Felix Mendelssohn – Symphony No. 3 (Scottish)

Felix Mendelssohn

Born February 3, 1809, Hamburg, Germany.
Died November 4, 1847, Leipzig, Germany.

Composition History
Mendelssohn began sketching the Scottish Symphony in 1829. In 1831, he stopped work on the score for a decade, and the symphony was not completed until 1842. Mendelssohn conducted the first performance on March 3, 1842, in Leipzig. The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately forty-three minutes.

Performance History
The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Mendelssohn’s Third Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on January 1 and 2, 1892, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on October 8, 9, 10, 11, and 13, 1998, with Yaron Traub conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 5, 1942, with Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting, and most recently on August 14, 2009, with James Conlon conducting.

Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, Op. 56 (Scottish)
Among Mendelssohn’s earliest teachers was Johann Gottlob Samuel Rosel, a landscape painter who thought his bright young pupil might make his living painting and drawing rather than writing and performing music. From an early age, Mendelssohn displayed many talents; he wrote poetry, sketched madly, and, as we more readily remember, began composing early enough to write two enduring masterpieces as a teenager (the Octet and the Overture to Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream). Mendelssohn did not lose his fondness for landscape painting once his musical talent began to overshadow his other gifts, although he drew his most famous pictures in music.

Travel always ignited Mendelssohn’s inspiration. In 1823, after a family vacation in Switzerland, the fourteen-year-old composer used Swiss folk songs in two string symphonies. He made his first important solo journey in 1829 at his parents’ urging, and it too produced musical benefits.
Mendelssohn left Berlin on April 10, 1829, to join his friend Karl Klingemann in England. While in London, Mendelssohn found time to play four concerts before the two set off for Edinburgh. In Scotland, he met Sir Walter Scott—Mendelssohn had read all his novels—and enjoyed a bagpipe competition. On July 30, 1829, the first idea for this \textit{Scottish} Symphony came to him. He and Klingemann had gone to Holyrood, the obligatory tourist attraction where Mary, Queen of Scots supposedly fell in love with the poor Italian lutenist David Rizzio, who subsequently was murdered by the queen’s husband. Mendelssohn wrote home:

\begin{quote}
We went, in the deep twilight, to the palace where Queen Mary lived and loved. There is a little room to be seen there, with a winding staircase leading up to it. That is where they went up and found Rizzio in the little room, dragged him out, and three chambers away is a dark corner where they killed him. The adjoining chapel is now roofless; grass and ivy grow abundantly in it; and before the ruined altar Mary was crowned queen of Scotland. Everything around is broken and moldering, and the bright sky shines in. I believe I found the beginning of my Scotch symphony there today.
\end{quote}

Where tourists today take photos with their mobile phones, Mendelssohn jotted down the melody that would preserve this moment for his symphonic scrapbook.

Felix and Karl were quickly off to see other sites, including Fingal’s Cave in the Hebrides, where he wrote out another famous melody as it came to him. In a letter dated later that year, he said, “The ‘Scotch’ symphony and all the Hebrides matter is building itself up step by step.” In 1830, after a short visit back home in Berlin, Mendelssohn made another trip, this time to Italy (at the suggestion of Goethe, whom he had befriended when he was twelve and the great poet seventy-two), where he was sidetracked by the beginning of an Italian symphony. From Rome he wrote that two symphonies were “haunting his brain,” as he put it, and later that they had begun to assume more definite shape. (He managed to find time to complete \textit{The Hebrides} Overture while in Rome.)

Work on the \textit{Italian} Symphony progressed rapidly and it was the first to be finished. “The Scottish symphony alone is not yet quite to my liking,” he wrote to his sister Fanny in February 1831. “If any brilliant idea occurs to me, I will seize it at once, quickly write it down, and finish it at last.” Either Mendelssohn ran out of brilliant ideas, which seems unlikely given his track record, or else life intervened, because it was another ten years before he picked up the unfinished score and swiftly brought it to a conclusion. It was the last symphonic work he completed. By then, this symphony meant more to him than scenery, and by the time of the first performance in March 1842, Mendelssohn had dropped its \textit{Scottish} nickname. Indeed, to unsuspecting audiences, there is nothing overtly “Scottish” about the music. (In his review, Robert Schumann mistakenly believed this was Mendelssohn’s \textit{Italian} Symphony and wrote how its beauty made him regret that he had never gone to Italy!) Mendelssohn had sworn off nationalistic music ever since visiting Wales, where he was driven mad by harps and hurdy-gurdies at every turn, incessantly playing Welsh melodies—“vulgar, out-of-tune trash.” We are probably safe in detecting the mists of the Scottish highlands in Mendelssohn’s haunted opening measures, for this is the music conceived in the deep twilight at Holyrood. Mendelssohn cautioned against dramatic readings, but how many listeners still find bagpipes, Gaelic melodies, and highland flings in this symphony? There are four movements, played without pause. A snatch of the slow introduction returns at the end of the first movement to lead us toward the high
gymnastics of the scherzo that follows. Only a flicker of light separates that movement from the first doleful chords of the Adagio; later the finale also breaks in without warning.

There are many exquisite touches. The opening introduction, with its swelling wind chords, colored at first only by the sound of violas, contains some of Mendelssohn’s most expressive and profound music. The body of the movement, in sonata form, sustains the sense of urgency and drama. Near the end of the development section, the cellos begin a broad new melody, accompanied only by a scattering of chords, that carries into the recapitulation, adding a wonderful counterpoint to the main theme. The scherzo is a model of lightness and grace at lightning speed, even when the entire orchestra joins the dance, fortissimo. The slow movement, one of Mendelssohn’s many songs without words, is interrupted several times by fierce martial music suggesting that the finale is assembled and waiting on the horizon. Even Mendelssohn admitted that his A minor finale is warlike. Although two themes do battle each other, the contest throughout remains civilized and ultimately fades to a peaceful truce. The grand conclusion comes unannounced, with a switch to A major and 6/8 time, and a majestic, affirmative new theme waving the flag of victory.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

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