the slow, hushed beginning of the recapitulation, is an effective moment, suggesting a peaceful interlude in the midst of a bitter religious struggle. The two middle movements are in the nature of interludes: the first is a lilting scherzo in B flat major, with an even more tuneful trio in G major; the second is a gentle "song without words" in G minor, scored only for strings, flutes and bassoons, until the last few bars, when additional instruments reinforce the sharp stab of a momentary reference back to the second subject of the first Allegro. This movement leads straight into a stark G major presentation of *Ein' feste Burg*; then a transitional passage in quick 6/8 time leads in turn in to the D major finale, which is both a sonata structure and a chorale fantasia on Luther's hymn, heard at first in various fragmentary forms, but stated with increasing clarity and confidence as the movement proceeds.

Symphony no. 4 in A major, op. 90 "Italian"

1. Allegro vivace
2. Andante con moto
3. Con moto moderato
4. Saltarello. Presto

In October 1830 Mendelssohn set out on a journey to Italy: the "land where the lemon trees blossom" of Goethe's poem, and the longed-for goal of so many German travellers. He visited Venice, where he was more interested in the paintings of Titian than in the canals and palaces; he travelled via Bologna and Florence to Rome, where he spent several months, and was able to observe in detail the ceremonies and music associated both with the coronation of a new Pope and with Holy Week; and he also visited Naples, Genoa and Milan before departing via Switzerland to Germany in July 1831. While in Italy, he began work on what was to become his *symphony no. 4* in A major, the *Italian*. He worked on it side by side with the *Scottish* Symphony, and not surprisingly there are many points of resemblance between the two works, both in a mixture of A major and A minor, and both with a high proportion of music in compound 6/8 and 12/8 rhythms; there is one particularly striking similarity between a major-key theme in the exposition of the first movement of the *Scottish* and the minor-key idea which dominates the development section of the first movement of the *Italian* – almost as if Mendelssohn had absent-mindedly chosen to develop an idea from the wrong piece! Of the two Symphonies, the *Italian* was the first to be completed, in time for performance in London in May 1833; but Mendelssohn with-held it from publication during his lifetime. Apparently he always meant to revise it further, especially the finale – hard though this is to believe of a work which seems to combine spontaneity of invention with perfection of craftsmanship as successfully as any in the entire symphonic repertoire. The four movements are, first, a springing Allegro, with among many other felicities a long, beautifully handled lead-back to an initially disguised recapitulation; then a trudging Andante in D minor which was surely suggested by all the religious processions Mendelssohn saw in Rome; a graceful minuet, with a trio and coda anticipating the woodland scenes of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* incidental music; and finally a fast and furious Saltarello, which unexpectedly remains in A minor right up to the end.

Symphony no. 2 in B flat major, op. 52 "Hymn of Praise"

1. Sinfonia
Maestoso con moto – Allegro – Maestoso con moto come I
Allegretto un poco agitato
Adagio religioso

2. Allegro moderato maestoso – Allegro di molto. »Alles, was Odem hat, lobe den Herrn«
Molto più moderato ma con fuoco. »Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele«

3. Recitativo. »Saget es, die ihr erlöset seid durch den Herrn"
Allegro moderato. »Er zählet unsre Tränen in der Zeit der Not«

4. Chor. A tempo moderato. »Sagt es, die ihr erlöset seid«

5. Andante. »Ich harrete des Herrn«

6. Allegro un poco agitato – Allegro assai agitato – Tempo I moderato.
»Stricke des Todes hatten uns umfangen«

7. Allegro maestoso e molto vivace. »Die Nacht ist vetgangen«

8. Choral. Andante con moto – Un poco più animato. »Nun danket alle Gott«

9. Andante sostenuto assai. »Drum sing' ich mit meinem Liede ewig dein Lob«

10. Allegro non troppo – Più vivace – Maestoso come I.
»Ihr Völker, bringet her dem Herrn Ehre und Macht«

It will be clear by now that the numbering of Mendelssohn's symphonies for full orchestra does not correspond to the order of their inception, completion or first performance: it is distorted by the long delay in the completion of the *Scottish* Symphony, and still more by the posthumous publication (in the wrong order) of the *Italian* and the *Reformation*. Thus it was that the last of Mendelssohn's symphonies to be conceived, and the last but one to be finished, the *Lobgesang* (*Hymn of Praise*), came to bear the sub-title *symphony no. 2*. It was composed for the celebrations in 1840 of the quatercentenary of the invention of printing. The first performance took place in Bach's church, St. Thomas's, Leipzig, as part of this Gutenberg Festival; soon afterwards there was another performance (in English) at the Birmingham Festival; and before the year was out there was a further Leipzig performance, given at the command of the King of Saxony, to whom the work was dedicated when it was published in 1841.

