

A Midsummer Night's Dream (ca. 1595)

William Shakespeare

(Baptized April 26, 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon;
died there April 23, 1616)

Incidental Music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Opp. 21 and 61 (1826, 1842)

Felix Mendelssohn

(Born February 3, 1809 in Hamburg;
died November 4, 1847 in Leipzig)

Berlin in the 1820s was a populous, densely packed city with few open spaces, "a city without lungs," wrote the art historian Karl Scheffler. Abraham Mendelssohn, father of Felix and a wealthy banker, was one of those who could afford to live beyond the city gates, where the open country made life more pleasant. The Mendelssohn home was a mansion, a small palace really, set on ten verdant acres. The residence boasted a hall for theatrical productions, while the garden house was arranged so that its large interior could be used for concerts with an audience of several hundred. There were, in fact, regular Sunday afternoon musicales in the Mendelssohn household, with Felix and his older sister, Fanny, being regular participants. (It was for those events that Mendelssohn composed and — a luxury rare among composers — heard his early music performed immediately, including the dozen lovely Symphonies for Strings.) Also on the grounds was a beautiful garden, a magical place for young Felix, where the warm days of summer were spent reading and dreaming. In later years, he told his friend the English composer William Sterndale Bennett about an evening in July 1826, "It was in that garden one night that I encountered Shakespeare."

Felix and Fanny were enamored in those years of reading the works of Shakespeare, who, next to the arch-Romantic Jean-Paul, was their favorite writer. Shakespeare's plays had been appearing in excellent German translations by Ludwig Tieck and August Schlegel (father Abraham's brother-in-law) since the turn of the century, and the young Mendelssohns particularly enjoyed the wondrous fantasy world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The play inspired the already accomplished budding composer, and plans began to stir in his imagination. Early in July, he wrote in a letter, "I have grown accustomed to composing in our garden. Today or tomorrow I am going to dream there [the music to accompany] *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. This is, however, an enormous audacity...." Within a few days, however, he had embarked on his "audacity," and was writing an overture to the play. By August 6th, the work was done. On November 19th, Felix and Fanny played the original piano duet version of the score on one of their Sunday musicales, and a private orchestral performance followed before the end of the year. In February, the work was first played publicly in Stettin. It immediately garnered a success that has never waned.

By 1842, Mendelssohn was the most famous musician in Europe and in demand everywhere. He was director of the superb Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig, a regular visitor to England, and Kapellmeister to King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia in Berlin. For Mendelssohn's Berlin duties, Friedrich required incidental music for several new productions at the Royal Theater, including Sophocles' *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, Racine's *Athalie* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This last would, of course, include the celebrated overture that Mendelssohn had written when he was seventeen, exactly half his age in 1842. He composed the twelve additional numbers of the incidental music the following spring, creating a perfect match for the inspiration and style of the overture. The premiere of the new production in November was an enormous triumph.

Franz Liszt wrote of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* music, "Mendelssohn had a real capacity for depicting these enchanted elves, for interpolating in their caressing, chirping song the bray of the donkey without rubbing us the wrong way.... No musician was so equipped to translate into music the delicate yet, in certain externals, embarrassing sentimentality of the lovers; ... no one could paint as he did the rainbow dust, the mother-of-pearl shimmering of these sprites, could capture the brilliant ascent of a royal wedding feast." The Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the greatest piece of orchestral music ever composed by one so young, including Mozart and Schubert. Woven into its sonata form are thematic representations of the woodland sprites, the shimmering light through forest leaves, the sweet sighs of the lovers, even the "ee-ah" braying of that memorable Rustic, Bottom, when he is

turned into an ass. In matters of formal construction, orchestral color and artistic polish, this Overture is, quite simply, a masterpiece.

The *Scherzo*, the Entr'acte to Act II, is the music that, in the words of Sir George Grove, "brought the fairies into the orchestra and fixed them there." Its winsome grace and incandescent sonorities defined in large part the idea of delicacy in music, and there has never been another major composer (only Saint-Saëns and Berlioz come close) who was so well able to conjure exactly this mood in his works.

