

Concert 1

September 24, 2016

The Hebrides Overture, op. 26--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. They matured early, and a stream of musical compositions flowed from both of them. Mendelssohn was clearly one of the most important German composers of his time; he 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 much at home writing Protestant oratorios such as *Elijah* and *St. Paul* as he was chamber music and symphonies. He composed a significant body of work in his relatively short life, including major works for orchestra that constitute an important part of today's repertoire. The major works include five symphonies, six concert overtures, and six concertos.

The Hebrides Overture, equally well known as the *Fingal's Cave Overture*, is not an introduction to a larger work, but simply a stand-alone concert piece. Like so many musical compositions of the romantic period, it does have an extra-musical inspiration—although it does not tell any stories. Rather, it was simply inspired by the composer's feelings in the presence of specific experiences, in the way that Mendelssohn's visit in 1830 inspired his Italian Symphony.

In 1829 Mendelssohn traveled to Scotland, touring extensively, and visited Sir Walter Scott, with whom he made a trip to the western coast, looking out on the Hebrides. There, on August 7, he conceived the main theme of the overture. The next day he visited Fingal's Cave, on the desolate island of Staffa, as well as the island of Iona. It wasn't until late in 1830, during a visit to Rome that Mendelssohn finished the Scottish overture, and dedicated it to his father as a birthday present. Later, in May 1832 in London, he heard its première, given by the Philharmonic Society.

The first theme of the work, heard right away, is a descending figure played in the low strings, which gives an admirable evocation of the loneliness of the image. The other main theme, an arresting one announced by a kind of fanfare in the brass, is soon heard in the cellos and bassoons. It suggests the inversion of the first and it remarkably calls to mind the action of wind and waves. The overture is in sonata form, and the development section depicts a maelstrom of nature. The recapitulation continues this stormy mood, which is broken with a quiet clarinet duet. The storm resumes, and finally gentle woodwind figures restate the opening themes, softly ending this remarkable evocation of the rugged Scottish coast.

Piano Concerto for Two Pianos in E Major—Mendelssohn

In addition to his remarkable, broad education in the liberal arts, he and Fanny studied music, of course. Their precociousness was recognized early on. Young Felix began piano lessons at the age of six—all four of the siblings studied piano. The family's wealth and social position afforded them access to Europe's outstanding teachers and performers, and Felix and Fanny advanced with impressive abilities. In addition to their piano studies the two siblings studied counterpoint and composition with a well-known scholar, and benefited immensely by a veritable immersion in the music of the Baroque and Classic periods, especially J. S. Bach and

Mozart. Their compositional efforts began early, and an impressive stream of compositions poured forth by Felix's early teens, including the twelve "string symphonies."

His concerto for two pianos in E was written in 1823, when the composer was fourteen, and was first performed by Fanny and him in December of that year at the home of their father, Abraham. It is his fourth essay in the concerto genre, having just finished three others in the previous year's time. He went on to compose a second concerto for two pianos the very next year. Interestingly, the E major concerto enjoyed only two other performances for the rest of the century: six years later in London with his friend the great virtuoso, Ignaz Moscheles, and some thirty years later by two students of Moscheles. After that it lay unknown until 1950 when its manuscript was "rediscovered."

The concerto obviously was conceived as a showpiece for the young siblings. Accordingly it is replete with the kinds of impressive virtuoso figurations that were becoming all the fashion at the time. While, today, Beethoven and Schubert's music from that decade dominates our concert stages, there were plenty of contemporaneous composers whose popular style was decidedly "flashier" and more concerned with wowing the listener than that of the two immortals. So, we should not be surprised that a young teenager, exercising his own skills as composer and performer, should be tempted somewhat in the latter direction. Both he and Fanny played exceptionally well, and the music shows it in the exuberant technical passages that a more mature composer would have pruned back a bit. The ghost of Mozart is surely looking over the composer's shoulder, and Mendelssohn admirably informs much of the work with the former's virtues.

The concerto begins conventionally with an extended section for the orchestra alone, where most of the important material is heard—not saving anything important for the soloists, as later became the norm. The mood begins gently—somewhat Mozartian, to be sure, but equally characteristic of the mature Mendelssohn, as well. After some stormy moments in the minor mode, the soloists enter alone and somewhat pensively, but surely with a bit of the exhibitionist, too. Mendelssohn is quite careful to divide the material equally with his sister, as they trade roulades and melodies in total equanimity. The opening section ends dramatically, as we might expect, in the dominant, b minor. But, the young Mendelssohn has already learned a thing or two, and the development begins most surprisingly in the rather romantic key of G major—it's hard to miss; the solo pianos echo the cadenza-like rhetoric of their first entrance. The return to the opening is heralded by a grand sustained chord, which leads to the spirited, animated charge to the end.