Mendelssohn actually called the *Lobgesang* a "Symphony-Cantata": it consists of a "Sinfonia" of three orchestral movements – introduction and Allegro in B flat major, lilting Allegretto in G minor, slow movement in D major – followed by a sequence of nine further vocal and choral movements to texts selected by the composer from the Bible, together with the hymn *Nun danket alle Gott*. On paper, this plan recalls Beethoven's "Choral" Symphony; but, quite apart from the difference between the humanistic assertion of Schiller's Ode to Joy and Mendelssohn's more conventional anthology of praise and rejoicing, the proportions of the two works are dissimilar: Mendelssohn's three orchestral movements amount to not much more than a third of the whole piece, in effect an extended prelude. One important formal feature of the *Lobgesang* (obscured to some extent on records) is that it is designed to be played without any breaks between sections, in a continuous span of roughly 70 minutes. The most significant cyclic element is the use made of the bold two-bar trombone theme of the introduction: after being incorporated into the argument of the ensuing Allegro, and also the middle section of the Allegretto, it reappears in the first choral section, and again at the very end of the work, in association with the words "Alles, was Odem hat, lobe den Herrn" – "All that hath breath praise the Lord". These and the other choral movements demonstrate once more Mendelssohn's fluent command of counterpoint, and there is a great deal of appealing melodic writing in the solo arias and in the soprano duet with chorus known in English as "I waited for the Lord". But the most striking passage in the work – added after the first two performances, reputedly after Mendelssohn had suffered a sleepless night – is the tenor's recitative, "Watchman, will the night soon pass?" The tension accumulated by the repeated question is released in the soprano's answering assertion "The

night has departed", which is then taken up by the orchestra and chorus to thrilling effect. Such moments as these won the *Lobgesang* great popularity in the 19th century, especially with British choral societies; but in recent years it has suffered almost complete neglect. This is undeserved: there is some fine music in the work, not least in the orchestral movements; and its almost accidental inclusion in the list of Mendelssohn's symphonies serves to remind us of the high proportion of religious music in his output, and by extension of the seriousness of purpose with which he always attempted to put his prodigious musical talents to the best possible use.

Overture to Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream", op. 21

Allegro di molto

Two years later, though, in 1826, Mendelssohn was to write another orchestral piece which did not merely show immense talent and promise, but was a work of undisputed genius, one which some writers have even suggested he was never to surpass: the Overture to *A midsummer night's dream*. Inspired by his readings of Shakespeare's play, in Schlegel's German translation, this was intended as a concert overture and not for the theatre – though 17 years later Mendelssohn was to add to it a set of incidental music which borrowed some of its themes and brilliantly recaptured its spirit. The Overture (which like the later Violin Concerto is in the keys of E minor and major) conjures up the three very different worlds in which the action of the play takes place: that of the fairies in the magical opening; that of the quartet of lovers in the warmly romantic second theme; that of the "rude mechanicals" in a third important idea, complete with an ass's bray for the "translated" Bottom. The fairies dominate the central development section, and, as in Shakespeare, have the last word.

Overture "The Hebrides" ("Fingal's Cave"), op. 26

Allegro moderato – Animato in tempo

Mendelssohn's visit to Great Britain in 1829 was his first. After several weeks in London, he and his friend Klingemann travelled to Scotland, where one of the famous beauty-spots on their itinerary was Fingal's Cave on the Hebridean island of Staffa. This was a magnet for tourists with a taste for the picturesque and the sublime, not only because of its dramatic setting but also as the reputed home of the ancient bard Ossian, the "translations" of whose poetry had become famous all over Europe. At Fingal's Cave, according to Mendelssohn's own account (or on the journey there, according to the evidence of his sketch-books), he conceived the idea and the opening theme of the great orchestral seascape which at one time was called simply "Overture in B minor", and later *The lonely isle*, but which we now know as the *Hebrides* Overture. He worked at it, on and off, over the next three years, struggling to reconcile the demands of classical sonata form and descriptive tone-painting – a struggle summed up in his wry lament, in a letter in January 1832, that "the whole so-called development smells more of counterpoint than of blubber, gulls and salted cod".

Overture "The Fair Melusina", op. 32

Allegro con moto

Shortly before setting out for London in the spring of 1833, on the visit which saw the first performance of the *Italian* Symphony, Mendelssohn went to a performance at the Royal Berlin Opera of *Melusina*, an opera with a libretto by Grillparzer (originally intended for Beethoven) and music by Conradin Kreutzer. He disliked Kreutzer's music so much, it is said, that before the end of the year he had composed a concert work of his own to demonstrate how the quintessentially romantic subject of the opera should have been treated: the Overture *Die schöne Melusine*. The opera was a retelling of the folk-tale about the beautiful water-sprite Melusina who, taking human form, falls in love with and marries a mortal. The opening of Mendelssohn's F major Overture depicts her in her native element,

rising from time to time above the waves; the later themes are concerned with her love-affair on dry land; and, as the ending makes clear, the drama is resolved by her disappearance once more beneath the waves.

