

Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 21—Felix Mendelssohn

Mendelssohn was a prodigy, born into a distinguished family of Jewish bankers and philosophers. He and his sister Fanny—also a talented composer, conductor, and pianist—were raised in a warm, intellectual, highly supportive artistic family. In fact, Felix and his sister were incredibly precocious. He was probably one of the best-educated major composers of all time. Voracious readers, interested in science and philosophy, and daily conversationalists with the leading minds of Germany, the siblings even started their own literary magazine in their early teens. Obviously, they matured quickly, and a stream of musical compositions soon flowed from them both. Mendelssohn was clearly one of the most important German composers of the 19th century, and infused the expressiveness of early romantic music with the clarity and intellectuality of Mozart and Haydn's classicism. This exquisite balance found expression in a wide variety of musical genres; Mendelssohn was as at home writing Protestant oratorios such as *Elijah* and *St. Paul* as he was composing chamber music and symphonies. He created a significant body of work in his relatively short life, including major works for orchestra that constitute an important part of today's repertoire. These works include five symphonies, six concert overtures, and six concertos.

His musical style reflects, to a large degree, his upbringing and his personality—it speaks of discipline, balance, and an overall cheerful, largely untroubled mien. While his compositions reflect solicitude for clear, balanced musical structures, and an obvious avoidance of excess of romantic emotion and empty virtuosity, there is nevertheless a sentimental and emotive quality to them. His personal musical voice reached maturity by the remarkable age of seventeen, a feat some say that even Mozart did not attain.

Fanny and Felix, like so many on the continent during the 19th century, adored Shakespeare, and the concert overture inspired by *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for two pianos (to be played by brother and sister) was written when Mendelssohn was seventeen. He soon orchestrated it, and his facility at that task is no less an achievement than the overture's composition itself. Mendelssohn captured Shakespeare's world of fairies, Oberon and Tatiana, gossamer atmospheres, magic, elves, and donkeys with a deft facility that is simply unmatched—even by Berlioz.

The magic begins immediately with the immortal four chords of the opening—a remarkably simple little affair, but memorable for their effect, and the source for many of the tunes in the work. As the instrumentation builds from chord to chord, the curtain rises in our mind's eye and we are transported to Shakespeare's enchanted world. A spritely dance for fairies begins straightaway and we are off. While the musical structure is conventional, it is cloaked in the marvelous tunes that evoke the players' personalities, even closing the first section with a humorous “hee-haw” from Bottom, the donkey. After working through the themes, the magic chords that open the work return and, after a reprise, the work ends with the same soft chords of the beginning—chords that draw our reverie to a sleepy close, and in Franz Liszt characterization, we slowly open our eyes.

Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 54—Robert Schumann

This work was Schumann's first piano concerto, the best of the lot, and deservedly one of the most popular in all of the repertoire. Schumann composed in almost all of the common genres, and notwithstanding his success in the larger forms, did perhaps his most respected work in song and piano literature. A gifted and passionate musician, he was privileged to be married to the love of his life, Clara Wieck, herself a respected composer and highly regarded concert pianist. Known—at least during his lifetime—almost as much for his distinguished career as music critic and essayist, even today his analyses and commentaries lend valuable insights into the music of his milieu and times. He was a formidable pianist—his wife even more so—and his contributions to the piano stand with those of Schubert, Chopin, and Brahms in artistic significance.

Schumann was a Romantic to the core, as evidenced by the deep emotional feeling imbued in his works; by his great appreciation for fine poetry in his song settings; and by his ability to create unique and profound art in the briefest of music moments. Yet, withal, he had great respect for clarity, balance, and formal integrity so characteristic of the music of Classicism. It must be admitted, however, that to some degree his deep passions and emotional self-indulgences can be seen as aspects of a personality that ultimately broke down in the psychoses and pathologies that led to his early death in an institution. He was happy early on, however, and the years of his early marriage to Clara brought forth masterworks in spades, as his mind focused extraordinarily in narrow directions. He wrote primarily piano music during the 1830s, over 125 songs in 1840 (he called it his “year of song”), symphonic music in 1841, chamber music in 1842, and so on.

