



Classics Concert Insights Lecture

Moris Senegor, music aficionado

MENDELSSOHN SYMPHONY #4, ITALIAN (1833)



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"It's hard to imagine that any musician has ever had trouble with the Italian Symphony unless it was sheer envy...The surprising exception is Mendelssohn himself." (Michael Steinberg)

MUSICAL HISTORY:

- Renaissance & Middle Ages
- Baroque (1600-1750): BACH, HANDEL, VIVALDI
- Classical (1750-1827): HAYDN, MOZART, EARLY BEETHOVEN
- Romantic (1827-1900): LATE BEETHOVEN, BRAHMS, **MENDELSSOHN**, TCHAIKOVSKY, DVORAK, MAHLER
- 20th Century: STRAVINSKY, COPELAND, BARTOK, SHOSTAKOVITCH

THE "MIDDLE" ROMANTIC ERA:

- Orchestral works of distinction became rare.
- Beethoven (1770-1827) cast a long shadow on his followers.
- Lots of works were written; now obscure.
- Examples of obscure composers: Kufferath, Taubert, Gade, Spohr, Verhulst, Esser, Lachner, Rietz, Gleich, Veit, Jadassohn, Pauer, Volkmann, Fetis, Hiller, Huber.
- Composers that survive: Berlioz, Schubert, Schumann, **Mendelssohn**.

THE CLASSICAL AESTHETIC:

- Clarity of line.
- Clarity of Structure: adherence to form and proportion.
- "Good taste", restraint of expression.

THE ROMANTIC AESTHETIC:

- Composer's need for expression overrides other concerns.
- Unrestrained emotion.
- Compositional liberty with Classical Era musical forms; emergence of "formless" music.
- Nationalism.
- Exoticism.
- Program music.
- Preoccupation with the supernatural.
- Ever enlarging orchestras, ever lengthening works.
- Emergence of the "modern" conductor.

“Posterity has never quite forgiven Felix Mendelssohn for being happy. His offense was compounded by his being rich....in funds, ..friends,....family affection,....admirers.” (Downs)

MENDELSSOHN BIOGRAPHY: 1809-1847

- Mozart parallels: child prodigy, musically talented sister, early death.
- Wealthy, privileged upbringing.
- Early contact with many eminent people, including Goethe.
- “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” at age 17.
- Visits Italy 1830, at age 22; begins Italian Symphony 1831.
- Completes Italian Symphony, 1833.
- Preeminent conductor; Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra 1835-47.
- Early death, age 38, within months of sister’s death

MENDELSSOHN SYMPHONIES:

- They are numbered roughly by order of publication, not composition.
- #1 in C minor, composed 1824 (age 15), first performed 1829, published 1830.
- #2 Choral, in B flat major, composed 1840, published 1841.
- #3 “Scottish”, in A minor, composed 1842, published 1843.
- #4 “Italian”, in A major, composed & premiered in 1833, published posthumously in 1851.
- #5 “Reformation”, in D major, composed 1830, published posthumously in 1868.
- Mendelssohn remained dissatisfied with his Symphonies #4 and 5, and did not allow publication, hence the posthumous dates.

HISTORY OF THE ITALIAN SYMPHONY:

- Mendelssohn, aged 21, visited to Italy in autumn, 1830 and stayed there nine months, traveling to various areas.
- He began composing while there and completed it in Berlin, 1833 under deadline pressure by a commission from London.
- Mendelssohn conducted the first performance for the London Philharmonic Society on May 13, 1833. It was well received.
- Mendelssohn was dissatisfied with the work, and in 1834 he revised the last three movements considerably. He intended to revise more, but then abandoned the project.
- The symphony was conducted by others in three other occasions (1834, 1837 and 1838), none in Germany. It was otherwise not heard in Mendelssohn’s lifetime.
- The work entered the symphonic canon after its publication in 1851, in its original version. It has been a staple of the repertoire since.
- Mendelssohn’s apparent dissatisfaction with this symphony has been a mystery to music critics and scholars who view the work as perfect.

MENDELSSOHN SYMPHONY #4 (“ITALIAN”):

- MOVEMENT 1: Allegro vivace, A major, 6/8 meter
- MOVEMENT 2: Andante con moto, D minor, 4/4 meter
- MOVEMENT 3: Con moto moderato, A major, $\frac{3}{4}$ meter
- MOVEMENT 4: Presto, A minor, Saltarello; $\frac{3}{4}$ meter

These do not have a running plot. They can be considered as a series of Italian vignettes, viewed through the composer’s youthful, and German eyes.