Scherzo in G minor from the Octet, op. 20

(Orchestral version by the composer for performance as alternative 3rd movement in the Symphony no. 1)
Sempre pianissimo e leggiero

Another work of genius from Mendelssohn's teenage years is his Octet for strings, which was composed in 1825; and the third movement of the Octet was later to find its way into the list of his orchestral works as the *Scherzo in G minor*. Mendelssohn made this shortened and orchestrated version of the Octet movement to replace the Minuet and Trio of his First Symphony when he directed the work at a concert of the Philharmonic Society in London in May 1829. It is a highly unconventional scherzo, being in 2/4 time rather than the usual 3/4, and in a continuous sonata form without a separate trio section. According to Mendelssohn's sister Fanny, the piece was inspired by a passage in Goethe's *Faust* describing a scene dissolving in "streaks of cloud and veils of mist"; and certainly there is an evanescent quality about both the string original and the equally delicate and dazzling orchestral version.

Anthony Burton

Overtures

Mendelssohn's overtures occupy a significant place in their composer's output and reflect the varied characteristic forms that this genre has assumed in the course of its history. For if the overture was originally no more than a favourite (and frequently interchangeable) orchestral piece played at the start of an operatic or theatrical performance in order to call the audience to attention, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries it increasingly acquired the function of an introduction to the content of whatever followed, be it as a general atmospheric preparation for the mood of the drama, the representation of a dominant idea or the anticipation of specific events in the plot. And from there it was only a short step to the complete emancipation of the genre: not only could overtures be performed as self-sufficient orchestral works independently of the action that followed them, but they were often conceived from the start as programmatic concert works, thus already anticipating features of the symphonic poem.

Ouvertüre für Harmoniemusik op 24 (Overture for Wind Instruments)

Andante con moto – Allegro vivace

"Trompeten-Ouvertüre" op 101 ("Trumpet Overture")

Allegro vivace

"Ruy Blas" op 95

Lento – Allegro molto

"Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt" op 27 ("Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage")

Meeresstille. Adagio – Glückliche Fahrt. Molto Allegro e vivace

These various conceptions existing alongside one another are encountered in Mendelssohn's music. His *Overture for Wind Instruments* (1824), written for the traditional ensemble employed for

outdoor performances consisting of wind and brass instruments, often supported by a double bass, belongs in the same way as the *Trumpet Overture* (1826) to the festive but in content "neutral" kind of orchestral music. All the remaining overtures, however, portray a literary subject more or less clearly. Thus the overture *Ruy Blas* (1839) is inspired by Victor Hugo's play of the same name; the stuff of tragedy – great passions and irresolvable conflicts – sets the tone. In contrast, Mendelssohn based *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* (1828) on two Goethe poems, whose opposed moods ("Deep calm reigns in the water/The sea rests motionless" in the first, "The winds are howling ... Hurry! Hurry! ..." in the second) find a clear musical analogy: the Adagio introduction is succeeded by a Molto Allegro e vivace in which the departure of the ship, the play of the waves, the swift voyage and the safe arrival are easily perceived.

"Die Hebriden" ("Die Fingalshöhle") op 26 ("The Hebrides", "Fingal's Cave")

Allegro moderato – Animato in tempo

In the *Hebrides* (or *Fingal's Cave*) overture (1830) motives from Norse mythology, which were popularized in the Romantic period by Ossian's songs in particular, combine with Mendelssohn's personal impressions of his experiences of sea and scenery derived from his travels in Scotland in 1829 to produce a magnificent mood-painting. But it would be mistaken to lay too much weight on the pictorial elements, for this single-movement work also occupies a prominent place in Mendelssohn's music on account of the compositional technique shown in it and, one might say, its status as "absolute music" (symphonic form, strict motivic development). Significantly, such contrasted musicians as Wagner and Brahms were numbered among its admirers.

"Zum Märchen von der schönen Melusine" op 32 ("The Fair Melusina")

Allegro con moto

In his overture *The Fair Melusina* (1833) Mendelssohn takes up a favourite Romantic theme: the story of the mysterious mermaid who is not permitted to live among humans and who, after experiencing the pleasures and pains of mortals, returns to her own world.

"Ein Sommernachtstraum" op 21 ("A Midsummer Night's Dream")

Allegro di molto

The concert overture *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was composed as early as 1826 – the flash of inspiration of a seventeen-year-old! This music, like all his music for the play, is probably the most perfect example of how to translate the world of comedy into musical notes: princes and young noblewomen, blustering tradesmen and ethereal elves – everything is made audible, combines effortlessly and envelops in Mendelssohn's magic not only the persons on the imaginary stage but also those who listen.

Volker Scherliess

Mendelssohn – The string symphonies

It is a commonplace that Mendelssohn was born to privilege, but to regard that privilege, as many do, in the light of financial wealth alone is to render a disservice both to the composer and to his remarkable family. The fact is that the works recorded here are a testament to a childhood unique in the history of music and remarkable even in the history of genius. By the time he embarked on his career as a symphonist, at the imposing age of twelve, Mendelssohn had already put behind him a cantata, a trio for piano and strings, a violin sonata, four piano sonatas, two operettas and numerous

miniatures. As a pianist, he had been able to play all of the Beethoven symphonies from memory at the age of eight, and could read virtually anything at sight, even from manuscript. His playing of the organ was equally distinguished, and he was a violinist of professional skill. Nor did he confine his attentions to music. Well before reaching his teens, he was a fluent linguist, widely read in several languages both classical and modern, a draughtsman whose drawings and watercolours retain their charm even today, and a writer whose letters from abroad are in the great tradition of 19th-century travel writing (indeed, ironically, his boyhood letters often evince a greater maturity and stylistic sophistication than those written ten and twenty years later).

