FELIX MENDELSSOHN
1809 - 1847

Overture, *The Hebrides (Fingal’s Cave)*, Op.26

Felix Mendelssohn would have made a model EU citizen. Born into a xenophobic era, when many European countries were struggling to establish their national identities, he learned at a very early age to take a keen interest in the language and culture of other nations. By 1825 his appetite had been whetted further by foreign travel to Switzerland, Silesia and France, and in that year his wealthy father bought a large mansion which quickly established itself as the most important cultural salon in Berlin. There, the Mendelssohn children mingled freely with the finest minds of the day: the philosopher Hegel, the scientist Alexander von Humboldt, the oriental scholar Friedrich Rosen, the actors Eduard and Thérèse Devrient, the theologian Julius Schubring and the music critic and editor Adolf Marx were just a few of the family’s regular guests.

Together with the works of Goethe and Shakespeare, both of which bore musical fruit in the brilliant Octet and the overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Mendelssohn was reared on Romantic literature, especially the novels of Sir Walter Scott. To cultured Europeans, Scotland seemed to epitomise the essence of fashionable romanticism: wild, lonely landscapes steeped in epic tales of ancient battles and heroic deeds. Scottish ballads were all the rage in 19th-century Germany (both Haydn and Beethoven had set many of them to music), and literary-minded Germans were well versed in Celtic history and legend. In April 1829, at the age of 20, Mendelssohn, accompanied by his friend Karl Klingemann, paid his first visit to Britain. Having sailed from Hamburg to London, he appeared at a Philharmonic Society concert on 25 May, conducting his Symphony in C minor to great acclaim. After a couple of months in London, he and Klingemann left for a tour of Scotland. They went first to Edinburgh, from where Felix wrote: ‘Few of my Switzerland reminiscences can compare to this; everything looks so stern and robust, half enveloped in haze or smoke or fog.’

While watching a procession of Highlanders in full ceremonial dress passing by the ‘half-ruined gray castle on the meadow, where Mary Stuart lived in splendour and saw Rizzio murdered’, Mendelssohn first had the germ of the idea which 12 years later would blossom into the Scottish Symphony. From Edinburgh, he and Klingemann went in search of Sir Walter Scott, but found the great man ‘in the act of leaving Abbotsford, stared at them like fools, drove 80 miles and lost a day for the sake of at best one half-hour of superficial conversation’. They then continued to the west coast, intending to visit the Hebrides Islands. On 7 August they made a stormy crossing by steamship to the tiny, uninhabited Island of Staffa, famous for its basalt caves, with their characteristic ‘organ pipe’ columnar rock formations. The most impressive of these is Fingal’s Cave, named after the legendary Celtic hero Finn MacCool, of which Keats had written ten years earlier: ‘Suppose, now, the giants who came down to the daughters of men had taken a whole mass of these columns and bound them together like bunches of matches, and then with immense axes had made a cavern in the body of these columns. Such is Fingal’s Cave, except that the sea has done the work of excavation and is continually dashing
there. The colour of the columns is a sort of black, with a lurking gloom of purple therein. For solemnity and grandeur it far surpasses the finest cathedral.'

On seeing Fingal's Cave, Mendelssohn first conceived the restless B minor motif which opens his Overture, The Hebrides, and which seems to epitomise the heaving, storm-tossed Atlantic Ocean. According to his friend, the pianist and conductor Ferdinand Hiller, Mendelssohn later recounted how he and Klingemann had spent the evening after their boat trip with a Scottish family. Although there was a piano in the drawing-room, it was a Sunday, and it took all Mendelssohn’s tact and diplomacy to persuade the family to open the piano briefly, so that he could ‘hear the theme which forms the germ of that original and masterly overture’.

In fact, the Overture was not completed for well over another year, by which time (December 1830), Felix was in Rome, far from the cold Scottish mists. There he met Berlioz, who showed Mendelssohn the score of his King Lear Overture and, in return, had his first experience of ‘that delicate, pretty, richly coloured substance known as the Fingal’s Cave Overture. Mendelssohn had just completed it and gave me a fairly accurate idea of the piece, such was his ability to play the most complicated scores on the piano’. Mendelssohn originally called the overture ‘The Solitary Isle’ and it did not acquire its better-known title The Hebrides for another two years, when he conducted a revised version in London at a Philharmonic Society concert. It has since taken its place in the repertoire as one of the world’s most popular concert overtures, an inspired example of Romantic musical tone-painting.

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WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
1756 – 1791

Piano Concerto No. 24 in C minor, K491

Allegro
Larghetto
Allegretto

This concerto was the last of a group of three written for Mozart’s intended series of subscription concerts over the winter and spring of 1785/86. By the time of its composition, in March 1786 (while Mozart was working on Le nozze di Figaro), his popularity as a composer/performer had begun to wear thin with the fickle Viennese public, although he composed three new concertos for the 1785/86 winter concert season (K482 in E flat, completed on 16 December 1785; K488 in A major, finished on 2 March 1786; and K491, completed three weeks later on 24 March, just over a month before the première of Figaro), he
seems to have given only four concerts – three in December 1785, at which he performed K482, and one the following spring, on 7 April, when K491 may have been premiered. In the remaining five years of his life, he wrote just three more piano concertos.