MOVEMENT 1: A Major, Sonata Form

EXPOSITION 1:

- Theme I (A major) erupts like “*a burst of Mediterranean sunlight*” (Todd). A fast cheerful woodwind melody with, even faster repeated string chords and tremolos in accompaniment.
- In its first version Theme I is somewhat unfinished.
- A miniature development of the theme leads to a loud string reprise of Theme I, now in a more finished variation.
- Brief modulating music.
- Theme II (E major) is a more subdued, rustic melody with a hopping-skipping rhythm, presented initially in bassoons & clarinets, repeated in oboes and flutes, and then loud in orchestra.
- Brief clarinet interlude (C sharp minor) “casts a shadow on the landscape” (Steinberg) and provides transition into the closing section.
- Closing section begins tutti and loud, with material derived from Theme I; it ends with a new concluding theme, also derived from Theme I, which leads to a repeat of Exposition.
- This new concluding theme only appears in Expo 1; it does not reappear in Expo 2. It will however, return as an important concluding element of the coda.

EXPOSITION 2:

- Exposition repeated verbatim except for the closing section.
- Closing section begins same in the first exposition, but ends with a brief transition derived from Theme I that leads into development.

DEVELOPMENT:

- Begins with a fugato on a new theme in D minor (Theme III). The 4-part fugue quietly develops.
- The fugue converges into the main Theme III motive in crescendo; Theme I motives now appear in a polyphonic combination with it, in a rising passage, which Donald Tovey calls “*a most masterly imbroglia*”.
- Theme I motives seem to take over in a crescendo passage; Theme III motives interject loudly, more assertive; the two themes are repeatedly juxtaposed.
- The music leaves an impression of an energetic struggle between these two themes.

- Drained of energy, music quiets down and slows. The Theme I fragment is now only two notes. It repeats itself as if it is slowly panting.
- A solo oboe melody based on Theme I now ushers in the recapitulation. *“The oboe is the sweetest and most seductive of tour guides”* (Steinberg).

RECAPITULATION:

- Theme I returns (A major), in another truncated variation.
- Theme II returns, lush and lyrical in strings, and in home key (A major), as expected from the Classical rules.
- Theme III recapped (A minor), as a now more fully developed melody.
- Closing section begins with Theme I material as in the exposition.
- It then features a juxtaposition of Theme I and Theme III material.

CODA:

- A calm transitional melody leads to the theme that ended the first exposition; this represents a recall of Theme I.
- The appearance of this music announces that the end of the movement is imminent.
- Theme III makes one final appearance (A minor), before concluding chords in A major.

NOTES:

- By composing different endings to the two expositions, Mendelssohn forces repetition of the Exposition. Most Exposition repeats in his era were optional.
- Mendelssohn’s introduction of a brand new theme in the Development is very original. Considering his reputation as a “Classicist”, this gesture deviates from the Classical model.
- The movement is dominated by the first and third themes.
- The appearance of Theme III initially in D minor foreshadows the second movement, also in this key. More importantly, its reappearance in A minor in Recap and Coda anticipates the unusual finale of the symphony, also in the same key.
- Examples of Mendelssohn’s deft attention to small details in his composition: the mini-development of Theme I in Exposition (in lieu of such in Development), the C sharp minor clarinet passage, the solo oboe transition into Recap.

MOVEMENT 2: D minor, Sectional, A- B - A - B - Coda

A: D minor; overall phrase structure: a-a'-b-b'-codetta

- Starts with a brief introduction, a “*unison invocative recitation*” (Seaton), a “*wailing introductory figure*” (Tovey).
- The walking base which will accompany the main theme now appears, *pizzicato* in low strings.
- Violas play a chant-like melody (a), *forte*, over this walking base; the overall effect is that of a procession.
- Violins repeat the melody in variation (a') .
- A countermelody in winds appears (b) in violas, with the *baso continuo* still present; its second half is the main theme.
- Countermelody repeated in variation (b') by violins.
- A quiet string melody concludes the section and serves as a transition.

B: A major

- A second theme emerges in flute conversing with the strings.
- This “introduces a note of human wistfulness into the austerity of the litany.” (Tovey)

A: A minor

- Processional theme returns in variation and is extended.
- Brief string transition.

B: D major

- The flute melody in variation, this time with orchestral accompaniment.
- Transitional music.