Astounding as all this may seem to us, his parents took great care to see that Felix should not regard himself as being particularly unusual. And they lavished no less attention on his brother Paul and his sisters Rebecca and Fanny (observed at birth to have "Bach-fugue fingers"). All the children rose daily at five in the morning to begin a day which included the thorough study not only of music but of history, Greek, Latin, natural science, philosophy, contemporary literature and drawing as well as regular instruction in riding, swimming and dancing. Fanny, true to the designated nature of her childish fingers, was a remarkable pianist, playing the whole of Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier" from memory at the age of fourteen, and a more than competent composer whose later works were easily mistaken for her brother's (and in some cases actually published as such).

Hardly less stimulating to the children than their private tuition was the company kept by their parents. The most powerful influence was undoubtedly Goethe (with whom Felix spent a fortnight prior to embarking on the String Symphonies), and regular visitors included Alexander von Humboldt, the naturalist and explorer, Friedrich Hegel, the philosopher, Schadow; the sculptor, and the theologians Schleiermacher and Schubring, while Europe's most celebrated musicians could count on a welcome at the private concerts given each Sunday at the Mendelssohn home. Felix thus grew up on a steady diet of Bach (unusual in those days), Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven, as well as such lesser masters as Pleyel, Hummel, C.P.E. and W.F. Bach and Karl Zelter (a friend of Goethe's, and Mendelssohn's teacher), and it was almost certainly at these august gatherings that the String Symphonies were first heard.

Strange to say, these works, written between the ages of twelve and fourteen and effectively a creative diary of Mendelssohn's early artistic development, remained unpublished and virtually unknown until the early 1970s, when they were belatedly issued under the editorship of Helmuth Christian Wolff. For this century and a half of apparently shameful neglect, the composer himself is largely to be blamed. Haunted by the phantom of his unparalleled precocity (not even Mozart accomplished so much so early), Mendelssohn was eager to suppress those works which he regarded as belonging to his apprenticeship, and studiously avoided all reference to them in the years of his maturity.

Symphony no. 1 in C major

1. Allegro
2. Andante
3. Allegro

Symphony no. 2 in D major

1. Allegro
2. Andante
3. Allegro

The string Symphonies number twelve in all, of which the first six, all written in 1821, are relatively short and are confined to three movements. And if they seem to anticipate Berlioz's wry observation in later years that Mendelssohn "loved the dead too much", we should be neither surprised nor dismayed. As students of painting have known for centuries, there is no better way of learning a craft than by studying (and copying) the works of great masters. Prior to his undertaking the works recorded here, Mendelssohn had made a meticulous piano arrangement of Mozart's *Jupiter* Symphony (fortified by his already long-standing knowledge of the Beethoven cycle), and the influence of that work is plainly evident in the first of his own symphonies. But though it may dervive both its key and some of its thematic material from the *Jupiter*, its three movement form (fast-slow-fast) harks back to the very origins of the Classical symphony in the Italian overtures of the early 18th-century – just as the exhilarating gigue-like finale of the Second Symphony acknowledges that other symphonic progenitor, the Baroque orchestral suite. Indeed at times it seems almost as if Mendelssohn were consciously attempting to re-live the development of the form itself. As if limbering up for the concentratedly developmental nature of fully-fledged symphonic thought, he tends in these early works to east his central slow movements in variation form, drawing on the sort of graceful cantabile melodies which he was later to immortalise as "Songs Without Words".

Symphony no. 3 in E minor

1. Allegro di molto
2. Andante
3. Allegro

For all the youth of their composer and the preparatory nature of the explorations at hand, the confidence displayed in those early essays is breathtaking in itself. The spirit and style of C.P.E. Bach may dominate the Second Symphony, as Mozart and Beethoven hover over the First, but the deftness of construction (the evolution of the first movement from its opening theme, for instance) and the spontaneity of feeling (who could resist the splendid vigour of the finale?) are admirable and enjoyable in equal measure. The Third Symphony, in the characteristically Mendelssohnian key of E minor, is filled with "Bachian" counterpoint, but the dramatic urgency of the first movement is redolent of Beethoven, while the slow movement and the finale (which follows without a break) suggest a Mozartian model.

Symphony no. 4 in C minor

1. Grave – Allegro
2. Andante
3. Allegro vivace

With the Fourth Symphony, written in the "fateful" Beethovenian key of C minor, we meet for the first time the sort of slow, rhetorically grave Introduction which characterises so many of Haydn's symphonies and which gives clear notice, at the outset, of the composer's seriousness of intent. The finale, too, in the "learned" style of a fugue, bespeaks a lofty aim, and again reveals the 12-year-old Mendelssohn's intimate knowledge of Bach. Here too we have intimations of the composer's lifelong fondness for moving straight into his finales without a break (later examples include the E minor Violin Concerto, both piano concertos and the "Reformation" Symphony).

