



ABOUT THE MUSIC

MENDELSSOHN'S *ITALIAN* SYMPHONY

January 10, 11, 12, 2026

Program Notes by Elizabeth Schwartz

CAROLINE SHAW

Entr'acte for String Orchestra



COMPOSER: Born August 1, 1982, Greenville, NC

WORK COMPOSED: 2011 for string quartet; adapted for string orchestra on commission from A Far Cry Chamber Orchestra in July 2014

WORLD PREMIERE: Premiere performed by the Brentano Quartet on April 21, 2011, at Princeton University in Princeton, NJ.

INSTRUMENTATION: String orchestra

ESTIMATED DURATION: 11 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Composer, violinist, vocalist, and producer Caroline Shaw became the youngest recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2013 with her groundbreaking *Partita for 8 Voices*. Today, Shaw is a sought-after composer/performer in multiple genres, including classical music, film and television scores, and contemporary popular music. She has received numerous awards, including several Grammys (most recently 2022's Best Contemporary Classical Composition for *Narrow Sea*). Over the last decade, Shaw has written over 100 works for Anne Sofie von Otter, Davóne Tines, Yo Yo Ma, Renée Fleming, Dawn Upshaw, the LA Philharmonic, Philharmonia Baroque, Baltimore Symphony, Seattle Symphony, Cincinnati Symphony, Aizuri Quartet, The Crossing, Dover Quartet, Calidore Quartet, Brooklyn Rider, Miro Quartet, I Giardini, and Ars Nova Copenhagen, among others. As a vocalist or composer, Shaw and her work have been featured in several films, TV series, and podcasts, including *The Humans*, *Bombshell*, *Yellowjackets*, *Maid*, *Dark*, Beyoncé's *Homecoming*, *Tár*, Dolly Parton's *America*, and *More Perfect*.

Shaw's compositions defy the common belief that contemporary music is obscure, esoteric, or comprehensible only to musical cognoscenti. Instead, Shaw creates music that appeals to audiences of all ages and backgrounds, with its fresh approach to established forms, accessible sounds, and moments of pure joy.

Shaw writes, "*Entr'acte* was written in 2011 [while Shaw was a graduate student at Princeton University] after hearing the Brentano Quartet play Haydn's Opus 77 No. 2 – with their spare and soulful shift to the D-flat major trio in the minuet. It is structured like a minuet and trio, riffing on that classical form but taking it a little further. I love the way some music (like the minuets of Opus 77) suddenly takes you to the other side of Alice's looking glass, in a kind of absurd, subtle, technicolor transition."

Entr'acte begins simply, with a catchy repeated rhythmic motif. Shaw juxtaposes the Minuet's signature $\frac{3}{4}$ rhythm with the less regulated, improvisatory quality of the Trio. When she composed *Entr'acte*, Shaw wanted the players to collaborate in the way the music unfolds; to this end, she provides detailed instructions in the score regarding how to execute certain passages. In the Trio, for example, the cellist's part includes the following directions: "Notes with fall-off gesture are basically that. Slide down from the written pitch (which does not have to be absolutely exact, except where tenutos are

marked), maybe a half or whole step, with a slight coming away. Like a little sigh.”

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN

Concerto No. 2 in D major for Cello and Orchestra, Hob. VII:2



COMPOSER: Born March 31, 1732, Rohrau, Austria; died May 31, 1809, Vienna
WORK COMPOSED: 1783
WORLD PREMIERE: Undocumented
INSTRUMENTATION: Solo cello, 2 oboes, 2 horns, and strings
ESTIMATED DURATION: 26 minutes

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Joseph Haydn's lovely second cello concerto was mired in controversy for almost 200 years. It was published in 1810, but the original manuscript disappeared soon thereafter, which led to disputes about its authorship. Many believed it had been written by Anton Kraft, the principal cellist for the private orchestra of Prince Nicolaus Esterházy, Haydn's patron. In 1951 the original manuscript resurfaced in Vienna with Haydn's signature on it, thus ending the long argument. Rather than being composed by Kraft, Haydn wrote the concerto for Kraft in 1783, possibly for the wedding of Prince Nicolaus to Princess Maria Josepha Hermengild Liechtenstein in September of that year.