CODA: D minor

- Motivic fragments of the processional theme reappear, and fade into *pianissimo*.
- Movement quietly concludes, as though the procession has moved away.

NOTES:

- It is thought that Mendelssohn was inspired to compose this as a religious processional (pilgrim's march) he observed in the streets of Naples.
- The setting of the processional theme at various dynamic levels (f,ff,mf & pp) suggests an approaching and passing procession.
- Music scholars note the remarkable similarity of the processional theme to a song composed by Carl Zelter, a former composition teacher of Mendelssohn, set to the Goethe poem “Es was ein Konig in Thule”. (A double homage to two mentors?)
- Some have likened this movement to the corresponding one in Beethoven's 7th Symphony, also a slow march.

MOVEMENT 3: A major, Minuet & Trio, A-B-A form

MINUET:

- Strings play an elegant theme repeated twice.
- Each statement ends with a brief codetta in winds; this will serve a concluding function through the movement.
- Theme extended in a variation, again concluding with wind codetta.
- Transitional music.

TRIO:

- Distant sounding horn-calls, in French horns and bassoons, with a pitter-patter response in strings evoking animals, and bird-calls in winds.
- Repeat horn-calls in slight variation, now with both strings and winds responding pitter-patter.
- Horn-call motive alternates between horns and strings, in a march like passage.
- Another variation on the horn call theme then ushers in the minuet return.

DECAPO:

- Minuet returns abbreviated.
- Trio recalled in a brief coda after which the movement soon ends.

NOTES:

- Here Mendelssohn *“returns to the old world grace of the slow Minuet without so naming it.”* (Fiske)
- This movement is exemplary of Mendelssohn’s style as a “Classicist”. *“A Romantic translation of Minuet, delicate and surely quite un-Italian.”* (Steinberg)
- The movement also reflects a common feature of “Exoticism” in the Romantic era. Composers writing in or about foreign lands cannot help but place their own native idiom into their music. Another good example of this is Dvorak’s 9th Symphony (New World), in which the third movement is quite Slavic, rather than “American”, as the composer saw it.
- The Trio evokes German forests and hunting, *“arguably adducing a mood of nostalgia for Germany, in the midst of the Italian setting.”* (Seaton)
- The minuet was obsolete in Mendelssohn’s time. According to biographer R. Larry Todd, the composer’s purpose in this choice was to contrast the aristocratic elegance of this court dance with the raucous Italian dance to follow in the fourth movement.

FOURTH MOVEMENT: A minor, Saltarello, Sonata variant

- Saltarello: an Italian jumping dance. Mendelssohn was inspired to compose this movement by a street celebration he witnessed in Amalfi.
- Five loud orchestral chords followed by fast string tremolos in triplets usher the dance.
- Note: these tremolos will underlie most of the movement and their rhythm is that of tarantella, another popular Italian dance, named after a tarantula. It was believed that its bite could only be cured if the victim engages in perpetual motion, aided by the music. At harvest time fiddlers would wander through fields hoping for “therapeutic engagements”. (Tarantula bites are actually harmless.)
- Theme I stated quietly in winds, repeated and extended. It has the saltarello rhythm, featuring a series of small leaps typical of the dance.
- Music rises to a crescendo and a countermelody follows.
- Music continues at breakneck speed in a modulating passage.
- Theme II a more stately tune incorporates Theme I motives within it.
- Theme II tune is in duple meter, and this creates a brief interruption in the momentum of the movement, even though the tempo stays fast.
- Closing section uses theme II ideas and comes to a convincing conclusion.
- Development starts with Saltarello motives being developed quietly.
- A new theme is introduced in imitative counterpoint in a pp passage;
- This is a tarantella; music has a buzzing sound.
- New theme is juxtaposed against Theme I motives.
- Louder statement of Theme I in variation.
- Buzzing music returns, with Theme I motives emerging and further developed.
- Music dies down, seeming to come to some conclusion.
- Brief coda recalls Theme I and concludes.

NOTES:

- A minor key finale to a major key symphony is rare, and therefore quite original.
- Seaton suggests this choice of the composer is a “*shift in the direction of folk based modality.*”
- The structure of the movement can be considered, Exposition-Development-Coda. There is no clear Recapitulation. In this regard, the composer’s expressive needs, namely to maintain the breakneck momentum of the dance supersede considerations of form.
- The introduction of a new theme in development and its juxtaposition with the main theme of the movement mirrors the first movement.