Symphony no. 5 in B flat major

1. Allegro vivace
2. Andante
3. Presto

In the Fifth Symphony, despite its brevity, the overall form becomes more ambitious, and more strikingly individual, than in the first four, and the essence of true symphonic thought (the large-scale integration of opposing contrasts) more naturally assimilated. The first movement, with its bold, rhetorical opening and its embellishing trills owes something to W.F. Bach, and the central, song-like *andante* is infused with a Classical sweetness suggestive of early Schubert. The finale, for all its quick-tempo brevity, is highly sophisticated in its deployment of material, introducing neo-Mozartian contrasts into the opening theme itself and showing a tonal adventurousness again reminiscent of Schubert.

Symphony no. 6 in E flat major

1. Allegro
2. Menuetto
3. Prestissimo

The Sixth Symphony illustrates Mendelssohn's increasingly sure hand at developing more from less. Virtually everything in the Allegro first movement is audibly derived from its opening figure. The central movement balances its light, Rococo-style minuet with not one but two Trio sections, and the *Prestissimo* finale forges unity out of diversity with an almost Beethovenian abundance of pleasant little shocks and surprises.

Symphony no. 7 in D Minor

1. Allegro
2. Andante
3. Menuetto
4. Allegro molto

While the first six String Symphonies pay their most conspicuous debts to Haydn, Mozart and Pleyel (a now forgotten but once popular composer), the Seventh takes much of its manner, though not its material, from Beethoven. The opening movement subjects its stereotypically contrasting themes to a degree of development new in Mendelssohn, just as the work as a whole marks the first of his experiments with a four-movement structure. As in all but the last of the previous symphonies, the slow movement is a characteristically songful *Andante*, whose textural variety is enhanced, in the present case, by the use of solo players. The succeeding *Menuetto* has a Beethovenian terseness in its thematic economy, but it is the Finale, with its dramatic, insistent tone and its startling rhythmic displacements, which remind one most forcibly of Beethoven's lowering ghost.

Symphony no. 8 in D major

1. Adagio e Grave – Allegro
2. Adagio
3. Menuetto
4. Allegro molto

The Eighth Symphony is unique among its companions in that Mendelssohn provided two distinct scorings of it: the first, played here, for strings alone, the second, with added wind and timpani. Nor do the discrepancies end there. In the version with wind, parts are exchanged and transposed, bar numberings and phrase lengths are altered, and the trio section of the Minuet is entirely recast. Here too, though, Mendelssohn is happy to pay his debts openly and without embarrassment. In this case, not only composers but specific works appear as formative influences. The derivation of the opening *Adagio e grave* from Bach's "Musical Offering" has been widely remarked, as has that of the *Allegro*'s second theme from Mozart's "Prague" Symphony, K. 504. An interesting feature of the

Adagio is the division of the violas into three parts while the violins are omitted – a further example of the 13-year-old composer's keen sense of instrumental textures. And lest anyone doubt the progress made by this extraordinary child in rather less than a year of composing for orchestra, the turbulent finale displays a thoroughly professional, even inspired, blending of contrapuntal skill, thematic unity and developmental imagination.

Symphony no. 9 in C major

1. Grave – Allegro
2. Andante
3. Scherzo
4. Allegro vivace

The presiding deities in the case of the Ninth Symphony (composed in March 1823) are most obviously Haydn and Mozart, though the first movement may strike many as distinctly Beethovenian (with specific echoes of his Symphony no. 1 in C). Nevertheless, Mendelssohn's own stylistic fingerprints and his willingness to experiment, even at fourteen, are clear enough to make this recognisably a work of his, not theirs. Among the most significant harbingers of the mature Mendelssohn is his perceptive and imaginative ear for instrumental textures. In all but the first movement, he divides his violas into two, and in the *Andante* (one of the loveliest movements ever penned by this miraculous child), he further doubles traditional balances by dividing the violins into four parts. The resulting combination of brilliance and depth anticipates not only the Octet and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture (written at sixteen and seventeen, respectively) but the darker-hued orchestration of *Fingal's Cave* and the *Scottish* Symphony. The Trio section of the third movement serves as a musical memento of Mendelssohn's first trip to Switzerland, in 1821: it quotes the Swiss yodelling song "Uf d'Alme gommer uu-fe" – one of the first (and last) instances in which he makes overt reference to folk music of any kind. The Finale provides evidence of a trait which was to characterise Mendelssohn throughout his professional career, as both composer and performer (and which greatly vexed Wagner), namely his propensity to fast tempi. In his second version of this movement, he leaves the notes intact but alters the tempo indication from *Allegro moderato* to *Allegro vivace* and tops it all off with a characteristic coda marked *Presto*.

