

Prelude

“Inside Masterworks”

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Masterworks #4: A Scottish Fantasy | January 19-21, 2018

Mendelssohn: A German musician and composer, embraced by England, whose music is played at weddings throughout the United States.



While the term “child prodigy” may be overused, it appropriately describes Felix Mendelssohn. Starting piano lessons at age 6, Felix quickly displayed astonishing technical skills and emotional expression. When 12-year-old Felix performed for the renowned Ludwig van Beethoven in 1821, the elder composer made the following notation in a conversation book: “Mendelssohn – 12-years old – promises much.”ⁱ

Mendelssohn began composing as a child, and his first piano quartet was published when he was just 13 years old. By his late teens, while a skilled pianist, Felix focused on composition. His wildly successful *Overture to a Midsummer Night's Dream* saw its premier in the summer of 1826: the young composer was just 17 years old.ⁱⁱ



Felix Mendelssohn and his sister, Fanny Mendelssohn

By 1829, Felix Mendelssohn was renowned in his native Germany. Having completed four semesters of study at the University of Berlin, the 20-year-old embarked on a tour abroad. Instead of traveling to Italy and France, as was then customary, Mendelssohn felt a trip to London and then Scotland would be an exciting alternative.ⁱⁱⁱ In May of 1829, his C Minor Symphony debuted in London to overwhelming acclaim, and from there, he continued his travels to Scotland with his close friend, Karl Klingemann, who was working as a diplomat in London.^{iv}

Mendelssohn, an avid fan of the poet, Sir Walter Scott,^v was eager to see the home of his favorite writer. The poems of Sir Walter Scott had already inspired great music: Sullivan's *Ivanhoe* as well as two of the most famous operas in the repertory, Donizetti's *La Donna del Lago* and *Lucia di Lammermoor* were directly influenced by Scott's stories.^{vi}

It is easy to imagine the two impressionable young fans, determined to meet their hero, heading straight to Scott's home, Abbotsford House, without any set plans or introduction, but hoping to run into their idol.^{vii} In a letter to Mendelssohn's parents, Karl Klingemann painted an exciting picture of their 'encounter' with Scott, insisting that he and Felix had spent the day in fascinating conversation with Scott and his wife.^{viii} Mendelssohn's postscript in the letter made clear that the encounter was entirely fantasy, the product of Karl's over-active imagination:

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"P.S. by Felix- This is all Klingemann's invention. We found Sir Walter in the act of leaving Abbotsford, stared at him like fools, drove eighty miles and lost a day for the sake of, at best, one half-hour of superficial conversation... we were out of humor with great men, with ourselves, with the world, with everything. It was a bad day."^{ix}

As documented in Mendelssohn's journal, the rest of the trip through Scotland was exciting and beautiful. A gifted artist, Mendelssohn also documented scenes from their journey.^x After their disappointing trip to Sir Walter Scott's home, Felix and Karl traveled through the Scottish highlands, visiting places such as Perth and Dunkeld. As the summer continued, Mendelssohn saw the Falls of Moness (immortalized by the poems of Robert Burns) as well as Loch Lomond and the city of Glasgow.^{xi}

Mendelssohn's trip to the British Isles became more than just a fondly remembered vacation; Great Britain quickly became the composer's second home, and, during his all-too short life, he made at least 10 visits to England.^{xii} The English



Felix Mendelssohn, Prince Albert and Queen Victoria

returned Mendelssohn's affections and were ardent supporters of his music.^{xiii} The composer's close friends in England included Charles Dickens, the young Queen Victoria and her consort, Prince Albert.^{xiv}

Inspired by his visits to England and Scotland, Mendelssohn began composing his Symphony No. 3; it took more than a decade to complete. The work, known as his "Scottish" Symphony, commemorated his visit to Holyrood Chapel in Edinburgh and the highlands,^{xv} and was dedicated to Queen Victoria, as he had become the Queen's favorite composer.^{xvi} One of the most celebrated works during the composer's lifetime was the English-language oratorio, *Elijah*, which

premiered in 1846 to an enthusiastic audience in Birmingham.^{xvii} Mendelssohn became the most popular composer in 19th century England, whose influence on English music was equal to George Frederic Handel.^{xviii}

Mendelssohn's impressive memory amazed even his fellow musicians. At a monumental revival performance of Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*, Felix was featured as piano soloist and conductor. But when he took his seat at the piano, the wrong score had been placed on the stand. Rather than delaying the performance to secure the correct music, Mendelssohn chose to keep the score open, pretended to reference it periodically (even regularly turning pages) as he conducted and performed, playing and conducting the entire composition from memory.

