

Total performance time: approximately 100 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Sir Andrés Schiff

[Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment](#)
[Andrés Schiff](#) fortepiano, conductor

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

Piano Concerto No.1 in G minor, Op.25 (1830–31) 20'

- i. *Molto allegro con fuoco*
- ii. *Andante*
- iii. *Presto—Molto allegro e vivace*

Symphony No.1 in C minor, Op.11 (1824) 35'

- i. *Allegro di molto*
- ii. *Andante*
- iii. *Menuetto: Allegro molto*
- iv. *Allegro con fuoco*

INTERVAL

Symphony No.4 in A, Op.90 'Italian' (1833, rev. 1834) 27'

- i. *Allegro vivace*
- ii. *Andante con moto*
- iii. *Con moto moderato*
- iv. *Saltarello: Presto*

Piano Concerto No.1 in G minor

At 22, Mendelssohn was spurred into writing his first piano concerto by that timeless inspiration, calf-love. Delphine von Schauroth, a fine pianist from an aristocratic family in Munich, could, by Mendelssohn's own admission, wrap the whole establishment round her little finger if she so wished. But despite dedicating the concerto to her, Mendelssohn had pragmatic aims too: he gave its first performance himself, during a tour in which he featured as composer, pianist and conductor.

'Mendelssohn does something that Mozart and even Beethoven never did: he composed it through, so that there is no break,' András Schiff says. 'Transition passages lead from one movement to the next. The piano concertos are rather economical, perhaps on the short side, but never too short or too long. The G minor has a wonderful opening, very Shakespearean in tone. I think Shakespeare is always in the back of his mind, whether it is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Tempest*.'

Mendelssohn gives his soloist maximum opportunity for display: the piano writing is often light and filigree and dashes forward at exuberant speed. But Mendelssohn had no time for empty virtuosity: this music is full of melodic wonders and inspired twists. The opening movement fizzles with drama, the second is exquisitely lyrical, and the work concludes with an exhilarating finale.

Symphony No.1

A child prodigy whose efforts exceeded Mozart's at similar age, Felix Mendelssohn was fortunate to be nurtured by his cultured family in Berlin. His juvenilia include 13 symphonies for strings, written well before his celebrated teenage efforts, the Octet and the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and his official Symphony No.1 was composed when he was 15. 'It comes as a sequel to those string symphonies, but with full orchestra,' András Schiff says. 'It shows an incredible sense of form, proportion and counterpoint. Polyphony is everywhere in it.'

The symphony was premiered privately on 14 November 1824, to celebrate Felix's sister Fanny's 19th birthday. The Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra gave its first public performance on 1 February 1827, and in 1829 the composer conducted it in London, presenting the Philharmonic Society with its manuscript. The occasion helped to launch his dazzling reputation in Britain.

Mozart, Weber and Beethoven are audible influences, while plentiful counterpoint reflects his appetite for Bach. The first movement is full of Beethovenian fieriness and Mendelssohn's characteristic energy-in-overdrive. In the slow movement violin and woodwind seem effortlessly to offset one another's lines. A scherzo-like Menuetto is third, with an emollient central trio. The seething finale, nodding towards Mozart's Symphony No.40, forms a rousing conclusion.

Symphony No.4, 'Italian'

'This is Italy!' Mendelssohn wrote to his parents. 'And now has begun what I have always thought ... to be the supreme joy in life. And I am loving it.' His words are virtually mirrored in his 'Italian' Symphony's sun-drenched opening.

Between 1829 and 1832, he undertook some mind-broadening European travels, which included about a year and a half in Italy. He declared that his 'Italian' Symphony sprang from every aspect of the country: landscape, people and culture. For him, perhaps following Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony, it was perfectly acceptable for music to draw on extramusical inspirations.

It was his third full-scale symphony (their numbering bears little relation to their chronology) and he conducted its 1833 premiere with London's Philharmonic Society. Nevertheless, it went unpublished until 1851. Having revised it in 1834, he had intended to write alternative versions of the last three movements. Perhaps fortunately, he never did.

The symphony opens with a Tarantella-like allegro; there follows a slow movement resembling a pilgrims' song, a warm and gracious minuet, and a dizzying Saltarello finale. András Schiff says: 'The Italian is a perfect symphony, compact and condensed. It is one of the few pieces that start in the major and end in the minor, though there are plenty the other way around. Mendelssohn was a keen traveller and such a sensitive artist that he could create atmospheres like the opening, full of light, like a breath of fresh air and joy. The second movement and the finale are quite different, however. My Neapolitan friends tell me that they are melancholic folk: jolly on the surface, but with something darker beneath. I think Mendelssohn captures that quality in this incredible final movement.'

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The Underrated Giant: Talking about Mendelssohn with Sir András Schiff

Who needs an excuse to celebrate a composer as fine as Felix Mendelssohn? Strangely, though, he and his reputation remain entrapped in a cats-cradle of paradoxes. He is at once the best-loved and most underrated of early Romantic geniuses.

