

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

(1809–1847)

Overture, *The Hebrides*, Op. 26

(1830 rev. 1832)
(10mins)

Felix Mendelssohn was born into a highly cultured family; Felix and his siblings were exposed to a wealth of enriching educational pursuits including literature, art, philosophy, languages, the classics and music. Another aspect of Mendelssohn's education was travel. As a young man he set out on a four-year 'Grand Tour' across Europe, starting in 1829, and composed works such as the *Italian* and *Scottish* symphonies along the way.

Mendelssohn arrived in Edinburgh on 26 July, where he embarked on a walking holiday with his friend, Carl Klingemann, sketching Highland scenes *en route* and, on 7 August, arriving at Oban on the western coast of Scotland. It was here, whilst looking out at the Hebrides, that Mendelssohn first conceived his *Hebrides* Overture. On the following day, the friends visited the remote island of Iona, founded by St Columba in the 6th century, and Fingal's Cave on the island of Staffa, which made a deep impression on the composer. Mendelssohn's travels took him to Rome on 1 November 1829, where he finished the first draft of the *Hebrides* Overture, provisionally entitled *Overtüre zur einsamen Insel* (*To the lonely island*). He announced the work on 11 December as a birthday present for his father. The first version was finished in 1830, with revisions finally completed in London in 1832, where it was premiered by the Philharmonic Society on 14 May under the title, *The Isles of Fingal*. The overture's undulating texture is evocative of the inexorable swell of the sea and the rugged drama of the Scottish coast.

MAX BRUCH

(1838–1920)

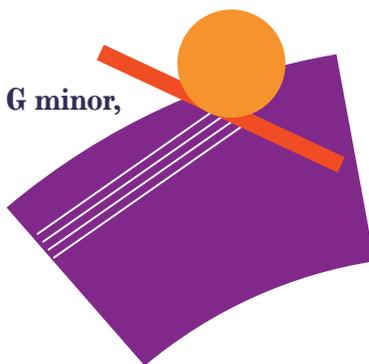
Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 26

(1866 rev. 1867)
(24mins)

Vorspiel: Allegro moderato – Adagio
Finale: Allegro energico

Bruch was, like Mendelssohn, well travelled, and counted Scotland amongst his sources of inspiration (his *Scottish Fantasy* for violin and orchestra is particularly well-loved). But it is Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1 that has endured above all his works – much to the composer's distaste, as its enormous popularity has led, even during Bruch's lifetime, to the neglect of his other compositions. The concerto was written while Bruch was working at the Koblenz court, where he was music director between 1865 and 1867. He was friends with a number of virtuoso violinists, including Joseph Joachim, Pablo Sarasate, Ferdinand David and Willy Hess, musicians who advised him during the composition of nine major works for violin and orchestra. Bruch's affinity with the violin was sincere; he argued that the instrument "can sing a melody better than a piano, and melody is the soul of music".

Even if it is unfortunate that Bruch's fears of being a one-hit wonder came true, it is easy to understand why his First Violin Concerto has enjoyed such phenomenal success. According to Joachim, the work is one of four great German violin concertos, alongside those of Beethoven, Brahms and Mendelssohn. Joachim declared that, of these works, "The richest, the most seductive, was written by Max Bruch". Joachim helped to revise the work, as he had with the Brahms concerto. The original version of Bruch's work was



completed in 1866 and was first performed on 24 April of the same year by Otto von Königsloew, conducted by Bruch himself. Once Joachim's revisions had been incorporated, the concerto was completed in its definitive form in 1867 and performed by Joachim on 5 January 1868, this time with Karl Martin Rheinthal conducting.

When one considers the large sums of money Bruch would have received had he been alive to enjoy the work's ongoing popularity, it is painful to contemplate what happened next. He sold the concerto for a lump sum to the publisher Simrock (who also published Brahms's works), but kept a copy for himself. By the end of the First World War, Bruch was destitute; royalties had been impossible to chase during the conflict. In desperation, he sent his manuscript of the Violin Concerto to some friends, pianist sisters Rose and Otilie Sutro, in the United States, asking them to sell it there for him. But the money never appeared, and Bruch died in October 1920 without receiving anything more for his concerto. His estate did not fare any better, and it seems that the sisters kept and sold the autograph much later, in 1949. It is now housed in the Pierpont Morgan Public Library in New York City.

The first movement is, unusually, a *Vorspiel*: a 'prelude' to the second movement. This dramatic prelude begins and ends slowly, with brief cadenzas (when the soloist takes a moment to display dazzling skill) in the opening and closing passages framing a turbulent central section. The prelude flows into the second movement, the focal point of the concerto, its achingly romantic, slowly-building melodic lines inseparable from the work's popularity. The concerto is rounded off by a joyful finale, the violin's spirited tune contrasted with more lyrical material, which briefly evokes the ravishing slow movement.

Interval (20 mins)

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PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

(1840–1893)

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

(1878)
(44 mins)

Andante sostenuto - Moderato con anima
Andantino in modo di canzone
Scherzo. Pizzicato ostinato. Allegro
Finale. Allegro con fuoco

The first mention of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony dates from May 1877, when he wrote to his patroness, Nadezha von Meck that he was "... engrossed in a symphony, which I began to write during the winter... Any other type of work would weigh heavily upon me at the moment... I find that now my nerves are frayed and irritable when I am deflected from the symphony, which progresses with some difficulty". A month later he declared: "The symphony is finished, i.e. in outline. By the end of the summer it should be scored." This proved rather optimistic, but he set about orchestrating the work that August, soon reporting to Meck, its dedicatee: "Our symphony is progressing a little. I will take particular care when orchestrating the first movement – it is very long and complicated; yet it is also, in my opinion, the best movement. The remaining three are much simpler..."