K491 is only the second of Mozart’s minor-key piano concertos, sharing the same passionate, dark-hued nature as the earlier D minor Concerto, K466. However it is much less theatrical in character, demonstrating a greater affinity with the intimate environment of chamber music than with the public arena of the opera house. Whereas the D minor Concerto depends on contrast and conflict to drive it forwards, this C minor Concerto develops much more organically. It is also Mozart’s only concerto to require the enlarged scoring of a pair of oboes in addition to a flute, pairs of clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets, plus timpani, as well as strings. Mozart makes the most of the richness of colours at his disposal, and the orchestral writing is very sophisticated, with the violas often divided in two, as well as the violins. The characterful treatment of orchestral timbre and texture found in its two predecessors is allied to a symphonic approach to form: themes reappear unexpectedly in different guises and in unconventional order.

Unlike most of Mozart’s manuscripts, which give the impression that the music was absolutely complete in his head before he wrote it down, the score of this concerto is full of crossings-out and additions. Whether this was because Mozart was in a state of internal conflict, or whether he needed to see the music on the page before he could evaluate its full effect, will always be open to speculation. Either way, this is without doubt one of his very greatest masterpieces.

The first movement is in 3/4 metre and Mozart uses every trick in the book to explore the widest variety of rhythmic configurations. The metre lends itself naturally to flowing, lyrical music – there is a natural tendency for the bars to subdivide into long-short dactylic patterns. But Mozart turns this expectation on its head, characterising the main theme with a short-long pattern, and also exploits the various dances associated with this metre: the minuet, Ländler and waltz. The movement opens with a theme that seems almost outside metre and tempo, at least to begin with. The full implication of its rhythmic shape is only clear when it is repeated by the full orchestra. The angular 12-bar phrase is built around diminished intervals, pulling the music in on itself, and it includes all 12 notes of the chromatic scale. The movement ends on a subdued, sombre note.

The central Larghetto is a simple, major-key rondo. Unlike the D minor Concerto, where the contemplative nature of the slow movement is shattered by a passionate middle section, here Mozart sustains the mood throughout, using the resources of the orchestral palette for contrast. In particular there are characteristic episodes for the wind instruments, evoking the outdoor atmosphere of the serenade. For the finale, Mozart chose theme-and-variation form, of which most of the eight are intricately crafted double variations.

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GUSTAV MAHLER
1860 – 1911

Langsam, schleppend – Wie ein Naturlaut
Kräftig bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell
Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen
Stürmisch bewegt

Mahler suggested that his First Symphony and the Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen arose from similar situations and the degree of overlap between them is certainly striking. For a start, the symphony takes some of its material from the song cycle – the main theme of the first movement is derived from the carefree walking song ‘Ging heut’ Morgen über’s Feld’, and the dream vision at the end of the cycle reappears in the third movement of the symphony. But just as the songs were composed in the wake of Mahler’s failed relationship with Johanna Richter, so the symphony was completed, at fever pitch in the spring of 1888, following the ending of his affair with Marion von Weber (wife of the composer’s grandson). In fact, it seems likely that the beginnings of the symphony go back to Mahler’s time in Kassel, and thus overlap with the composition of the songs. In its original form it had five movements, including an Andante (Blumine) composed in 1884 as part of Mahler’s incidental music for the verse play, Der Trompeter von Säkkingen. Later, after he had removed the movement, clearly the music to a love scene, Mahler referred to it as his hero’s ‘blunder of youth’.

The première, in November 1889, was conducted by the composer in Budapest where Mahler had recently become Artistic Director to the Royal Hungarian Opera. Clearly undecided as to what kind of work he had written, Mahler presented the work as a ‘Symphonic Poem in Two Parts’, thus aligning himself with the modernity of Richard Strauss rather than the more conservative tradition of Brahms. But critics and public alike were perplexed by the abrupt changes of mood, especially between the spring-like atmosphere of the first three movements (Part I) and then the sudden reversal of character in Part II, with its funeral march and highly dramatic Finale. Not for the last time, there was a demand for the composer to provide a more helpful commentary to his music.

The work languished for four years without a further performance, until 1893 when a revised version was performed in Hamburg, but Mahler’s ambivalence about the nature of his work was still unresolved. He referred to it both as a ‘Tone Poem in Symphonic Form’ and as a ‘Symphony’. Stung by the critics’ comments at the première, he now provided programmatic titles for each movement and the whole work was now titled ‘Titan’, apparently in reference to a novel by Jean-Paul Richter. Part 1 (From the Days of Youth: Flower, Fruit and Thorn pieces) consisted of three movements: 1. Spring without end; 2. Blumine; 3. Under full sail. Part II (Commedia humana) was made up of 4. The Huntsman’s Funeral Procession, a Death March in Callot’s Manner; and 5. ‘Dall’ Inferno al Paradiso’.