The *March of the Elves* accompanies the appearance of the mischievous woodland sprites in Act II, Scene 1.

The *Song with Chorus* ("You spotted snakes ... Philomel, with melody") is sung by the fairies in Act II, Scene 2 to protect the sleeping Titania from the evils of the enchanted wood.

The *Entr'acte/Intermezzo* to Act III is a swift and agitated piece that depicts the desperation of Shakespeare's pairs of lovers caused by a magic spell that has made one of the men fall in love with the wrong woman; the movement concludes with a bumptious country dance to accompany the entry of the Rustics whose style recalls moments from *Der Freischütz* by Mendelssohn's friend Carl Maria von Weber.

The *Nocturne* evokes the magic slumber of the lovers in the moonlit forest in Act III, Scene 2 through the burnished sonorities of horns and bassoons.

The majestic *Wedding March*, the Entr'acte to Act V, accompanies the festive triple wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, Demetrius and Helena, and Lysander and Hermia.

The *Funeral March* accompanies the arrival of Bottom and the Rustics in Act V to perform their riotous *Pyramus and Thisbe*. They exit to the *Dance of the Clowns*.

The *Finale*, based on themes from the Overture, is the background to the last lines of the play, some spoken over the musical accompaniment, some sung by a soprano soloist and a chorus of fairies to accompany dancing. Mendelssohn's incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* closes as it began, with the bewitching woodwind chords that seem to distill the very essence of Shakespeare's enchanted wood.

Inserted into the score are several *melodramas*, spoken lines accompanied by or interrupting the music — *Over hill, over dale* (Act II, Scene 1); *What hempen homespuns have we swaggering here* (Act III, Scene 1); *Be as thou wast* (Act IV, Scene 1) — as well as a brief instrumental *Andante* in Act II, Scene 3 and a reprise of the *Wedding March* in Act V (*Music between Scenes*).

Of Mendelssohn's inspired music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Charles O'Connell wrote, "There is a magic in it ... an elfin gaiety, a diaphanous delicacy, an ethereal quality compounded of dew and honey and the nectar of flowers, the scents of flowers on warm midnight airs, the rhythm of flowers and tiny feet dancing 'neath the towering blades of grass. There are pranks and clowning, true love and black magic, pathos and the pleasant, impossible conceits of a poet's imagination."

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TEXT OF THE "SONG WITH CHORUS"

You spotted snakes with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen;
Newts and blind-worms, do no wrong,
Come not near our fairy queen.
Philomel, with melody
Sing in our sweet lullaby;
Lulla, lulla, lullaby:
Never harm,
Nor spell nor charm,
Come our lovely lady nigh;
So, good night, with lullaby.

Weaving spiders, come not here;
Hence, you long-legged spinners, hence!
Beetles black, approach not near;
Worm nor snail, do no offence.
Philomel, with melody ...

Hence, away! now all is well:
One aloof stand sentinel.

TEXT OF THE FINALE

(Chorus) Through the house give glimmering light,
By the dead and drowsy fire:
Every elf and fairy sprite
Hop as light as bird from brier;
And this ditty, after me,
Sing, and dance it trippingly.

(Solo) First, rehearse your song by rote,
To each word a warbling note:
Hand in hand, with fairy grace,
Will we sing, and bless this place.

(Chorus) Through the house...

(Spoken) Now, until the break of day,
Through this house each fairy stray.
With this field-dew consecrate,
Every fairy take his gait;
And each several chamber bless,
Through this palace, with sweet peace;
And the owner of it blest
Ever shall in safety rest.

(Sung) Trip away; make no stay;
Meet me all by break of day.

(Spoken) If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend:
If you pardon, we will mend:
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearned luck
Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long;
Else the Puck a liar call:
So, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.