All this took place against the backdrop of Tchaikovsky's tumultuous personal life. Flouting his own sexual preferences, Tchaikovsky proposed in June 1877 to one of his students, Antonina Miliukova, despite admitting that she was "... a woman with whom I am not the least in love". Their marriage took place in July, and failed in less than three months. Tchaikovsky, suffering psychologically and, unable to compose, left, spending time travelling, mostly in Italy, to aid his recovery. It was at this time that Tchaikovsky set about >>

completing the Fourth Symphony. In December 1877, some of his former enthusiasm had returned. He wrote to Meck:

“Not only am I occupying myself assiduously with scoring our symphony, I am utterly absorbed in this work. ...I think that this symphony is something out of the ordinary, and that it is the best thing I have done so far... something which, in my opinion, shall not be forgotten...”

Tchaikovsky finished the symphony early in 1878 and, at Meck’s request, wrote a programme describing the work. Some have regarded this as an obstruction, preventing the music from speaking for itself, but it does offer an insight into Tchaikovsky’s conception. Tchaikovsky explained in a letter to fellow composer Taneyev that his work could never be completely abstract: “I should not wish for symphonic works to come from my pen, which express nothing and which consist of empty playing with chords, rhythms and modulations. Should a symphony not express those things for which there are not words but which need to be expressed?”

Of the first movement, Tchaikovsky wrote: “The introduction is the seed of the whole symphony, beyond question the main idea. This is Fate, the fatal force which prevents our hopes of happiness from being realised...” The Fate theme is initially heard as an ominous fanfare on trumpets, horns and trombones. Sunnier music emerges, decorated by a descending woodwind motif. But as the composer explained, the light-heartedness is temporary: “It is here, it is here, happiness! No! These were dreams, and Fate awakens us harshly. Thus, life is a perpetual alternation between grim reality and transient dreams and reveries of happiness.”

The second movement, which opens with a wistful oboe solo, was characterised by Tchaikovsky in terms of listless nostalgia: “... the melancholy feeling that comes in

the evening when one sits alone, tired from work, having picked up a book but let it fall from one’s hands. A whole host of memories appears.” The music in this movement is not without energy; its full-throated themes, though poignant, are intensely passionate.

According to Tchaikovsky, the third movement, which begins with delicate pizzicato (plucked) string textures interrupted by bucolic woodwinds, “... does not express any definite sensations. It consists of capricious arabesques, elusive apparitions that pass through the imagination when one has drunk a little wine and feels the first stage of intoxication... one remembers the picture of a roistering peasant and street song. Then somewhere in the distance a military parade passes. These are completely disconnected images, like those that flit through one’s head as one is falling asleep.”

The fourth movement’s programme is interesting but is only part of the story. In Tchaikovsky’s words: “If you find no cause for joy within yourself, look for it in others... Rejoice in others’ rejoicing. To live is still bearable.” Alongside this, however, is a subtler allusion to Antonina in the form of a childhood folk song incorporated into the music, ‘In the field a little birch tree stood’. The birch tree is alone and is described as though it represents a woman. A crowd of women gathers; they dance and throw wedding wreaths into the stream. Those whose wreaths float will marry; those whose wreaths sink will not.

The finale opens with a flurry of activity, contrasted with an enigmatic, sensuous theme that builds in tension, the brass used to sinister effect, answered by gentler woodwinds. The powerful Fate theme returns, but optimism wins the day, and the work ends in a defiantly joyful spirit.

Programme notes by Joanna Wyld

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Q&A with Nicola Benedetti



Simon Fowler

What were the key moments in your childhood that led to you wanting to be a professional violinist?

I started learning the violin aged four because I copied my big sister. She is four years older than me and I wanted to do everything that she did. The initial phase was hard but I remember being so moved by music from a very young age and was hooked. I can’t remember ever seriously considering doing anything else.

How old were you when you first played Bruch’s First Violin Concerto and how has your interpretation changed since then?

I first learnt the second movement when I was eight, and the third when I was nine. I’m sure I sounded quite ridiculous playing it at that age, I wasn’t good enough at all! But I totally loved it, and tried my best. I then didn’t play it again till I was 17 or thereabouts. Of course, it changes every time I play it.

On the day of a concert, how do you prepare? Do you have any rituals you follow?

Yes and no. I used to be very controlling over the amount of practice I did, when I washed my hands, etc, etc. Now, I’m more relaxed. My routine is to try to be in an open state and recognise what my body

and mind needs in order to be prepared for walking on stage. It’s a complicated thing, really. It’s way beyond the purely physical.

Have you performed with conductor Pablo Heras-Casado before?

No, and I’m really looking forward to it!

You’ve recently launched The Benedetti Foundation. Congratulations on its success so far. What would be your top tip for beginner violinists?

Thank you. We are in the very early stages but I am very excited about the Foundation, and to be formalising my vision and expanding my commitment to the education of young people and to supporting music teachers. My top tip for beginner violinists is to be patient and to persevere. The violin is hard and can be very frustrating, particularly in the early days, but don’t get disheartened. Do little and often on a daily basis and you will see big improvements. Also, do look at my online video series ‘With Nicky’ on YouTube for some helpful tips!

Which of our forthcoming concerts would you recommend?

Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride* at Garsington Opera.