Although he was a gifted composer, Haydn was not an outstanding musician. He was a competent violinist and keyboard player, but no virtuoso. This lack of affinity with solo instruments resulted in concerti of no great merit. The Cello Concerto in D major is an exception to that trend, due in some measure to Kraft, who may have made suggestions to Haydn about the cello's capabilities.

The opening *Allegro moderato* is a model of Classical form and style. It features two closely related main themes, first heard in the orchestra. The soloist's first entrance is a reiteration of the principal theme with some embellishments. The movement continues to develop the two main themes, but also features some brilliant passages for the soloist, including a long cadenza. The *Adagio* features a gently sighing melody heard first in the solo cello, then reiterated by the orchestra. The soloist sings a second melody of lyrical sweetness before returning to the opening theme. As is customary in slow movements, the harmonies are more adventurous and Haydn explores several before returning to the opening A major of this movement. A second cadenza ends this quiet interlude. In the final *Allegro* Haydn again allows the soloist to present the opening melody, a lilting 6/8 tune, before the orchestra repeats it. This becomes the basis for a lively rondo. Contrasting episodes of finger-popping virtuosity from the soloist and bold statements from the orchestra are interspersed with this lighthearted theme throughout the movement.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Symphony No. 4 in A Major, Opus 90, *Italian*



COMPOSER: Born February 3, 1809, Hamburg; died November 4, 1847, Leipzig
WORK COMPOSED: 1833, rev. 1834
WORLD PREMIERE: Mendelssohn led the Philharmonic Society in London on May 13, 1833
INSTRUMENTATION: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings
ESTIMATED DURATION: 27 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

In 1830 and 1831, Felix Mendelssohn traveled in Italy, spending most of his time in Rome. While there, Mendelssohn wrote several of his best-known works, including the *Italian* Symphony. Although widely considered the finest of Mendelssohn's symphonies, the *Italian* failed to please its creator. Even after its auspicious premiere, which Mendelssohn conducted to great acclaim in London, the 24-year-old composer was dissatisfied. Ignaz Moscheles, a close friend of Mendelssohn's, who attended the premiere, noted in his diary, "Mendelssohn was the outstanding success of the concert; he conducted his magnificent A major Symphony and received rapturous applause." Nonetheless, soon after the premiere, Mendelssohn began making revisions. He continued tinkering with Opus 90 until his death and observed that the symphony caused him "some of the bitterest moments I have ever endured." In the end, Mendelssohn's dissatisfaction with the *Italian* Symphony led to his refusal to conduct it again or permit it to be published during his lifetime.

Mendelssohn's abiding unhappiness over Opus 90 is puzzling; both Moscheles and Mendelssohn's sister Fanny, a gifted composer herself, praised its form, artful melodies, and overall grace. Unconvinced, Mendelssohn continued revising it and left a detailed outline of changes he wanted to make to the first three movements. Four years after Mendelssohn's death, the *Italian* Symphony was published, albeit without Mendelssohn's revisions. Since then, audiences have embraced the work, and it is among Mendelssohn's most popular and most frequently programmed symphonies.

When recalling his trip to Italy, Mendelssohn said, "The whole country had such a festive air that I felt as if I were a young prince making his entry." The Allegro vivace reflects the relaxed confidence of a young man on the brink of new adventures, as well as the warmth of the Italian sun, the deep blueness of the sky, and the sunny temperament of the Italian people. The mood of the Andante con moto is more introspective; the melody, in a minor key, is supported by pizzicato strings, which provide a walking bass line suggestive of footsteps. Mendelssohn observed a number of Church rituals during his stay in Rome, and this processional quality suggests the solemn rites of a religious ceremony. With the Con moto moderato, Mendelssohn returns to the warmth of the first movement, taming its exuberance into a graceful minuet, accompanied by a trio of winds and brasses. Mendelssohn titled the final movement a saltarello, after an energetic Italian dance. The rapid-fire theme skips nimbly and without pause through the orchestra, first in the winds, then the strings and brasses. The perpetual-motion quality of this music suggests another Italian dance, the tarantella, named for the mistaken belief that immediate exertion would save the victim of a tarantula's bite from its deadly poison.

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Elizabeth Schwartz is a writer and music historian based in the Portland area. She has been a program annotator for more than 20 years and works with music festivals and ensembles around the country. Schwartz has also contributed to NPR's "Performance Today," (now heard on American Public Media.)

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Photo of Caroline Shaw by Kait Moreno