The adagio central movement—in a gentle, rocking 6/8 time—brings to mind, if you will, not only the warm, gracious expansiveness that characterized elements in the composer's oratorios, such as *Elijah*, but a bit of Chopin, as well. Through it all, we remember the gift for melody familiar from his *Songs without Words*. The last movement, as you might expect, is a romp, with all the dashing scales, arpeggios, and dizzy figurations that one desires. There is more repetition than is usual in a typical concerto, but we have two virtuosos to please, and one's attention is more than arrested by their give and take as they take turns scampering along in a party that seems loathe to end. But end it must, and a mad dash of technical brilliance caps it off. Years later, the mature Mendelssohn spent no small amount of time trying to tighten up the structure, eliminate redundancies, and "modernize" it a bit—but this first version documents a fourteen-year-old genius whose remarkable musical facility is completely convincing in what it portends. Forget its youthful indiscretions and enjoy!

Pelléas et Mélisande, op. 80—Gabriel Fauré

Prélude
Fileuse
Sicilienne

For most of the concert-going public, Fauré is associated with his well-known work, the graceful *Requiem*, and little else. While he did contribute a modicum of symphonic works to the literature, they largely met with little success, and frankly, the composer's bent was not directed to the orchestral medium. Rather, he was hugely successful as France's most respected composer of song, and made important contributions to chamber music, as well. Consequently, the incidental music that he wrote for Maeterlinck's play, *Pelléas et Mélisande* is about his only work that is commonly heard in orchestral concerts—but a fine one, it is.

Like his friend and colleague, Saint-Saëns, Fauré lived a long and productive life, which spanned major changes in European musical style—from Berlioz to Shostakovich! Born in rural France in modest circumstances, his early talent led to years of training as an organist and choir director, and this vocation he pursued for much of his early life. During his student years, Saint-Saëns became one of his teachers, and that literally changed his life, opening up prospects that otherwise would probably have been unlikely. The slightly older man served as an introduction to the “modern” music of the day—Liszt, Wagner, *et al.* Not insignificantly, for the young Fauré’s education thitherto had primarily emphasized organ instruction, plainchant, and Renaissance choral music. Of almost equal importance was Fauré’s entrée into Saint-Saëns’ circle of influential friends, representing the highest echelon of French artists and intellectuals. Thereby—along with his distinction in winning numerous academic prizes—the door was opened for much of Fauré’s later successes. Nevertheless, he had to earn a living, so he embarked upon a career as a church musician. He served in various churches around France, spending his rare free time composing. Orchestral music was obviously not his *forte*, and large-scale dramatic works offered little success for him, as well. But, he slowly gained recognition for his works—primarily songs and compositions for piano. His musical style extended the harmonic language of late Romanticism, and his graceful melodic style was a paragon of lyrical sophistication. As the decades passed, his reputation as a composer soared, and he ultimately joined the faculty of the Conservatoire, going on to serve as the director—controversially pushing the notoriously conservative institution into modern times. By the end of his life, he was hailed as one of France’s greatest musicians, and a critical player in the evolution of French music into twentieth-century musical style.

While admittedly not a symphonic composer by nature, he did enjoy writing incidental music for plays—even telling Saint-Saëns that only that genre suited his “meager talents.” The most successful attempt was, of course, the suite extracted from his music for *Pelléas et Mélisande*. He spent much time in London during the 1890s, and received a commission there for music for a performance in English translation of the play. He wrote it for small orchestra—a student did the actual orchestration, but later Fauré picked four episodes from the material, and orchestrated them for full orchestra, himself. Interestingly, for a major composer of the time—and French, at that!—he evinced little interest in orchestration and the infinite subtleties of colors and color blends that are one of the glories of the symphonic orchestra. He obviously preferred to let his rich harmonies and inimitable melodies speak untrammeled by the blandishments of the rich orchestral palette.

The story of Pelléas and Mélisande is a typical love story from traditional literature in its predictable and inevitable tragedy. Debussy achieved great success with his opera on the subject, and Sibelius, Schoenberg, and others were attracted to it, as well. The first movement of Fauré's suite (the last movement of his four will be omitted tonight) sets the general tone of the drama, with his smooth, sinuous, undulating textures suggestive of the many important references to water in this metaphor-laden play. The rather surprising intrusion of the bucolic solo horn near the end is often explained as symbolic of a lover's discovery of Mélisande in the forest. The second movement—featuring a solo oboe—is a traditional “spinning song,” depicting Mélisande at the spinning wheel, perhaps dreaming of a lover (there are two). The third movement is cast in the traditional *siciliano* dotted rhythm, and although in a minor key, accompanies one of the rare happy moments of the doomed couple.