Lunday, Elizabeth, *The Secret Lives of Great Composers*, Quirk Books, 2009

Despite his premature death at age 37, the music of Mendelssohn infuses our lives: almost every wedding features the bridal procession music from his *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The practice of using *The Wedding March* for bridal processions originates from a performance of the piece at the wedding of the Princess Royal in 1858, roughly 11 years after Mendelssohn's death.^{xix}



Felix Mendelssohn memorial in Leipzig, Germany

Please join the Hartford Symphony Orchestra for **A Scottish Fantasy, January 19 – 21, 2018**, celebrating Mendelssohn and other composers whose music offers a tribute to the vivid imagery of Scotland and the Scottish Highlands.

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Wondering How the Music Will Sound?

Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE below, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage!

Please try this link to hear a full recording of Mendelssohn's Scottish Symphony, conducted by Kurt Masur:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-zoNEO55yU>

To hear Bruch's Scottish Fantasy in E-flat Major Op. 46 performed by renowned violinist David Oistrakh:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WKUaqrgA6w>

Maxwell Davies' Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise Op. 120b, Adam Johnson conductor, North York Moors Festival 2014:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luDLxKmkUkw>

For a taste of more Scottish music, we suggest:

"Auld Rob Morris": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PB6ow0PrHUg>

"Scots Wha Hae": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inmJFbvRtJg>

Billy Connolly, "I Wish I Was in Glasgow":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDXIYFDIC38>



Felix Mendelssohn's "Elijah"



"The Portrait of Felix Mendelssohn", Watercolor painting, James Warren Childe

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The return of Casey's Classics

Recommended recordings for your listening pleasure!

Want the best recordings of the pieces you'll experience on the concert program?

Coleman Casey, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers the following recommendations for recordings of selections featured on our upcoming Masterworks Concert:

Peter Maxwell Davies' most popular piece, *Orkney Wedding with Sunrise*, is spectacularly performed by George McIlwhen (bagpipes) with none other than the composer conducting the Royal Philharmonic (NAXOS).

Kyung Wha Chung is the finest of interpreters of Bruch's somewhat rambling *Scottish Fantasy*, which she and the conductor Rudolf Kempe with the Royal Philharmonic perform with complete commitment (DECCA).

Mendelssohn's "Scottish" Symphony has dozens of recordings, but Peter Maag's with the London Symphony is among the best, and the recording from the late 1950s totally belies its age (DECCA).

Did you borrow this Prelude? Get your own free copy!

Whether you're a ticket buyer, donor, curious about the music, or know someone who is, just send an email to rsovronsky@hartfordsymphony.org. We'll make sure you receive Prelude by email, in advance of each HSO Masterworks concert!

¹ <http://www.classicfm.com/composers/mendelssohn/>

² "Mendelssohn in Scotland." Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. November 06, 2015. <http://www.oae.co.uk/mendelssohn-in-scotland/>

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Sir Walter Scott." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 15 Jan. 2017. www.britannica.com/biography/Sir-Walter-Scott-1st-Baronet.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Felix-Mendelssohn>

¹³ Lockspeiser, Edward. "Felix Mendelssohn." Encyclopædia Britannica. March 02, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Felix-Mendelssohn>.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ <http://www.biography.com/people/felix-mendelssohn-40373>

¹⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Felix-Mendelssohn>

¹⁷ <http://www.biography.com/people/felix-mendelssohn-40373>

¹⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Felix-Mendelssohn>

¹⁹ Ibid