PROGRAM NOTES

Felix Mendelssohn - *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

**Composition History**

Mendelssohn composed this overture in 1826 for performance at home, where it was first played as a piano duet by the composer and his sister Fanny. He immediately orchestrated the overture and the first public performance was given on February 20, 1827, in Stettin. Mendelssohn did not compose the remaining incidental music for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* until 1843. It was first performed privately in Potsdam on October 14, 1843, and publicly four days later in Berlin. The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, three trumpets, three trombones, ophicleide (an obsolete instrument replaced by a tuba for these performances), timpani, and strings. At these concerts, Mendelssohn’s incidental music is performed with a narration adapted from Shakespeare’s play by Ara Guzelimian.

**Performance History**

These are the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first performances of Mendelssohn’s complete Incidental Music to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Our first subscription concert performances of selections from the incidental music (Wedding March, Overture, Nocturne, and Scherzo) were given at the Auditorium Theatre on January 12 and 13, 1894, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances (Overture) were given at Orchestra Hall on November 14, 15, 17, and 19, 2002, with Lorin Maazel conducting. The Orchestra first performed a selection from the incidental music (Overture) at the Ravinia Festival on July 19, 1936, with Willem van Hoogstraten conducting, and most recently performed several selections on July 14, 2001, with Stacey Tappan and Lauren McNeese as soloists; the Chicago Children’s Choir (Josephine Lee, director); actors John de Lancie, John Mahoney, Janet Zarish, and Timothy Gregory; and Sir Andrew Davis conducting.

**For the record**

The Orchestra’s very first recording was the Wedding March from Mendelssohn’s Incidental Music to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in 1916 with Frederick Stock conducting for Columbia. The Orchestra recorded the Overture in 1979 with Daniel Barenboim conducting for Deutsche Grammophon; a 1976 performance under Sir Georg Solti is included on *From the Archives*, vol. 4: *A Tribute to Solti*. The Orchestra recorded several selections in 1967 with Jean Martinon conducting for RCA; and in 1984 with Judith Blegen and Florence Quivar as soloists, women of the Chicago Symphony Chorus (Margaret Hillis, director), and James Levine conducting for Deutsche Grammophon.
**Felix Mendelssohn**

*Born February 3, 1809, Hamburg, Germany.*

* Died November 4, 1847, Leipzig, Germany.

**Incidental Music to A Midsummer Night's Dream, Opp. 21 and 61**

In recent decades, music lovers have given Mendelssohn little thought, and the 200th anniversary of his birth this year passed with little fanfare. His life wasn't dramatic enough to inspire plays or motion pictures (he was born wealthy and died richer); his profile is too ordinary to grace a T-shirt. But during his lifetime, Robert Schumann said that “Mendelssohn is the Mozart of the nineteenth century, the most illuminating of musicians, who sees more clearly than others through the contradictions of our era and is the first to reconcile them.” Goethe went so far as to claim that Mendelssohn bore “the same relation to the little Mozart that the perfect speech of a grown man does to the prattle of a child.” Throughout the nineteenth century, Mendelssohn was regularly discussed in the same breath as Bach, or as Beethoven’s natural successor. Today, however, we are apt to take Mendelssohn for granted, despite the real beauty of his music and the undeniable significance of his achievements.

Mendelssohn was the most astonishing child prodigy among composers. Mozart, for all his brilliance, didn't find and master his own voice at so early an age, and even Schubert, one of history’s most amazing early achievers, produced nothing to compare with the Octet for strings Mendelssohn composed at sixteen or the overture to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* he wrote the following year.

Mendelssohn, admittedly, was no ordinary child. He was born into a wealthy German Jewish family and grew up in a home filled with music and literature and frequented by distinguished guests. His father Abraham was a prosperous banker, and his grandfather was the famous philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. (Years later, after Felix had made his mark, Abraham would say, “First I was the son of my father. Now I am the father of my son.”) His sister Fanny, four years older, showed exceptional musical talent, although, for reasons that have nothing to do with art, she was fated to become one of the nineteenth century’s lost composers.

