

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Love Letters– February 9, 10 & 11, 2019

This program presents works by two couples—one a marital couple, the other close siblings—in which all parties composed, though until quite recently only the male representatives were heard much. Fanny Mendelssohn was closely linked to her brother, especially in their teen years, when they were so delighted by Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* that Felix composed an overture for piano four-hands, which they played regularly (the orchestral version came much later). Since the family did not think it appropriate for a girl to publish her compositions, Felix included three of her songs in his Opus 8 collection, and when, years later, Queen Victoria told him that she especially loved one of these songs, he was forced to confess that it was by his sister.

Clara Wieck's father did not want her to marry the then-unknown composer, particularly because she was becoming one of the greatest pianists of the century. But they persevered through paternal arguments and a lawsuit, before Clara was of age and could marry despite her father's refusal. She composed extensively before her marriage, later devoting herself to motherhood and concert tours that provided a large part of the family's support. After Robert's death at 46, she fervently maintained her role as the promoter and performer of her husband's music.

FANNY MENDELSSOHN-HENSEL Overture in C major for Orchestra



Fanny Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg on November 14, 1805, and died (as Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel) in Berlin on May 14, 1847. She composed her Overture in C about 1830. The score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, percussion and strings. Duration is about 10 minutes.

Fanny studied piano with her mother and then with professional teachers both in Berlin and Paris. She also studied theory and composition with C. F. Zelter, an early Bach champion. She wrote her first composition at age 14, a song in honor of her father's birthday. The following year she enrolled at the Berlin Sing-Akademie. During the next decade she composed a large number (more than 400) of songs and chamber compositions, most of which were certainly performed in the artistic salon, which she headed after her marriage, in 1829, to the Prussian court painter William Hensel.

The Overture in C is Fanny's only orchestral composition, composed in 1830, and probably intended for an in-home performance at one of her mother's musical gatherings. A few years later she wrote to her brother to describe what was probably the second performance, at which she was invited to conduct. "Had I not been so shy, and embarrassed with every stroke, I would've been able to conduct reasonably well. It was great fun to hear the piece for the first time in two years and find everything the way I remembered. People seemed to like it—they were very kind, praised me, criticized a few impractical passages, and will return next Saturday. Thus I took part in an unexpected pleasure."

The overture opens with a graceful, pensive, slow introduction which soon builds up to a lively rhythmic outburst, which becomes the principal theme of the well-crafted sonata-form movement.

CLARA WIECK-SCHUMANN

Concerto in A minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 7



Clara Wieck was born in Leipzig on September 13, 1819, and died Clara Wieck-Schumann in Frankfurt on May 20, 1896. The Piano Concerto in A minor, Opus 7, was composed between 1833 and 1836. She was soloist at the premiere in Leipzig in November 1835, with Mendelssohn conducting. In addition to the solo piano, the score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and trumpets, plus timpani and strings. The second movement calls for just piano with solo cello and timpani. Duration is about 21 minutes.

At the age of twelve, Clara Wieck was already a remarkable pianist, who had performed frequently in her native Leipzig and on a concert tour across much of Europe. On January 13, 1833, at 13, she confided to her diary that she had begun to compose a concerto. This was, in fact, a single movement, which she called a "Concert Rondo." At its completion she wrote, "[Robert] Schumann will orchestrate it now so that I can play it at my concert." They had already begun their lifelong creative partnership when she was 14 and he was 24.

Eventually Clara returned to the work and, making her earlier composition the finale, she composed two further movements to produce the full Concerto in A minor, which she published as Opus 7. While she retained Robert's orchestration for the finale, she herself orchestrated the first two movements. She was, of course, the soloist at the first performance, which was conducted by Felix Mendelssohn in Leipzig in November 1835.

Clara Wieck's piano concerto is one of the earliest of several composed about the same time that linked the movements without a break. The piano dominates, and the solo part is conceived by the composer for the precise talents of the performer—herself. It is brilliantly written and, at the same time, offers (in the words of an early critic) a "poetic unity." The slow movement begins as an unaccompanied solo for the piano, a pensive, lyrical romance, which a solo cello eventually joins. At the end, the rumble of timpani suggests a more energetic mood to come—and this happens with the arrival of the rhythmic finale—which, remember, was composed when Clara was only thirteen. The Rondo provides an energetic finish.

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Overture to *Manfred* in E-flat major for Orchestra, Opus 115



Robert Alexander Schumann was born in Zwickau, Saxony, on June 8, 1810, and died in Endenich, a suburb of Bonn, on July 29, 1856. He wrote music for Byron's Manfred—an overture and fifteen numbers, six of them musically complete, the rest serving as musical accompaniment to spoken text—during 1848 and 1849, himself conducting the first performance of the overture at a Leipzig Gewandhaus concert on March 14, 1852. The score calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings. Duration is about 12 minutes.

Like so many romantic composers whose temperament was fundamentally undramatic, Schumann longed to write a successful opera. (For one thing, an opera would pay him fees for performance rights, which was not the case with almost any other musical genre; the few composers who became wealthy were successful on the operatic stage.) He did complete a full-scale opera called *Genoveva* in 1848, but the work, for all its many musical beauties, was theatrically stillborn.