The A minor piano concerto stems originally from the year of symphonic music, 1841, and originally took the form of a single movement for piano and orchestra, which he entitled a *Phantasie*. It almost resembles a miniature concerto in one movement, for each of its three main sections—unlike the norm typical of usual first-movement form—has its own character and tempo. Moreover, he constructs most of the movement from essentially one idea (some say a kind of musical anagram of a pet nickname for Clara). In the middle section, he recasts the opening theme into the major mode, in a kind of nocturnal mood. The last section takes its course in yet a new mood, but with reference to the opening theme. After the première of the work in that form in the same year, he sought unsuccessfully for a publisher. Failing to find one, he put it away, but returned to the composition almost four years later, while recovering in Dresden from severe depression, exhaustion, and a variety of phobias. Deciding to remake the *Phantasie* into a regular piano concerto with the usual three movements, he added to it a slow movement and a finale in 1845. In that form, it was published the next year, and as they say, the rest is history.

The work, notwithstanding the composer's pianist abilities, reflects his deep suspicions of empty virtuoso bombast so often characteristic of contemporary piano works. While a document of true romantic feeling and expression, and certainly not without its moments of formidable technical challenges, it is a work of romantic taste of the highest order. Some elements of the first movement have been mentioned, and further notice should be given of the delightful and solicitous writing for solo woodwinds that engage the piano soloist. The *Intermezzo* of the second movement gracefully explores a variety of reflective moods and moves without pause into the buoyant finale. This last

movement treats the theme of the first movement in the major mode, varying it constantly—both procedures common to the romantic period. Yet in its midst the orchestra takes a shot at fugue-like passage—definitely a relic of the distant past of J.S. Bach. We must remember that at the time of the composition of this movement the composer and Clara had just finished a series of preludes and fugues in that old Baroque style. The dance-like theme hurdles along merrily, alternating with excursions to contrasting materials, before ending jubilantly. We are more than fortunate that the early indifference to this ingratiating work led Schumann to flesh it out in such an endearing fashion, and it reminds us of the happier moments in truly gifted artist's bittersweet life.

Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 16--Edward Grieg

Easily Grieg's most famous work, it was composed in 1868 when the composer was only twenty-five years of age. Married the year before, he, his wife, and their two-month old daughter were in Denmark escaping the more rigorous Norwegian climate. Grieg was an excellent pianist—it was a major focus of his life as a composer—and had the privilege of hearing Schumann's piano concerto played by Schumann's wife, the great *virtuosa*, Clara Schumann, while a student at the Leipzig conservatory. It has long been accepted that the Schumann composition influenced much of the young Grieg's concerto. With its multitude of attractive melodies and its dramatic musical rhetoric, it became a Norwegian favorite almost immediately—although the rest of the world warmed to it gradually. The greatest pianist of the time, Franz Liszt, however, read it early on and praised it with unreserved enthusiasm. Later, near the end of Grieg's life, Percy Grainger—a leading piano virtuoso of the time—spent time with Grieg in Norway studying the work and promoted it for the next half century.

Grieg's musical panache is in evidence from the beginning when the timpani crescendos right into the soloist's big-time entry. This dramatic beginning is followed by a winsome succession of tunes—seven, all told—memorably led by the melody in the cellos accompanied by trombone chords. The tender second movement has been associated with Grieg's response to the recent birth of his daughter, Alexandra. The last movement is based upon the rhythms of the traditional Norwegian folkdance, the *halling*, with a lyrical diversion in the middle featuring a solo flute.

While the popular idea of Grieg today may pigeonhole him as a late Romantic nationalist, master of ingratiating tunes, and painter of quaint Scandinavian scenes, he is much more. He was strongly influential upon Debussy—especially in comparing their respective string quartets—and upon the evolution of advanced harmonic thinking in general. In a famous exaggeration, Frederick Delius observed that: “Modern French music is simply Grieg plus the prelude to the third act of *Tristan*.” Persiflage perhaps, but more than a grain of truth there.

--Wm. E. Runyan