

The music of Mozart has always brought a smile to my face; what has changed over time for me is a deepening appreciation for the deceptive simplicity of the music. In the Piano Concerto No. 23, I love how the heart-tugging sadness of the second movement melts away in the joy of the third movement!

LIZ BEILMAN, NCS ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL CELLO

Mendelssohn's Third Symphony is the perfect piece to hear in the springtime—this intensely exuberant music is so evocative of nature. The second movement always reminds me of the forest fairies running around in A Midsummer Night's Dream.

RACHEL NIKETOPOULOS, NCS FRENCH HORN

Piano Concerto No. 23 in A Major, K. 488

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

PREMIERE Composed 1786; first performance 1786, with the composer as soloist

OVERVIEW

During the period between 1782 and 1786, Mozart completed no fewer than 12 piano concertos, many of them exploring new structural and harmonic territory. The A-major concerto, one of his most popular, is not only a powerfully emotional work—especially the second movement—but is also of historical interest. One of three concertos he was to perform in Vienna during the Lenten season of 1786, K. 488 was completed in March and was among the first of his works to make use of clarinets.

Preliminary sketches for this work exist, demonstrating—contrary to legend—that Mozart wasn't always composing on the fly. In fact, he kept notebooks containing musical ideas to be used at a later time, works in progress, and even some brief sketches eventually abandoned altogether. About 320 fragments and sketches have survived. Sketches for part of the first movement, an abandoned second movement in D major, and the finale, reveal that this work was already underway in 1784, two years before its completion. This evidence demonstrates that Mozart sometimes devoted great care to revising and polishing his music.

This concerto belongs to a group of five that Mozart dedicated to his early patron Joseph Wenzeslaus von Fürstenberg, the reigning Prince of Donaueschingen in southwest Germany, a well-known center for the promotion of new music to this day. In a letter to the prince, Mozart reveals that these were works “for my own use and for a small group of music-loving friends.”

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening movement, in the modified sonata form used for the classical concerto, comprises two lyrical principal themes—rather than the usual contrasting themes—separated by a more harmonically unstable bridge, plus a syncopated closing theme. The bulk of the movement involves the interplay of brief fragments of the themes presented during the exposition. The fairly simple cadenza is the only surviving solo cadenza Mozart wrote into a score. Usually, he either wrote out cadenzas separately or improvised them in performance. Generations of composers and pianists have taken advantage of the creative freedom allowed in the cadenza to supply their own.

The second movement is the only piece Mozart ever composed in F-sharp minor, the relative minor to A major. While the mood is extremely intense, the orchestration is quite light; and it is probable that the piano part was originally embellished with improvised ornamentation. Those interested in the nature of such improvised embellishments should consult Mozart's earlier Concerto No. 9, "Jeunehomme," K. 271, in which Mozart wrote out elaborate ornamentation for the piano in the second movement.

The sprightly rondo of the finale is a sharp contrast to the pathos of the preceding movement. It suggests a happy release from a dark night of the soul.

INSTRUMENTATION

Solo piano, flute, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, strings

Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, Op. 56, "Scottish"

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

BORN February 3, 1809, in Hamburg;
died November 4,
1847, in Leipzig,
Germany

PREMIERE Composed 1829-1842; first performance March 3, 1842, by the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, conducted by the composer

OVERVIEW

We are all familiar with the romantic stereotype—and often the reality—of the composer struggling for his daily bread and artistic survival. Probably the greatest exception to this picture was Felix Mendelssohn, an economically secure composer from a culturally sophisticated and highly supportive family. The Mendelssohn household was a Mecca for the intellectual elite of Germany, and the many family visitors fawned over the prodigy and his talented sister Fanny. Fortunately for the development of his rare abilities, his carefully selected teachers were demanding and strict.

Mendelssohn's financial security gave him the opportunity to take the Grand Tour in what was then considered the civilized world: Western Europe, Italy, and Britain. In 1829, he traveled to England and then on to Scotland, where his visit to Fingal's Cave in the Hebrides Islands inspired *The Hebrides*. It also produced the ideas that became the "Scottish" Symphony.

Started in Italy in 1830 but not finished until 1842, the “Scottish” Symphony was Mendelssohn’s last—the numbering of the five symphonies reflecting their order dedicated the symphony to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, whom he had met and charmed during one of his visits to England (the queen actually sang with Mendelssohn accompanying her on the piano.)

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

While the music has an undeniably Scottish flavor, it does not quote any authentic folk melodies, a device that Mendelssohn despised. Writing to his father from Wales, he commented: “... anything but national music! May ten thousand devils take all folklore ... a harpist sits in the lobby of every inn of repute playing so-called folk melodies at you—dreadful, vulgar, fake stuff; and simultaneously a hurdy-gurdy is tooting out melodies—it’s enough to drive you crazy ...” That being said, it’s difficult to distinguish Mendelssohn’s invented Scottish-style melodies from the kind of musical nationalism he so despised.

Beginning with the introduction and the succeeding *Allegro agitato*, the gloomy atmosphere gave rise to the myth that it was somehow inspired by the tragic life of Mary, Queen of Scots. More likely, the symphony reflects the bleak and stormy weather so prevalent in the Scottish Highlands, lowlands, and outlying islands. The climax of the first movement is a veritable hurricane, replete with chromatic moaning in the strings.

The second movement provides a little sunshine, its main theme as near to a Scottish folksong—with “Scotch snap” and all—as Mendelssohn could get without actually using one. The third movement comes through as passionate, at times even anguished. Its middle section suggests a horn-call summons of doom. Then, it’s back to the *Sturm und Drang* (storm and drive) of the finale. But—perhaps with a bow to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony—Mendelssohn finishes the symphony with a shift again to the major mode and a new and optimistic theme to end it.

INSTRUMENTATION

Two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, strings