The Carnival of the Animals—Camille Saint-Saëns

Camille Saint-Saëns lived a long life, and was remarkable for his wide-ranging intellectual interests and abilities. As a child he was, of course, a precocious musical talent, but even then he evinced a strong natural interest in almost every academic subject—including, but certainly not restricted to, astronomy, archaeology, mathematics, religion, Latin, and Greek. In addition to a life of musical composition and virtuoso keyboard performance, he also enjoyed success as a music journalist, champion of early music (Handel and Bach), and leadership in encouraging French musical tradition. His father died when he was an infant, and he grew into middle age extraordinarily devoted to his mother—his marriage at the age of forty to a nineteen-year old did not last long. He simply left the house one day in 1881 and chose never to see her again; she died in 1950 at the age of ninety-five. Saint-Saëns went on to live an active life, filling an important rôle in the musical life of France—as performer, composer, author, spokesman, and scholar. He was peripatetic—researching Handel manuscripts in London, conducting concerts in Chicago and Philadelphia, visiting Uruguay and writing a hymn for their national holiday, and vacationing in the Canary Islands. He celebrated seventy-five years of concertizing in August of 1921 in his eighty-sixth year, and died a few months later.

The major figure in French musical life before the advent of Debussy and Ravel, in the face of the ravishing blandishments of the new musical style of the latter two composers, he nevertheless maintained his position as the grand old man of tradition in French musical composition. His music exemplified his deep respect for traditional forms and genres, and, unlike his friend and colleague, Fauré, he contributed prolifically to all of the genres of nineteenth-century composition—symphonies, operas, concerti, and more. And, in the midst of all this seriousness, he found time in the summer of 1886, to compose a gem—and fairly rare example—of genuine humor in symphonic literature. What is more, one whose droll humor is not compromised by stooping to cheap effects.

The Carnival of the Animals was composed in an Austrian village, where he was at work on the grand “Organ Symphony,” so beloved by audiences ever since. Nevertheless—perhaps as a break in the effort—he was tempted to write this suite of fourteen movements that humorously depict various animal friends for his students at the school where he taught (Fauré had been one of them, earlier). It was never intended for public performance, the composer feeling that it compromised his reputation as a major composer of dignity and seriousness of purpose. He even

forbade its publication until after his death—and so the first “public” performance did not occur until 1922, thirty-six years later!

The suite opens with a brief, dramatic introduction, followed by a stately march for the “King of Beasts” that from time to time is interrupted by the lions’ formidable roar, depicted by the ferocious, low chromatic octave scales. “Hens and Roosters” are next, clearly pecking around (no low strings, here), with little clarinet solos and an amusing rooster crow to top it off. Breakneck scales in the pianos herald the frenetic “Wild Asses”—and these are not your garden variety Mexican donkeys, for sure. These asses from Asia are supercharged, and Saint-Saëns’ busy pianists nail the depiction. The logy tortoises are next, and their ponderously slow gait is marvelously parodied by a tongue-in-cheek playing of Offenbach’s famous “Can-can” in the low strings. It’s really slow but you can doubtless recognize it. Following, a solo contra-bass earnestly sings a doleful little song for the elephant, without any apology at all for “borrowing” melodies from Mendelssohn and Berlioz—material that in the original was the essence of almost ephemeral lightness and grace. Well.

After a jerky little interlude by hopping kangaroos, we stand before a serene aquarium, as iridescent tropical fish glide to and fro. Saint-Saëns’ musical imagination then nails the hee-haws of “personages with long ears” with a super high note in the violins followed by a low “haw.” Next, the familiar descending third of a relentless cuckoo in a tranquil “piano” forest is easy to spot, played here by the clarinet—followed by a musical aviary. The flute as an apparently very happy bird is a familiar musical trope, and here, the pianists help out with other bird-like sounds. Then, something completely different: Apparently some student pianists have intruded on our little animal kingdom, and the composer (an accomplished pianist and teacher) has some fun with the scales every student pianist has to practice. A note in the score calls for some sloppy novice playing—as we all have done—from our stalwart keyboard artists.

Fossils are clearly not animals, but some of them undoubtedly were, and so Saint-Saëns has some fun with the xylophone rattling around like a box of prehistoric bones in the “Fossiles” movement. Among the many musical quotes here, listen for “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” and some allusions to Saint-Saëns’ own *Danse macabre*. Opera buffs will recognize Rossini’s “Una voce poco fa,” played by the clarinet.

Finally, the moment arrives that everyone has been waiting for, and the swan gracefully glides into view, in the guise of a ‘cello. It’s the only movement that the composer allowed to be published during his lifetime, and almost everyone knows it from its use in a thousand contexts. These charming animal vignettes end with a rousing finale that in sparkling fashion pulls together many of the motifs and tunes from the previous movements. It’s a perfect example of Saint-Saëns’ technical skill, as many of the animals jump in to end this musical zoo with his typical pizzazz. The donkeys, however, have the last say, with unmistakable “hee-haws” from these brazen equine musical critics.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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