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ELOQUENCE

## MENDELSSOHN

String Symphonies  
Nos. 9, 10 & 12

Concerto in A minor for  
Piano & Strings

John Ogdon  
Academy of St. Martin in the Fields  
Neville Marriner

**FELIX MENDELSSOHN** (1809-1847)

**Symphony No. 9 in C minor for Strings**

<b>1</b>	I	Allegro moderato	7'29
<b>2</b>	II	Poco adagio	8'03
<b>3</b>	III	Scherzo	2'50
<b>4</b>	IV	Allegro moderato	6'57

<b>5</b>	<b>Symphony No. 10 in B minor for Strings</b>		7'31
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**Symphony No. 12 in G minor for Strings**

<b>6</b>	I	Grave – Adagio	5'19
<b>7</b>	II	Andante	5'44
<b>8</b>	III	Allegro molto	6'12

**Concerto in A minor for Piano & Strings**

<b>9</b>	I	Allegro	12'46
<b>10</b>	II	Adagio	7'28
<b>11</b>	III	Allegro ma non troppo	6'20

**John Ogdon**, piano [Concerto]  
**Academy of St. Martin in the Fields**  
**Neville Marriner**

Total timing: 77'16

Few musicians have enjoyed the encouragement, support and opportunities afforded to young Felix Mendelssohn; fewer still have so swiftly and richly repaid such initial investment. Born into a wealthy, highly cultivated and well-connected family, Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy showed precocious musical talent from an early age, making an impressive private debut as a pianist at the age of nine.

He and his beloved sister, Fanny, initially received musical training from their mother who was soon supplanted by professional instructors, including the pianist Ludwig Berger, violinist Carl Wilhelm Hennig and Carl Friedrich Zelter, a friend of Goethe and principal of the Berlin Singakademie who instructed Mendelssohn in music theory and composition. In 1819 Mendelssohn joined the Singakademie as an alto and completed his first compositions during the following year. His juvenile compositions fill 44 neatly written and for the most part carefully dated volumes.

Under Zelter's care, Mendelssohn was encouraged to study the music of those regarded as the greatest composers of the past: Handel, J.S. Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Hummel.

Today, we may be as surprised by the inclusion of the latter as by the omission of, say, Beethoven (whom Mendelssohn discovered on his own). Yet it should be remembered that during the early decades of the nineteenth century – even as Romanticism was blooming – late-Baroque and Classical music were regarded as the epitome, and Beethoven by no means canonised.

Although they never met, Mendelssohn was, in fact, observed by Beethoven in 1813, who wrote in one of his conversation notebooks: 'Mendelssohn – 12 years old – promises much'. In the early 1820s he did, however, meet other contemporary composers, including Weber and Spohr.

In 1821, Mendelssohn wrote six sinfonias for string orchestra, completing a total of twelve 'string symphonies', as we now know them, two years later. The scores were rediscovered in the State Library of East Berlin in 1950, having been long thought lost. Frequently compared with the six *sonate a quattro* of the seventeen year-old Rossini or with the early symphonies of Mozart, Mendelssohn's string symphonies are often superior to either, demonstrating both his natural ability and the quality of Zelter's

pedagogy. Even from this early age, and bearing in mind their purpose as educational exercises closely based on models from the past, these works already display technical proficiency and bear audible hallmarks of Mendelssohn's characteristic style.

String Symphony No. 9 in C minor, completed on 12 March 1823, is in four movements. In the Mozartian first movement a Grave introduction precedes a spirited Allegro, whose development section comprises an astonishing five-part fugue that features string writing unmatched even by Mozart's efforts at a comparable age. The Andante second movement, strongly Haydnesque in character, begins with violins divided into four parts. The fugal middle section involves only the lower strings and evokes a mournful 17th-century mood before all the instruments combine to recap the opening material. The Scherzo, which prefigures those of the Octet and the incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, frames a delightful Trio titled 'La Suisse' in memory of a recent holiday trip. Paradoxically, the Allegro vivace finale adopts the sonata form usually employed for first movements, interwoven with further contrapuntal sections. Throughout, Mendelssohn's mercurial temperament and

highly individual harmonic freedom add genuine interest to what in lesser hands would remain mere pastiche.

In the same year, Mendelssohn composed the last three string symphonies, completing No. 10 on 18 May, No. 11 on 12 July and No. 12 on 17 September. The Tenth, in B minor, has not come down to us complete, two movements having been lost. The remaining torso is nonetheless substantial both in length and sophistication. Mendelssohn here seems to draw upon the contemporary sound worlds of Beethoven or even of Schubert, with whose music he was as yet unfamiliar. Are there even echoes of Rossini or intimations of Tchaikovsky? Certainly, the more 'modern' style of this sonata presages Mendelssohn's mature writing.

In contrast, String Symphony No 12 steps back to leap forward. A grandiose French overture recalls any number of 18th-century models – Handel's and J.S. Bach's spring foremost to mind – and Mendelssohn revels in the theatrical contrast between the weighty Grave and the chromatic Allegro fugue which follows. The teenage Mendelssohn's command of counterpoint is breathtaking. A quasi-Classical Andante, which again recalls Haydn while

peering around the corner into the future, employs divided violas to achieve a lushly restrained tone. The Prestissimo finale recruits all of Mendelssohn's burgeoning skills to integrate different musical styles and textures into a compelling musical climax, suggesting familiarity with Mozart's final symphonies. The first works of his maturity lay just over the horizon.

The Piano Concerto in A minor was composed in 1822 and premiered at a Sunday family concert by the composer as both soloist and conductor. Mendelssohn's confidence in string writing is apparent as is his debt to Mozart, Hummel and Beethoven, especially in the solo part whose virtuosity testifies to the thirteen year old's brilliant technique. In Chopin's two youthful concertos, which still lay almost a decade ahead, the solo and orchestral forces are frequently less well balanced than here.

Even more so than in the String Symphonies, Mendelssohn's striving for original effects seems to tug hard at his respect for Classical form. At its most fruitful, this tension generates much excitement – the thrill of potential energy finding novel means of expression. For instance, the manuscript of the Concerto is slightly damaged, missing seven bars (141-6) of the

bass line from the exposition of the first movement. Reference to the corresponding section of the recapitulation provides no assistance in restoring the loss: Mendelssohn has reharmonised the passage, a typically subtle but telling touch.

Mendelssohn's reputation, very high during his lifetime, sank as early as a few years after his death in the view of German-speaking critics while remaining higher in England. Even today, he polarises opinion. The facility of his music, like that of Mozart's, has been held against it (as if nothing delectable could possibly be seriously worthwhile), while its technical demands and elegant sophistication (again like Mozart) challenge all but the best performers. It is well, then, to remember the composer's point of view.

In a letter written in 1843, a few years before his death aged only 42, Mendelssohn wrote: 'Ever since I began to compose, I have remained true to my starting principle: not to write a page because no matter what public, or what a pretty girl, wanted it to be thus or thus; but to write solely as I myself thought best, and as it gave me pleasure.'

**Stephen Schafer**

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