He was a painstaking, obsessive craftsman, yet his music sounds effortless. The results are often structurally conservative, but groundbreaking in Romantic, programmatic content. He was born Jewish and became a convinced Lutheran. And while celebrated far and wide for his compositions, he was equally successful as a conductor and as founder of the Leipzig Conservatory. Indeed, he was probably the 19th-century's closest equivalent to the multitasking, multitasking Leonard Bernstein.

Ask András Schiff why he wanted to create a Mendelssohn series now and the response is a beaming smile. 'It's a love affair,' he says. 'He is still so underrated and I feel we have to help. There are composers who are not enough appreciated – Haydn is one, Mendelssohn is another – but these are giants.'

'The more I study Mendelssohn, the more I know about him, the more lovable he seems, both as a human being and as a musician. There is so much to admire and to thank him for. For example, we wouldn't have had a Bach renaissance without him.' Given a manuscript copy of the Bach St Matthew Passion as a gift by his grandmother while he was a teenager, Mendelssohn, aged 20, staged the work's first public revival since its composer's death.

The underrating of Mendelssohn would seem baffling, were there not such an undercurrent of darker 19th-century forces behind it. First, Schiff points out wryly, society tends to have certain romantic notions about its artists. 'We have the preconceived idea that great art comes from suffering,' he says. 'And also that we are such good people, we in humankind! We love compassion. We love to feel sorry for someone, because basically it makes us feel that we are better people.'

The trouble is that Mendelssohn is not an obvious underdog. Rather the opposite. He started life as a phenomenal child prodigy and was raised in a happy and wealthy family, with parents who steeped him and his equally talented elder sister, Fanny, in the finest cultural education of the day. 'How about adopting the opposite of the traditional attitude? To be happy for somebody else's happiness, success and talent?' Schiff suggests, and he's not wrong.

One other aspect of Mendelssohn that is often underestimated is how technically demanding his music is. Performing the piano concertos is a challenge even without directing from the keyboard. When I spoke to him, Schiff was still considering exactly which fortepiano to choose for these concertos. 'If you find a real historical instrument from the time which is in good condition, it's very difficult to transport and to travel with, and they go out of tune immediately,' he comments. 'So it will probably be a very good copy of a Graf or a Streicher.'

The instrument will need, first and foremost, a light touch: 'Mendelssohn's piano writing in the concertos, but also in general, presents very light textures. You need great dexterity: there are lots of notes, but it's never crowded. It's transparent. But for that, you have to play transparently.'

'I don't think there is room for conducting in addition. The hands are busy most of the time! I will occasionally stand up and lead for the *tutti*s, but mostly I will leave it to the leader – and the OAE has wonderful leaders. We work it out like chamber music.'

There is a disturbing aspect to the underrating of Mendelssohn, however. In short, attitudes that derive from anti-Semitic smears originally put about by Richard Wagner are sometimes still unthinkingly parroted in the 21st century. 'Wagner was a great genius, but a terrible character. What he wrote in his essay "Das Judenthum in der Musik" ('Jewishness in Music') is unforgivable.' In this notorious, bile-filled pamphlet, written in 1850, a couple of years after Mendelssohn's death, Wagner accused him of writing music that was 'sweet and tinkling without depth'.

'Unfortunately, his verdict is still very effective, and especially in the German speaking world,' Schiff says. 'I still hear these derogatory half-remarks from musicians in Germany, referring to him as a little salon composer. This outrages me. I can't change the world, but maybe I can convince a few people that this is not just worth playing and listening to, but is very great music indeed.'

Wagner's comments were fuelled largely by jealousy. But Mendelssohn's material success was the result both of extraordinary talent and of hard work on several fronts. 'Mendelssohn was a master conductor who knew the orchestra inside out,' Schiff says. 'You don't find any balance problems, especially not with the OAE. There are those wonderful passages in the middle movement of the G minor Piano Concerto – so beautiful, completely like chamber music – but my experience was also when we did the Schumann concerto, and even the Brahms concertos, that with the right approach and the right orchestra, the balance problems you sometimes experience with modern instruments disappear.'

But with his hefty schedule of conducting, directing the Conservatory, travelling (he came ten times to Britain), composing and raising a family of five, Mendelssohn always seemed to be working at twice the speed and intensity of most other musicians. You can hear it in his music; his soundworld seems to 'vibrate' at exceptional velocity. 'He worked with this burning intensity,' Schiff says. 'It's true that it was a major blow when his sister, Fanny, died [in spring 1847], but in the end I think he worked himself to death.' Mendelssohn died of a stroke, the same ailment that had killed Fanny, in November 1847.

And so, from music to letters to his impressive painting and drawing, Mendelssohn's legacy is one to treasure. 'I have a wonderful watercolour of Amalfi by Mendelssohn on my piano at home,' Schiff says. 'It is an eternal inspiration. Anything he touched turned into gold.'

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