

DT501: History of Music: Classic/Romantic

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Lecture 15: Mendelssohn and
Schumann

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)



- Grandson of Moses Mendelssohn, a prominent Enlightenment philosopher and leader of the Jewish Enlightenment.
- Studies with Carl Zelter and receives a comprehensive education in the humanities.
- Perhaps the greatest child prodigy in the history of western music.
- Reaches compositional maturity by the age of sixteen.
—Octet for Strings in E-flat Major, Op. 20 (1825) demonstrates stylistic originality and mastery of extended forms.

Mendelssohn's Style

- Classical Romanticism
 - remained committed to a classical sense of form throughout his career.
 - sectional divisions in his sonata form movements are normally clearly articulated and rounded off.
 - music rarely touches on overt displays of emotional anguish or the kind of 'inwardness' prized by the Romantics.
- Mendelssohn the reactionary?
 - the reliance on classical forms has often led to the charge of Mendelssohn being excessively reliant on the past.
 - fuelled by unfair and often ideologically motivated biographical constructions of easy facility and social privilege.
 - recent scholarship has worked hard to reassess this characterisation.
- Reassessing Mendelssohn
 - the poetic, the visual and the sense of place in his music.

Mendelssohn: *Thomaskantorei, Leipzig*



The Poetic, the Visual and the Sense of Place in Mendelssohn's Orchestral Works

- Acknowledged innovator in the genre of the concert overture which he used as vehicles to explore programmatic, poetic and visual concepts.
 - *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1826 –35)
 - *Calm Sea Prosperous Voyage* (1828 –35)
 - *The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave)* (1829 –35)
- The Visual: *The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave)*
 - Sketched while Mendelssohn was on a visit to Scotland in 1829.
- Sense of Place: Symphony No. 4 'The Italian' in A major
 - Composed on his Grand Tour of 1829. Its four movements can be interpreted as snapshots of Italian life seen through German eyes.
- The Poetic: *Calm Sea Prosperous Voyage*
 - Based on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's poem *Meeresstille und gluckliche Fahrt* ('Calm Sea Prosperous Voyage').

Meeres Stille:	Calm Sea:
<p>Tiefe Stille herrscht im Wasser, Ohne Regung ruht das Meer, Und bekümmert sieht der Schiffer Glatte Fläche ringsumher. Keine Luft von keiner Seite! Todesstille fürchterlich! In der ungeheuern Weite Reget keine Welle sich.</p>	<p>Deep stillness rules the water Without motion lies the sea, And sadly the sailor observes Smooth surfaces all around. No air from any side! Deathly, terrible stillness! In the immense distances not a single wave stirs.</p>
Glückliche Fahrt:	Prosperous Journey:
<p>Die Nebel zerreißen, Der Himmel ist helle, Und Äolus löset Das ängstliche Band. Es säuseln die Winde, Es rührt sich der Schiffer. Geschwinde! Geschwinde! Es teilt sich die Welle, Es naht sich die Ferne; Schon seh ich das Land!</p>	<p>The fog is torn, The sky is bright, And Aeolus releases The fearful bindings. The winds whisper, The sailor begins to move. Swiftly! Swiftly! The waves divide, The distance nears; Already, I see land!</p>

Robert Schumann (1810–1856)



- Studies piano from the age of seven. Throughout his youth, literary and musical interests run side by side.
- 1832—Permanently injures his index and middle fingers thereby ending his hopes of a career as a concert pianist.
- Establishes the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1833.
- 1835—falls in love with Clara Wieck whom he eventually marries in 1840.
- Later career hampered by mental instability.

Carnival, Op. 9

- Schumann often made use of musical cryptograms which consisted of short recurring motifs which spelled out certain extra-musical meanings.
- *Carnival* for piano consists of 21 short pieces depicting masked revellers at a ball. Each piece has a subtitle representing friends and colleagues of Schumann as well as characters from the old *commedia dell-arte* (Italian comic theatre of masks)

A, E-flat, C, B – signified in German as **A-S-C-H**

A-flat, C, B – signified in German as **As-C-H**

- Both motifs spell 'Asch', which could mean
 - 1) the town where Schumann's then fiancée Ernestine von Fricken was born
 - 2) the German word 'Ash', as in Ash Wednesday
 - 3) a version of the composer's name (Robert Alexander Schumann)
- Another motif (below) spells the composer's name more directly

E-flat, C, B, A – signified in German as **S-C-H-A**.

Literary Music?

- Schumann's music contains a wealth of biographical and literary allusions prompting much speculation as to its meaning and possible relationship to the circumstances of his own life.
- *Fantasie* in C Major, Op. 17
 - Schumann changed the title and subtitle several times in the lead-up to its publication leaving an intriguing set of three asterick stars to signal an omission.
 - contains a quotation from Beethoven's song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* (to my distant beloved). Schumann was in love with Clara Schumann at this time.
 - definitive resolution to the tonic in the first movement evaded and postponed until bar 299 when the *An die ferne Geliebte* makes its consoling close to C major.
 - form is rhapsodic with many unexpected departures including a lengthy character piece inserted in the middle of the movement in C minor marked 'Im Legendenton' (told in the manner of a legend).

Answering Beethoven

- Symphony No. 4 in D minor
 - Schumann was profoundly influenced by the concept of ‘cyclic form’ where the same thematic material reappears in more than one movement functioning as a unifying device.
- Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9
- Schubert’s Wanderer fantasy
 - thematic development: the allegro theme which itself is a development of the introduction theme, dominates the exposition.
 - two new themes emerge in the development. Instead of a recapitulation all three themes are set against each other leading to a trilling climax.
- Cyclic form:
 - these themes reappear in the other movements to create a unified structure across the entire work.

Prescribed Listening

Mendelssohn

Hebrides Overture

Schumann

Fantasie in C major, Op. 17 (first movement)

Prescribed Reading

Consult the relevant sections on Mendelssohn and Schumann in Chapters 25 and 26 of the *Norton Anthology of Western Music*

On the concept of literary music see Richard Taruskin: *Music in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 289–318.

For analysis of the *Fantasie* in C major, Op. 19 see Nicholas Marston: *Schumann's Fantasie Op. 19* (Cambridge Music Handbooks) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)