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

Symphony No. 5 in D Major, Op. 107 (Reformation)

Mendelssohn composed this symphony in the winter of 1829-30, completed the work in April, and conducted the first performance on November 15, 1832, in Berlin. The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-seven minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first performance of Mendelssohn's Reformation Symphony was given on a popular concert at Orchestra Hall on March 13, 1943, with Howard Barlow conducting. Our first subscription concert performance was given on November 23, 1943, with Désiré Defauw conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on November 14, 15, 17, and 19, 2002, with Lorin Maazel conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on August 5, 1950, with Pierre Monteux conducting, and most recently on August 1, 1999, with Christoph Eschenbach conducting.

In a well-known letter from 1829, Felix Mendelssohn’s father, Abraham Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, urged his son to adopt the name Bartholdy and drop Mendelssohn altogether, in order to take full advantage, in an increasingly anti-Semitic Germany, of the Lutheran identity available to him. Felix’s maternal uncle Jakob Salomon changed his name to Bartholdy (he took the name from the previous owner of a piece of real estate he had bought in Berlin). Jakob had urged the entire family to convert from Judaism to Lutheranism, and, in fact, Abraham had all of his children baptized in 1816, and he himself converted in 1822. Felix was raised as a Protestant and he knew more of the Lutheran faith than of his own religious heritage.

Late in 1829, the young Felix—who kept his hyphenated, crossover name, Mendelssohn-Bartholdy—began this symphony to commemorate the establishment of the Lutheran faith. He had been commissioned to compose music for a ceremony to be held on June 25, 1830, the three-hundredth anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, the formal document approved by Martin Luther. Although Mendelssohn worked long hours that winter to get the symphony done on time—fighting a serious case of the measles as the deadline approached—the celebrations were canceled due to the rising political tension spreading across Europe. Antoine Habeneck planned a performance in Paris in the spring of 1832, but that too was canceled after just one rehearsal because the musicians found the score unplayable (“much too learned, too much fugato, too little melody,” was one verdict). Mendelssohn was humiliated by the experience, and, as a result, he was unusually defensive about the work even before he introduced it to the public.

The symphony was finally performed, under the composer’s direction, in Berlin that November, with the subtitle “Symphony to Celebrate the Church Revolution.” Mendelssohn then withdrew it; he later said this was the one score he wished he could destroy. (Mendelssohn often was unreasonably hard on his compositions; he regularly and obsessively revised works that didn’t meet his standards and withheld others from publication.) As a result, it wasn’t published until 1868, as part of the posthumous edition of his complete works, when it was designated as the fifth of his five mature symphonies, although it was the second to be written. [The numbering of Mendelssohn’s symphonies is seriously out of order—the proper chronological sequence is 1, 5 (Reformation), 4 (Italian), 2 (Lobegesang), and 3 (Scottish).]
In Mendelssohn’s mind, this symphony was inextricably tied to the historical celebration for which it was intended, which only encouraged him to abandon it once that occasion passed. He used two themes with overt Protestant overtones that would ordinarily have no place in a symphony. To honor Luther, Mendelssohn included in his finale the beloved hymn *Ein’ feste Burg is unser Gott* (A mighty fortress is our God) that Luther had written while the Augsburg Confession was in session. (A century before Mendelssohn, Bach composed a cantata on Luther’s hymn for the Augsburg bicentennial.) For the first movement, Mendelssohn borrowed the familiar “Dresden Amen,” a serene sequence of rising chords familiar to churchgoers then and now. (Wagner, despite his dislike of Mendelssohn’s music, uses the same Amen cadence to famous effect in *Parsifal.* Both outer movements are unusually ceremonial and festive; the inner two, with no specific ties to the occasion, belong squarely within the classical symphonic tradition (Beethoven, one of Mendelssohn’s earliest heroes, had been dead for only two years when Mendelssohn began this work).

The symphony opens with the well-known four-note theme (transposed) of Mozart’s *Jupiter* finale, which sets a serious, dignified, “historical” tone as it leads to the first quiet statement of the Dresden Amen. The main body of the movement is rapid, stern, and forceful. It has a standard sonata form, but after the Amen cadence returns to announce the recapitulation, the main theme is as hushed as it originally was assertive.

The second movement is a scherzo (in substance if not in name) triggered by a single rhythmic figure that’s repeated in nearly every measure till the very last. The tone is one we now know as quintessential Mendelssohnian fleetness, offset by a genial waltzlike middle section.

The Andante is a brief, gracious song for violins. At its final chord, a flute begins to sing Luther’s great hymn, unaccompanied at first and quickly drawing in more and more voices until it is richly harmonized and proudly proclaimed. The strings then lead the music in a new direction, climaxing with a grand, vaulting theme of triumph and celebration. *Ein’ feste Burg* weaves in and out of the development section and then takes over, in majestic splendor, at the symphony's close.

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