

Mozart & Mendelssohn – March 18, 2017

Overture in C major, D. 591 “In the Italian Style”

Franz Schubert
1797-1828

Throughout his short life, Franz Schubert hoped to make a name for himself in opera, the most prestigious musical genre. He began his attempts at a tender age but continually experienced difficulties selecting appropriate plays and librettos in keeping with the public taste. None of his eight operas ever succeeded. In fact, most never made it to the stage in his lifetime, and those that did, usually folded after a few performances.

With all due respect, however, while Schubert has now taken his place in the pantheon of the great Viennese composers, he was the proverbial “prophet ignored in his own land.” Born into the lower-middle class with no prospects higher than that of a mere schoolteacher, he lacked the social connections that could have set his career on a successful course. Not only were his operas – complete and incomplete – failures, but his *Lieder* and instrumental works fared little better outside his own circle of friends. Some of his greatest works saw their first public performance and publication well after his death.

By 1817, writing successful opera posed a particularly difficult hurdle for any composer. A true “opera war” raged in Vienna between the adherents of the German style whose principal proponent was Carl Maria von Weber, and the boosters of the new Italian style of the young Gioacchino Rossini. That year, sensing which way the wind was blowing and adhering to transalpine manners, Schubert composed two overtures “In the Italian Style.”

The Overture in C is the second of the two (The other is in D Major, D. 590.) Its spirited tempo and colorful orchestration shows that Schubert learned his lesson well. While the opening short *Adagio* could have been from any traditional symphonic work, the following *Allegro* points clearly south of the border. While no match for Rossini in popularity, Schubert and his Italian rival shared one characteristic: both of them could churn out such overtures in a matter of hours.

Violin Concerto no. 5 in A major, K. 219

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
1756-1791

There is some controversy among scholars whether Mozart himself actually gave the first performance of his five known violin concertos, but there is no question that he was already a master violinist in his childhood. In fact, his father, Leopold – ever the “backstage parent” – was frequently after him to show off his skills by writing a virtuoso concerto for the instrument: “You yourself do not know how well you play the violin,” he wrote to his son. When Mozart finally did write concertos for the instrument in 1773-75, he wrote a bunch of them, his five concertos only 12 Koechel numbers apart. At that time, Mozart was in Salzburg, in the employment of Archbishop Hieronymus Colloredo for whom he both composed and served as violinist in the court orchestra. Mozart hated his employer who was a strict taskmaster and had no truck with his young musician, however talented. Although Mozart was more than seven years in the Archbishop’s employ, he spent nearly three of them on furlough – stretched to AWOL – performing around Europe and, none too diplomatically, looking for another job. By 1774 he was apparently quite negligent about his violin playing

and possibly wrote the concertos for his friend, the court violinist Antonio Brunetti, whose abilities were limited and who had difficulty playing them. After 1775 Mozart occasionally performed them himself.

Mozart's violin concertos are relatively modest works by a youthful master, written at a time when the genre had become neglected. After the flourishing of the Baroque violin concerto by such masters as Vivaldi and Tartini, it went into partial hibernation until Beethoven awakened it with a new kind of virtuosic writing that was to set the stage for the great romantic concertos of Mendelssohn, Bruch and Tchaikovsky. Mozart left no cadenzas but most players either write their own or borrow one from the pen of any number of great violinists.

The A major concerto has a number of unusual features, including a long recitative type section leading into the second movement, almost a melancholy aria for the violin. The Concerto is also known as the "Turkish" concerto because Mozart included a diversion in the final rondo of *faux* Turkish sounding music similar to, but more gentle than the finale of the much later Piano Sonata, K. 331 and the overture to the opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. Although bearing little resemblance to authentic Turkish music, this passage is supposed to reflect the jangling, percussive music of the Janissary soldiers of the Ottoman Turks. Many composers of the period were captivated by this exotic orientalism, especially composers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, whose eastern borders were continually threatened by their Ottoman neighbors. Among the most famous examples is the second movement of Franz Josef Haydn's Symphony No. 100, the "Military."

Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Op. 56, "Scottish"

Felix Mendelssohn
1809-1847

We are all familiar with the romantic stereotype – and often the reality – of the struggling composer struggling for his daily bread and artistic survival. Probably the greatest exception to this picture was Felix Mendelssohn, an economically secure composer from a culturally sophisticated and highly supportive family. The Mendelssohn household was a Mecca for the intellectual elite of Germany, and the many family visitors fawned over the prodigy and his talented sister Fanny. Fortunately for the development of his rare abilities, his carefully selected teachers were demanding and strict.

Mendelssohn's financial security gave him the opportunity to take the Grand Tour in what was then considered the civilized world, Western Europe, Italy and Britain. In 1829, he traveled to England and then on to Scotland, where his visit to Fingal's Cave in the Hebrides Islands inspired *The Hebrides Overture*. It also produced the ideas that became the Scottish Symphony.

Started in Italy in 1830 but not finished until 1842, the Scottish Symphony was Mendelssohn's last – the numbering of the five symphonies reflecting their order of publication rather than composition. He dedicated the Symphony to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, whom he had met and charmed during one of his visits to England (the Queen actually sang with Mendelssohn accompanying her on the piano.)

While the music has an undeniably Scottish flavor, it does not quote any authentic folk melodies, a device that Mendelssohn despised. Writing to his father from Wales, he

commented: "...anything but national music! May ten thousand devils take all folklore... a harpist sits in the lobby of every inn of repute playing so-called folk melodies at you – dreadful, vulgar, fake stuff; and simultaneously a hurdy-gurdy is tooting out melodies - it's enough to drive you crazy..." That being said, it's difficult to distinguish Mendelssohn's invented Scottish style melodies from the kind of musical nationalism he so despised.

Beginning with the introduction and the succeeding *allegro agitato*, the gloomy atmosphere gave rise to the myth that it was somehow inspired by the tragic life of Mary Queen of Scots. More likely, the Symphony reflects the bleak and stormy weather so prevalent in the Scottish highlands, lowlands and outlying islands. The climax of the first movement is a veritable hurricane, replete with chromatic moaning in the strings.

The second movement provides a little sunshine, its main theme as near to a Scottish folksong – with “Scotch snap” and all – as Mendelssohn could get without actually using one. The third movement comes through as passionate, at times even anguished. Its middle section suggests a horn-call summons of doom. Then, it's back to the *Sturm und Drang* of the finale. But – perhaps with a bow to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony – Mendelssohn ends the Symphony with a shift again to the major mode and a new and optimistic theme to end it.

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