Symphony no. 10 in B minor

1. Adagio
2. Allegro

The Tenth Symphony, in B minor, had occasioned some misunderstanding. Composed between the 13th and 18th of May, 1823, and described variously as a two-movement and single-movement construction, it was thought by some to have been intended as a grandiose sort of prelude to the Twelfth Symphony, with which it was originally bound. To be honest, it seems a strange assumption. Rather more than half as long as the Twelfth Symphony in its entirety, the work is differently scored (in five rather than four parts) and is written in a quite incompatible key (the Twelfth Symphony being firmly in G minor). In any case, the manuscript of the Twelfth is headed by the legend L.e.g.G. (*Lass es galingen, Gott:* "May it be successful, Lord") with which Mendelssohn often *began* his compositions, but which never appears in their midst.

Symphony no. 11 in F major

1. Adagio – Allegro molto
2. Scherzo commodo Schweizerlied
3. Adagio

4. Menuetto: Allegro moderato
5. Allegro molto

The Eleventh Symphony, in F (mostly minor), was likewise a product of 1823. Completed on the 12th of July, it is the only one to contain five movements, and unusually incorporates both a Scherzo and Minuet. Here too, after a dramatic and "Beethovenian" first movement (based, like the rest of the work, on the opening motif of the *Allegro molto*), we find another of the composer's picture postcards from Switzerland, and again we find it in the *Scherzo*: another yodelling song, this time an Emmenthal wedding dance, "Bin alben e warti Tachter gsi", here incongruously kitted out with triangle, cymbals and kettledrum, an instrumental ensemble more redolent of 18th-century "Turkmania" than of Alpine slopes. In the concluding *Allegro motto*, Mendelssohn again follows a Beethovenian line, combining thematic concentration with variation technique and fugal procedures and paying his dues (not for the first time in these symphonies) with a passing reference to Bach's "Musical Offering".

Symphony no. 12 in G minor

1. Fuga: Grave – Allegro
2. Andante
3. Allegro molto

It seems entirely fitting that Mendelssohn should conclude this sequence of "apprentice" works with his most artfully balanced and masterfully sustained work to date (it was begun less than a month after completion of the Eleventh and finished three weeks later, on the 17th of September, 1823). Returning to the three-movement format of the earlier symphonies, he demonstrates the distance travelled with a virtuoso display of contrapuntal skill and controlled intensity, and an emotional equilibrium which at no time smacks of shallowness. The poignancy and warm sonority of the *Andante* (again using divided violas) is all the more affecting after the powerful four-part fugue which precedes it, and the Finale, again returning to the medium of fugue in the context of sonata form (and recalling the chromatic descent of the first-movement fugue), simply defies one to believe that this work is the achievement of a composer still same way short of his fifteenth birthday.

Jeremy Siepmann 1988

Mendelssohn: Violin concerto

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in E minor op. 64

1. Allegro molto appassionato
2. Andante
3. Allegretto non troppo – Allegro molto vivace

Any discussion of the outstanding violin concertos of the 19th-century German repertoire inevitably centres upon four works: the concertos by Ludwig van Beethoven (1806), Felix Mendelssohn (1844), Max Bruch (1866) and Johannes Brahms (1878). In many respects these works fall into two pairs: while the concertos of Beethoven and Brahms are considered particularly "demanding", those of Mendelssohn and Bruch enjoy enormous popularity both with audiences and among violinists. Many factors contribute to this popularity: the potency and accessibility of their themes, a happy blend of *cantabile* melody and virtuosity, of expressiveness and brilliance, of simplicity and refinement, as well as the subtlety of the atmospheric moods created by Mendelssohn, and Bruch's inclination towards pathos and grandeur.

It is often said that Felix Mendelssohn was a classicist, but while this description may appear appropriate in connection with certain of his works, it is surely not applicable where the Violin Concerto is concerned. Written, alter a long gestation period, for the Leipzig virtuoso Ferdinand David, this is in every respect a work of the most quintessential Romanticism. Original down to the last detail, it points towards the future, and is marked by astonishing freshness of invention. One innovation, for example, is the way in which Mendelssohn dispenses with the traditional orchestral exposition of the themes, allowing the soloist to open the concerto. Equally novel is the placing of the first movement cadenza before the recapitulation (instead of before the coda). Particularly "Romantic" in this movement is the contrast between the songlike but impassioned first theme (*appassionato*) and the meditative second theme (*tranquillo*). The second movement, an Andante in three sections, is a typical "song without words". The finale, however, is marked by its capricious and picturesque character; the atmosphere which Mendelssohn creates here is reminiscent of his music to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is understandable that this movement, whose characteristic marking is *leggiero*, has given rise to the expression *Elfenromantik* ("elfin Romanticism").

Constantin Floros

Piano Concertos

"He played the piano as a lark soars, because it was his nature. He possessed great adroitness. Sureness, strength, fluency, a soft, full tone ... but, when he played, one forgot these qualities: one overlooked even the more spiritual gifts that are called ardor, inspiration. soulfulness, intelligence." These words, written by the composer and pianist Ferdinand Hiller about Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847), not only constitute an appropriate description of Mendelssohn's pianism but can also be said to apply to much of his output for piano. For the piano music of Mendelssohn docs, often, soar "as a lark" and is certainly inspired and intelligent, sure and fluent. In fact, it might be justifiably suggested that his piano works are just a bit too fluent, too facile and too obviously conceived as salon diversions. He once wrote, "I sometimes need a new piece to play, and if, now and then, something really suitable for the piano comes into my head, why should I be afraid of writing it down?" Why, indeed?

