

## **FÉLIX MENDELSSOHN — Ruy Blas Overture**

In February 1839, the Theater Pension Fund approached Félix Mendelssohn in his hometown of Leipzig to provide some original music for a benefit performance of Victor Hugo’s tragic drama *Ruy Blas*. The Theater Pension Fund hoped that its performance with a new overture and original song from the well-known Leipzig composer might sell more tickets and thus raise more money than one without. Mendelssohn agreed, but upon reading the play, he commented in a letter to his mother that “[it] was so absolutely ghastly and beyond contempt that you wouldn’t even believe it, and I decided that I didn’t have time to compose an overture and would only give them the song.” Mendelssohn promptly submitted the song to the theater along with his regrets that he couldn’t provide an overture.

Just a few days before the performance—scheduled for Monday, March 11—a group from the theater came to visit Mendelssohn and thank him for contributing to the performance. According to Mendelssohn himself, one of his visitors that day made an off-handed comment that it was “too bad that [he] hadn’t written the overture” though he quickly added that he “realizes that one needs time to write a piece like that, and that next year they would try to give [him] more notice.” Apparently, this comment so bothered Mendelssohn that he immediately set to work on a score for the overture. Despite a very busy week of rehearsals and a concert of his own on Thursday night, he managed to submit a full manuscript of his score by Friday morning.

The piece debuted to wild applause at the benefit concert the following Monday and Mendelssohn later commented that “it was all so much more fun than I’ve ever had writing one of my pieces.” Mendelssohn continued to conduct performances of the piece in subsequent years, though he insisted on the alternate title *Overture for the Theater Pension Fund* because of his continued dislike of the Hugo play that occasioned the piece. Perhaps because he dashed it off so quickly, the overture is a near-perfect crystalline iteration of Mendelssohn’s mature style. The two contrasting themes—one strident and forceful and the other quiet and brooding—are introduced, developed, and recapitulated in clever, if narrowly conventional, ways before being brought to a triumphant conclusion in the coda that closes the piece. Hopefully you will have a higher opinion of the show that happens after the overture than Mendelssohn thought of the play that followed the premiere.

## **BÉLA BARTÓK — Viola Concerto**

As the political situation in Hungary worsened during the fall of 1940, composer Béla Bartók and his wife Ditta boarded a steamer ship bound for New York City. Second in reputation only to the 19th-century virtuoso Franz Liszt in his home country of Hungary, during his first years in America Bartók found himself unwanted and unproductive. His health was deteriorating due to as yet undiagnosed leukemia and finances were tight due to a lack of professional opportunities.

However, the last 18 months of his life represented an extraordinary burst of creativity in which Bartók created some of his most enduring masterpieces. Beginning with the commission that would yield his *Concerto for Orchestra* during the fall of 1943, Bartók took on a flurry of new projects and in the spring of 1945, he received a note from the distinguished Scottish violist William Primrose asking for a new concerto. When Bartók responded that he didn't know enough about the instrument to write for it effectively, Primrose responded that he should "not feel in any way proscribed by the apparent technical limitations of the instrument" in the hopes that he would write something unconventional and challenging.

Bartók worked on the concerto over the summer and on September 8 sent a note to Primrose: "I am very glad to be able to tell you that your viola concerto is ready in draft, so that only the score has to be written...If nothing happens I can be through in 5 or 6 weeks, that is, I can send you a copy of the orchestral score in the second half of October, and a few weeks afterwards a copy (or if you wish more copies) of the piano score." Unfortunately, Bartók died just 18 days after penning this letter and never managed to finish assembling the score. This task fell instead to his friend, composer and violist Tibor Serly, who had to assemble the haggard pile of unordered manuscript pages into a usable whole and convert Bartók's threadbare draft into an orchestral score. Primrose finally premiered the piece in Minneapolis four years after the composer's death and performed it hundreds of times before his own death in 1982.

Formally, the *Viola Concerto* is almost classical in its construction, though the three-movement format hides a four-movement symphonic plan underneath. The first movement is a lengthy and wide-ranging sonata-allegro that spans more time than the other two movements put together. The demands on the player are almost athletic, beginning with some stretches and simple calisthenics before progressing to much more difficult terrain. The serenity of the "adagio religioso" at the beginning of the second movement is a welcome relief from the ferociousness of the first and seems to send the soloist on ecstatic flights of fancy that separate the ensemble's chorale portions. The second movement ends with a short scherzo—again, mirroring the four movements of a symphony—before moving into the boisterous Hungarian folk dance evoked by the mid-tempo finale.

### **FÉLIX MENDELSSOHN — Symphony No. 3 (Scottish)**

On July 30, 1829, a twenty-year-old Félix Mendelssohn visited the ruins of Holyrood Chapel in Edinburgh, Scotland. He had taken some time off for a walking tour of Scotland after a string of successful performances in London. A few days later he sent a letter to his family back in Berlin recounting the experience: "In the deep twilight, we went today to the palace where Queen Mary lived and loved; a little room is shown there with a winding staircase leading up to the door... The chapel below is now roofless. Grass and ivy thrive there and at the broken altar where Mary was crowned Queen of Scotland. Everything is ruined, decayed, and the clear heavens pour in. I

think I have found there the beginning of my ‘Scottish’ Symphony.” Along with the letter, he included a small scrap of staff paper on which he had inscribed some ideas for the symphony’s brooding opening measures inspired by his twilight walk at Holyrood.

Despite this seeming bolt of inspiration, Mendelssohn’s work on the piece floundered. His Scottish sojourn also compelled him to work on an overture inspired by the starkly beautiful basalt sea caves of The Hebrides off the northwest coast of Scotland. Mendelssohn completed this overture, titled simply *The Hebrides*, the following year, but continued to make little progress on the symphony. By 1831, he seems to have finally put the piece away in frustration only returning to it in earnest a full decade later in 1841. Although his “Scottish” Symphony was the second of five symphonies on which Mendelssohn began to work, it was the last of the five to be completed and the last to finally receive its public premiere.

That Mendelssohn does not obviously cling to his original Scottish inspiration is not surprising given the long and intermittent process that finally brought Symphony No. 3 to completion. He uses no Scottish folk melodies in the score and gives little indication of how the four movements might relate to Scottish history, geography, or culture in any way. In fact, by the time of the premiere in March 1842, Mendelssohn had completely dropped “Scottish” from the title. But while critics have argued over the years about which musical elements may or may not derive from his Scottish experience, they seem unified in the opinion that this represents the pinnacle of Mendelssohn’s achievement as a symphonic composer. From the brooding opening chords to the swirling, energetic scherzo through the gorgeous and lyrical adagio to the triumphant finale, it may not be a taste of Scotland, but it still makes for quite a trip.