Soon after completing *Genoveva*, Schumann turned to one of the most influential of Romantic poets, Lord Byron, to produce a musical setting of his poetic drama *Manfred*. When Schumann was inspired, he worked at white heat. He read Byron's play (in a German translation) on July 29, 1848. Joseph von Wasielewski, his concertmaster in Düsseldorf, recalled that on one occasion the composer read aloud from *Manfred*, and "his voice suddenly failed him, tears started from his eyes, and he was so overcome that he could read no further."

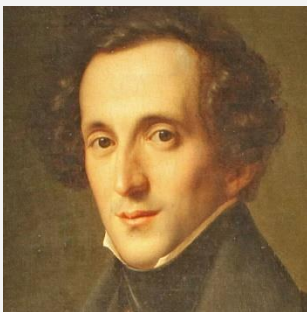
Byron's play was written in 1816-1817 after its twenty-eight-year-old poet had heard an oral recitation of Goethe's *Faust* (which the German poet still had not yet finished) and found himself inspired by the image of a seeker, a striver, who never achieves contentment. In *Manfred*, though, the principal character is subject to an orgy of guilt and remorse for reasons that remain unexplained. (It seems to reflect Byron's feelings about his own incestuous summer liaison, in 1813, with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh, a fact that was not known to Schumann, who would have been horrified at the very idea.) Byron's romantic language struck him in the aftermath of the sudden death of his good friend Felix Mendelssohn.

Within a week, he began preparing an adaptation of the text for musical purposes, though not of opera. He kept much of the spoken dialogue, alternating it with fifteen brief musical numbers—vocal, choral and orchestral. It was performed in June 1852, only because of the generous championing of Franz Liszt, who directed the performance in Weimar. The overture has long been regarded as one of Schumann's finest orchestral achievements, and he himself referred to it as one of his "most powerful children."

The fast chords, played off the beat and suggesting a headlong rush begin the piece, only to turn suddenly to a slow introduction with an intensely chromatic line and unstable harmonies. A few bars later, a melody in the violins anticipates what will be the main theme of the Allegro. The dark E-flat minor key and the intense thematic development both contribute to the success of this overture in capturing the personality of Byron's anti-hero. An ending that restates the dark opening music rounds off the work musically even as it signals defeat for the principal character.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY

Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Opus 56, *Scottish*



Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg on February 3, 1809, and died in Leipzig on November 4, 1847. Mendelssohn conceived the Scottish Symphony as early as 1829, and continued sketching it in Rome in the late winter and spring of 1831; he then stopped work on it for a decade. He finally finished the score in Berlin on January 20, 1842, and conducted its first performance in the Leipzig Gewandhaus on March 3 of that year. The score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings. Duration is about 40 minutes.

On July 30, 1829, Felix Mendelssohn wrote to his family from Edinburgh about the sightseeing he had done in Scotland, with a particular account of a visit to the palace of Holyrood, closely associated with the romantic figure of Mary Queen of Scots. Here the ill-fated queen had apparently succumbed to an infatuation for an Italian lutenist named David Rizzio. Whether real or imagined, the king apparently had poor Rizzio murdered for the affair. Mendelssohn was touched by the romantic tale associated with the spot, and wrote, "I believe I found the beginning of my Scotch Symphony there today." That very day he wrote down the opening bars of the melody that begins his A-minor symphony, but did not return to it until 1841.

But just how “Scottish” is the symphony? There are no skirling bagpipes, no highland flings, no borrowed folk tunes. The opening theme is the only part of the score explicitly inspired by Scotland; it is the melody that Mendelssohn wrote down after his visit to Holyrood, a pensive tune in A minor sung by melancholy violas and oboes, shrouded in harmonic clouds and mists. The main body of the movement, a 6/8 melody that follows the outline of the introductory theme, has a more agitated character, but no specific connection to Scotland.

The Scherzo has a brilliance unsurpassed even in that most brilliant of Mendelssohn scores, the *Italian* symphony. The principal theme, first stated in the clarinet over tremolo strings, is supposed to be derived from an actual Scottish bagpipe tune, though it could just as easily be a completely original melody. The third movement alternates a slow singing melody with rhythmic ideas of a march-like character. The dotted rhythms that appear in the winds at the outset eventually take over the entire orchestra, but each time the cantilena comes back with ever more delicate elaboration.

The finale begins with a wild flourish in the violins against a steady marching beat in the horns, bassoons and violas. Mendelssohn characterized this movement, after all, as a “martial Allegro,” and the battle is joined at once. At the end of the recapitulation, a very beautiful passage is about to lead to a quiet conclusion and we anticipate yet another, more definitive, statement of the first movement’s introductory theme. But Mendelssohn has a surprise: a completely new major-mode theme described by Mendelssohn as *maestoso* (“majestic”); the effect is to change, in retrospect, the listener’s recollection of the foregoing moods through a conclusion pregnant with affirmative power.

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