But perhaps Mendelssohn was too natural a pianist and too elegant and spontaneous a composer for his instrument; in the concertos on this album one searches in vain for either real passion or real profundity – or for the sense of conflict always so basic to, especially, the Romantic conception of sonata form. As brilliant and delightful as they are, these pieces seem to have little raison d'être, beyond that of sheer entertainment.

Probably the best brief appraisal of Mendelssohn is that of Alfred Einstein. "If Schubert is the romantic classic", he wrote, "Mendelssohn is the romantic classicist. The romantic is, in Mendelssohn, the better part ... He was a master of form. He had no inner forces to curb, for real conflict was lacking in his life as in his art ... But his instrumental and vocal works alike are masterpieces of refinement, lightness, clarity, and control." This last statement has particular application to Mendelssohn's two piano concertos.

Concerto no. 1 in G minor for piano and orchestra, op. 25

1. Molto allegro con fuoco
2. Andante
3. Presto; Molto allegro e vivace

The Concerto no. 1 in G minor for Piano and Orchestra, op. 25, was sketched in Rome, in November 1830, and finished in Munich during a visit by the composer in 1831, when he was twenty-two years old. Describing it as "a thing rapidly thrown off", Mendelssohn played the premiere himself in Munich in October 1831. "I was received", he wrote, "with loud and long applause ... but I was modest and would not appear". The Concerto consequently won considerable popularity and was championed by no less a figure than Franz Liszt.

There are two notable innovations in Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto no. 1: The normal Classical expositions in the solo and in the orchestra are combined into one and there is no lengthy opening *tutti* where all the themes of the movement are stated by the orchestra preparatory to the entrance of the piano. The other is that the three movements (lacking cadenzas) are joined together, without pause, by rhythmic fanfares. The first movement, (*Molto allegro con fuoco*) is in fairly orthodox sonata form, being somewhat dramatic and bravura in character, with the piano stating both themes. The *Andante* is a restful, singing romance, not unlike certain of the *Songs Without Words*, while the brash, agitated finale (*Molto allegro e vivace*) – prefaced by a *Presto* introduction – is positively Weberesque in the all-pervasive brilliance of the piano writing.

Concerto no. 2 in D minor for piano and orchestra, op. 40

1. Allegro appassionato
2. Adagio
3. Finale: Presto scherzando

Mendelssohn's Concerto no. 2 in D minor for Piano and Orchestra. op. 40, was composed in the summer of 1837 for England's Birmingham Festival. Mendelssohn gave the first performance in mid-September of that year. Of a London performance, five years later, he wrote: "Yesterday evening I played my Concerto in D minor and directed my *Hebrides* in the Philharmonic ... The people made such a fuss over me this time that I am quite dumbfounded; I believe they clapped their hands and stamped for at least ten minutes after the concerto ..." Nevertheless, the piece has never held its own in the repertory, and is only occasionally heard today.

Structurally and stylistically, Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto no. 2 is similar to its predecessor. Again, there is a compressed exposition, with the second subject given out initially by the piano, and no pause between movements (however this time the binding fanfares are missing). The vivacious *Finale* is introduced by an energetic *ritornello*. Melodically, the work is not as immediately engaging as the Concerto no. 1 (although the opening movement's second theme, simplicity itself, is one of the composers happier inventions – especially when combined with elaborate piano figuration); still, the Second Concerto is beautifully made and has been quite unjustly neglected. Robert Schumann stated the case exactly when he wrote:

"And now we have a report to make concerning Mendelssohn's second concerto. Indeed, he remains what he always was – he still takes things in his stride; no lips smile more charmingly than his. Virtuosos will find it difficult to display their astonishing proficiency in this concerto, for it gives them almost nothing to do which they have not done and played a hundred times before ... Although Mendelssohn deserves praise inasmuch as he *always* gives us music to hear, we cannot deny that he frequently provides it more casually in one work, more emphatically in another. This present concerto is among his most casual productions. Unless I am greatly mistaken, he must have written it in a few days, perhaps in a few hours. It is as though a tree had been shaken, and the ripe, sweet fruit had promptly fallen. People will ask how it compares to his first concerto. They are alike and not alike; alike because both were written by a finished master; unalike because this one was written ten years after the other. Here and there we have vistas of Sebastian Bach in the line of the harmony. Melody,

form, instrumentation, on the other hand, are Mendelssohn's own. Let us then rejoice in the felicitous, casual gift; the piece resembles some of those works known to us from the old masters which they composed while resting from their greater creations."

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Variations serieuses, op. 54

In 1841 Mendelssohn produced three sets of piano variations: in E flat, op. 82, and B flat, op. 83, and the *Variations sérieuses* in D minor, op. 54 (the higher opus numbers of the first two resulted from posthumous publication). Of these, the *Variations sérieuses* is by far the finest, traditionally ranked with the principal variations of Beethoven and Brahms, and it is the most often played of Mendelssohn's major solo-piano works.