From an early age Felix displayed many talents: he wrote poetry, played the piano, sketched, and drew—one of his first teachers thought his young pupil might make his name as a painter. At ten, he began to study composition with Carl Friedrich Zelter, a conservative composer who never wrote anything as impressive as Mendelssohn’s first efforts. The Mendelssohn family home in Berlin was a gathering place for the most important creative artists and intellectuals of the day, and it was there, during the regular Sunday musicales, that young Felix first heard his music performed, sometimes almost as soon as the ink was dry.

The most famous of Shakespeare’s plays were often read aloud (in August Wilhelm Schlegel’s new German translation) and sometimes even acted out in the Mendelssohn parlor. The Mendelssohn family library added Schlegel’s edition of *A*
Midsummer Night’s Dream to its collection in 1826, and it apparently was for an at-home performance of the play that year that Felix wrote this overture, originally scored for two pianos. Perhaps recognizing the magnificence of his own achievement, he orchestrated it almost at once. It was publicly performed within the year—the concert, which also featured the eighteen-year-old composer as piano soloist, marked his first public appearance—and often again during the composer’s life; its popularity hasn’t faded since.

In August of 1843, the king of Prussia, Frederick William IV, who liked Mendelssohn’s music, asked him to write incidental music for a new production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Now established, famous, and already even considered old-hat by the avant-garde, Mendelssohn quickly set to work on a “sequel” to his most celebrated work, in the process recapturing his childhood love for Shakespeare and creating some of his greatest music. (He didn’t tamper with the overture, recognizing that it was arguably his most perfect composition.) Mendelssohn interspersed the play with a series of songs, dances, entr’actes, and short melodramas (music designed to underlay the spoken words)—all taking their stylistic cues and sometimes also thematic material from the earlier overture. The result, despite the seventeen years and forty opus numbers that separate them—the overture was published as op. 21, the incidental music as op. 61—is a remarkably integrated, unified, and seamless work of theatrical music.

The Overture immediately sets the scene. With four simple, yet entirely distinctive, woodwind chords—a real “once upon a time” beginning—Mendelssohn transports us to Shakespeare’s magic-filled woods near Athens, where the play is set. The fleet, scurrying music that follows, catching fire when the last of the chords turns from major to minor, creates an indelible sonic image of the fairy world that no one, including Mendelssohn himself, has ever surpassed. And just as surely, Mendelssohn represents other elements in the play, including the young lovers and, in the homely braying of the closing theme, Bottom the Weaver turned ass.

The incidental music includes some of Mendelssohn’s loveliest and most enduring work, even though it is rarely performed in conjunction with the play it was designed to accompany. The breathtaking scherzo that introduces Shakespeare’s second act—and transports us to Shakespeare’s fairy world—is the most celebrated example of the featherlight, will-of-the-wisp style for which Mendelssohn is known. The first of two vocal pieces is a fleet, gossamer setting of “You spotted snakes” for women’s voices. The impassioned intermezzo—it serves as an entr’acte between acts 2 and 3—and the atmospheric nocturne, with its haunting horn calls, have both found a home in the concert hall. The famous wedding march—actually another entr’acte, dividing acts 4 and 5—manages to sound fresh and ingenious despite its near over-familiarity. (Listen to how Mendelssohn switches keys from the opening fanfare to the big tune that follows.) Mendelssohn lavished more music on Shakespeare’s fifth and final act than any other, including a tiny funeral march that seems to anticipate Mahler and a clown dance based on Bottom’s donkey theme from the overture. The finale is almost operatic in its sweep, incorporating both song and melodrama, and revisiting earlier music in a new light. Mendelssohn ends as he began, though the same chords, once filled with childlike anticipation, now seem forever changed.

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