By the time of the work’s fourth performance, in Berlin in 1896, Mahler had removed the Blumine movement altogether, and presented the work simply as a ‘Symphony in D major for full orchestra’, but his anxiety about explanatory programmes persisted. For the Viennese
première in 1900, Mahler ensured that his own comments on the movements were fed to a leading newspaper by his friend and confidante, Natalie Bauer-Lechner. Even so, critics reacted badly to the sense that this was indeed programmatic music, but with the programme withdrawn. One called it ‘a satire of the symphony’ while others dubbed it, in comparison with Beethoven’s *Eroica*, a *sinfonia ironica*. One listener recorded in her diary: ‘An astonishing jumble of styles – and an ear-splitting, nerve-shattering din. I had never heard anything like it. It was exhilarating, but no less irritating.’ That was the impression of the young Alma Schindler; she became Mahler’s wife less than four months later.

If a symphony should contain the whole world, as Mahler was famously to suggest, it is fitting that his First Symphony begins as if it were the beginning of the world. The slow introduction is marked *Wie ein Naturlaut* (like a sound of nature) and is one of Mahler’s most sustained landscape evocations – a musical depiction of dawn in which the distant sound of horns and military fanfares overlap with bird calls against a background haze of string harmonics. Mahler described it as the awakening of nature out of the long sleep of winter, ushering in ‘spring without end’. What follows is an exuberant *Allegro*, based on the bright energy of the second *Gesellen* song. But the divided world of the song cycle is not left behind; the sunny *Allegro* is cut short by a return to the slow introduction, and the central development section sees yet another return to this mysterious landscape. The lonely wanderer can still be heard in the mournful dialogue between the cellos and a forest bird (solo flute). In Mahler’s music the beauty of nature is often the site of human loneliness but also the threshold to new life. The return to the *Allegro* is marked by a quiet horn call; by the end of the movement it is given *fortissimo* in great youthful whoops.

The second movement opens with an energetic country dance, derived from one of Mahler’s earliest songs (‘Maitanz in Grünen’, or ‘Hans und Grete’). Mahler’s real fondness for the heavy-footed pleasure of this *Ländler* is clear; to the traditional folk material he adds a new contrasting section, more chromatic and stormy, which acts as a foil to the return of the rustic simplicity of the opening. This is a staged village scene, not the real thing, and Mahler’s movement is not hard to hear in terms of a scene from an opera – or operetta. The village dance of the outer sections gives way, in the central *Trio*, to more intimate exchanges – as if the chorus disperses to frame a rather flirtatious and slightly tipsy scene between the soloists. This is based on a slow waltz, characterised as sentimental and wistful by the sighing glissandi in the strings and the constant elasticity of the tempo. The start of the third movement remains shocking even to modern listeners. A timpanist beats out a mechanical rhythm, over which a solo double bass plays the children’s song, ‘Bruder Martin’ (‘Frères Jacques’) in a minor key. The macabre effect of playing a nursery song as a funeral march is enhanced by the thin tone of the double bass – an early example of Mahler’s use of the grotesque. It must have been utterly bewildering to Mahler’s first audience – as if an old tramp had walked out to sing on the stage of the Court Opera. But worse is to come, because the march is later interrupted by what seems like a band of street-corner buskers, the two different musical types grating awkwardly against one another. Into this nightmare, however, is inserted the vision from the end of the *Gesellen* songs – just another kind of unreality in Mahler’s dreamscape. The title supplied for this movement offers some background to the strange nature of this imaginative world. *The Huntsman’s Funeral* was a picture by Moritz von Schwind in a popular children’s
fairytale book, in which the hunstman’s cortège is formed by the animals of the forest. With the phrase ‘in Callot’s manner’, Mahler signalled his sense of kinship with the weird and distorted tales of another of his favourite authors, ETA Hoffmann.

This weird fantasy world is interrupted by the Finale erupting, in Mahler’s words, as a ‘sudden outburst of despair from a deeply wounded heart’. A storm of orchestral violence is unleashed here, completely at odds with the symphony so far. When this eventually subsides into a brooding silence, it is followed by one of Mahler’s most beautifully shaped melodies. The marking for the strings is sehr gesangvoll (very songful), a direction he used when he wanted instruments to imitate the tone of a singer. It appears like a distant vision of a longed-for goal – but firmly in parenthesis. Taken as a whole, the Finale presents a complex narrative of anticipated breakthroughs, interruptions and re-beginnings. A chorale theme in D major suggests that victory may be in reach, before the music collapses back to nothingness and a return to the mysterious state of nature with which the whole symphony began. The mood is more melancholic now – the wandering lad is older and wiser – but the encounter with nature becomes a threshold to eventual victory. As the falling fourths rain down in the repeated horn phrases of the chorale, like the tolling of bells, it is hard not to be swept along by the sense that, in this music, Mahler has made real his vision. If the Gesellen songs were about loss, then the First Symphony is about returning to that earlier loss and making it good.

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