This brilliant, highly pianistic piece consists of a theme and seventeen nearly continuous variations encompassing a wide variety of moods. As biographer Philip Radcliffe wrote, "The theme has great beauty and pathos; in some of the variations the harmonic scheme is altered considerably, but the most important features of the melodic outline are usually maintained. The keyboard writing is very varied and resourceful."

Prelude and Fugue, op. 35, no. 1

The six Preludes and Fugues, op. 35, comprise twelve pieces written at various times during the decade 1827–37. Of these, only no. 1 in E minor – generally considered the best of the set – can be said to have established itself in the repertory. In its melodic verve, the Prelude (1837) is suggestive of many of Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*, a kind of etude featuring a melody framed by arpeggios in both hands. The dramatic, Bachian Fugue (1827), where the subject is heard in original form and in inversion, follows, becoming increasingly agitated, climaxing, and ending with a powerful chorale over a moving bass.

Rondo capriccioso, op. 14

Published in 1833, Mendelssohn's ever-popular *Rondo capriccioso* in E minor, op. 14, was probably written in 1824. It is rather freely constructed in two parts: a Weberlike *andante* leads to a brilliant staccato *presto* in 6/8. In Radcliffe's words: "The piece as a whole is fresh, exhilarating, and well deserves its popularity."

Phillip Ramey

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" Music to Shakespeare's play

Overture, op. 21

Incidental Music, op. 61
1. Scherzo
2b. Fairies' march
3. Song with chorus: "Ye spotted snakes"
5. Intermezzo
7. Nocturne
9. Wedding march
10. Prologue
Funeral march
11. Dance of the Clowns
12b. Finale: "Through this house give glimm'ring light"

The Mendelssohn concert repertoire has grown considerably over the past three decades. So far such lesser known, but extremely interesting and worthwhile pieces as the youth symphonies, the first violin concerto, the double concerto, *Singspiele*, canratas, and some chamber music have joined the few standard works which were, for over a century, the sole representatives of the artist's oeuvre. In many of these pieces, it is possible to trace the development of certain expressive means, typical of the composer. For instance, the nature paintings in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" were already heralded in earlier essays: the Capriccio op. 5, the Rondo capriccioso op. 14, the Piano Quartet op. 3, and the String Octet op. 20. The Octet and the Overture to "A Midsummer Night's Dream" were the fruits of a summer which, for 17-year-old Felix, proved "an unbroken festival day, full of poetry, music, thought-provoking plays and witty banter, dressing-up, and performing". Among other things, Shakespeare's comedies were read almost daily. "A Midsummer Night's Dream" made such an impression on Mendelssohn that it stayed with him right into the lecture-rooms of the university, where it began to take musical shape in the form of extensive piano improvisations in the intervals between lectures.

The overture was finished on August 26, 1826, and the first performance followed in February under Carl Loewe in Stettin. It presents a congenial musical tableau of Shakespeare's dramatic fairy-tale. The piece is ushered in by *pianissimo* wind harmonies, but after only five bars this rather solemn mood is interrupted by a purling staccato in the upper strings. Diminished chords from the wind instruments suggest the half-light of the enchanted wood. Bur now the sunlight breaks through in a radiant E major. The gleam and shimmer of the music gives way first to the clumsy dance of the local artisans (Shakespeare called them clowns); the bray of the ass is then clearly heard, hunting horns ring out, and the whole magic starts over again.

There is no evidence to suggest that Mendelssohn was thinking of a stage production when he wrote the overture. This question became pertinent only when Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia wanted "A Midsummer Night's Dream" performed in the New Palace at Potsdam. In spite of the heavy demands made on the composer as conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra, Leipzig, Principal of the Conservatory, and General Musical Director of Prussia, he accepted the commission for incidental music, and conducted the première on October 14, 1843. The second act, set in a wood near Athens, opens with a scherzo. The phantastic conversation between Puck and a fairy is taken up by the music and carried through the whole piece. An atmosphere of gentle sensitivity towards nature and of prankish magic drifts towards us from this sublimely conceived music. For that part of the action with Oberon and Titania and their elfin entourage, Mendelssohn composed a tiptoe, ethereal orchestral piece, usually called the "Fairies' March". The point in the drama where Titania retires to sleep is followed by a fairy song with chorus in which the little folk battle with all sorts of woodland animals. The simple song melody forms the basis for an orchestral imitation of the humming of insects. At the end of Act II when Hermia awakes in the wood after a bad dream, to find that she has been deserted by Lysander, Mendelssohn inserted an intermezzo, which at once expresses Hermia's fear, disappointment, and determination.

The "Nocturne" ends in delicious harmony. Restful silence spreads over the scene, and the tired and confused couples sleep in the wood. Against this background of soft horn music, the "Wedding March", with its introductory trumpet fanfare forms an almost harsh contrast. After the "Dance of the Clowns", the finale (with chorus) gathers together fragments from the overture, enhanced by the chorus of fairies. It closes with the soft wind harmonies which introduced the overture at the outset.

Eherhard Rudolph