Mendelssohn & Mahler

Music of two composer-conductors comprises today's concert. Violinist Simona Lamsma plays Mendelssohn's gracious concerto. After intermission, we'll enjoy music by the young Mahler, his powerhouse Symphony No. 1.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born 3 February 1809; Hamburg, Germany
Died 4 November 1847; Leipzig, Germany

Concerto in E minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 64

Composed: 1838-44
First performance: 13 March 1845; Leipzig, Germany
Last MSO performance: September 2012; Gilbert Varga, conductor; Frank Almond, violin
Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings
Approximate duration: 26 minutes

In a letter dated 30 July 1838, Felix Mendelssohn wrote to Ferdinand David, "I should like to write a violin concerto for you next winter.One in E minor runs through my head, the beginning of which gives me no peace." It would be another six years before the composition came completely to fruition — in September 1844, as Mendelssohn relaxed with his family at Bad Soden, near Frankfurt. Over the years, he had worked closely with David in shaping the work, possibly the first instance of the sort of collaboration between composer and performer that continues to this very day.

Interestingly, David (1810-1873) was born in the same Hamburg house as Mendelssohn — one year later. When Mendelssohn was appointed as conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in 1835, he chose David as his concertmaster. And in 1843, David became the first violin professor at the newly founded Leipzig Conservatory. Four years later, he was one of the pallbearers at Mendelssohn's funeral.

The tuneful work Mendelssohn fashioned for David is one of the most beloved in its genre. Eschewing the usual orchestral introduction, the solo violin enters in the second bar, singing the E minor melody that caused the composer such unrest. (Joseph Kerman) The second subject is in G major, introduced by the woodwinds as the soloist sounds a pedal tone on low G. These two themes are combined in the development section — which, unusually, is capped by a written-out cadenza. In the recapitulation, that troublesome opening theme is cast in E major before returning to E minor.

A solo bassoon provides a seamless transition to the Andante, sustaining its B from the final E minor chord, then moving up a half-step to middle C. This three-part (A-B-A) "song without words" is in C major, with a tremulous middle section in A minor. A 14-bar transition passage (Allegretto non troppo) for the soloist and strings leads to the elfin-like Allegro molto vivace. Here—conjuring up the atmosphere of his incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—Mendelssohn gives us an idea of just how virtuosic David's technical prowess must have been. It is set in E major, with a "cheeky" (Donald Francis Tovey) second subject in B major. As in the opening movement, the soloist careens between melodic material and accompanimental figures — foreground and background, in other words. "And so this finale spins along in high spirits, in which no one need be ashamed to share." (Tovey)

Recommended recording: Nathan Milstein; Claudio Abbado, Vienna Philharmonic (Deutsche Grammophon)

GUSTAV MAHLER

Born 7 July 1860; Kalischt, Bohemia (now Kalište, Czech Republic)
Died 18 May 1911; Vienna, Austria

Symphony No. 1 in D major

Composed: 1884-88
First performance: 20 November 1889; Budapest, Hungary
Last MSO performance: October 2011; Edo de Waart, conductor
Instrumentation: 4 flutes, (2nd, 3rd, and 4th doubling piccolo), 4 oboes (3rd doubling English horn), 4 clarinets (2nd and 4th doubling E-flat clarinet, 3rd doubling bass clarinet), 3 bassoons (3rd doubling contrabassoon), 7 horns, 5 trumpets, 4 trombone, tuba, 2 timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, tam tam, triangle), harp, strings
Approximate duration: 53 minutes

Throughout his compositional life, Gustav Mahler was occupied by two musical genres: symphony and song. He wrote numerous Lieder for voice and piano, and also utilized songs in his orchestra works. In some instances, such as here in Symphony No. 1, these provided the inspiration for purely instrumental movements; in others, the voice is employed, to great effect.

It's important to remember that composing was Mahler's avocation, often carried out in the summer, his off-season. He made his living as a conductor. In 1883, he was appointed music and chorus director at the opera house in Kassel, Germany. There, he soon fell unrequitedly in love with Johanna Richter, one of his singers. This sad state of affairs led him to compose his first masterpiece, the song cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer). Mahler wrote the texts himself and, as musicologist Donald Mitchell notes, the composer "appears as the hero of his own work. The Artist as Hero is a role he continued to play to the very end of his creative life, though in a phenomenal variety of guises (not disguises)." The song cycle, in turn, led to the inception of his First Symphony, and — as we shall see — provided some of its melodic material.

The symphony opens with a single pitch (A) in the strings, spread across five octaves. Onto this blank canvas, Mahler begins to paint with ever-changing tone colors, utilizing a two-note motif, a descending perfect fourth. Little fanfares erupt, both onstage and off, and it sounds as though nature is awakening as dawn breaks slowly. As the tempo increases, the cellos usher in the movement's exposition with a tune that begins with the two-note motif. This melodyis from the second of the four *Wayfarer* songs, "Ging heut Morgen übers Feld" (This morningI went through the fields). Listen not only to this gently striding tune, but also to the soft countermelodies that provide Mahler's unique type of polyphony.

The second-movement scherzo is a rough-hewn folk dance that quotes a song Mahler wrote in his early 20s, "Hans und Grete." Again, the perfect fourth is a salient melodic figure. In the middle section (trio), the violins feature prominently, employing flirtatious glissandos as the winds provide counterpoint and contrasting timbres.

At the outset of the third movement, muted timpani (sounding perfect fourths!) provide the only accompaniment for a muted solo double bass, playing "Frère Jacque" ("Bruder Martin" in German) in D minor. Other instruments join, playing the tune in a round, just as we sang it — though in the major mode — as children. Mahler instructs that the dynamic level remain soft, regardless of how many instruments play. As the round winds down, two oboes, accompanied by two trumpets, launch into a klezmeresque tune, courtesy of the composer's Jewish/Czech background. Bass drum, cymbals, and violins — clicking the strings with the wood of their bows — add to the fun. As this subsides, harp and pizzicato cellos prepare the way for a melody of heart-rending beauty. It's from the last of the *Wayfarer* songs, and describes how the lovelorn lad lies down under a linden tree beside the road and falls asleep. Following this oasis, we return to "Frère Jacque," this time in E-flat minor.

The Hungarian audience that first heard this symphony in 1889 — confused enough by hearing a cheerful children's song in a doleful minor key — must have been taken aback by the opening bars of the Finale. Crashing cymbals, thudding bass drum, rumbling timpani, snarling brass, screaming woodwinds, rushing strings. It's all right here. In this 20-minute movement, Mahler first captures our attention with this violent outburst, then holds our interest by making us wonder just what's coming next. Listen for a variety of keys, transparent chamber-music textures, affecting violin melodies, kaleidoscopic tone colors, and felicitous counterpoint. There's even a section that offers a sentimental remembrance of themes from the first movement. In its triumphant final pages, Mahler's glorious music — with galloping timpani and blazing brass — wants to lift us right out of our seats. It's a Hollywood ending like none before, and the entire orchestra concludes the work with a touch of humor, "a two-note slam" (David Hurwitz) on octave Ds.

Discussing the symphonic form with Sibelius, Mahler famously opined, "The symphony must be the world; it must embrace everything." In this, his first essay, the 28-year-old composer was well on his way to achieving that goal.

Recommended recording: Klaus Tennstedt, Chicago Symphony Orchestra (EMI)