



AUDIOPHILE EDITION

MENDELSSOHN

Symphony No. 3 'Scottish' A Midsummer Night's Dream

Baltimore Symphony Orchestra
Sergiu Comissiona



Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)
Symphony No. 3 ‘Scottish’, Op. 56
A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Op. 61
(excerpts)

Symphony No. 3 ‘Scottish’, Op. 56

Symphony No. 3 was inspired by Mendelssohn’s sightseeing activity during his first visit to the British Isles in the summer of 1829, when he was 20 years old. The symphony was not completed until January 1842 and is one of Mendelssohn’s last works for orchestra (followed only by the incidental music for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Athalie* and *Oedipus at Colonus*).

In his boyhood Mendelssohn composed a full dozen symphonies for strings or for chamber orchestra with winds; the first of his mature symphonies for full orchestra – *No. 1 in C minor, Op. 11* – was the only one he had behind him when he wrote to his sister Fanny from Edinburgh in July 1829 to describe his visit to the castle known as Holyrood: ‘In the evening twilight we went today to the palace where Queen Mary lived and loved; a little room is shown there with a winding staircase leading up to the door; up this way they came and found Rizzio in the little room, pulled him out, and three rooms off there is the dark corner where they murdered him. The chapel close to it is roofless now; grass and ivy grow there, and broken is the altar at which Mary was crowned Queen of Scotland. Everything around is broken and mouldering, and the bright sky shines in. I believe I found today in that old chapel the beginning of my Scottish Symphony.’ In the same letter the young composer sketched out 16 bars which were to open the symphony, but a dozen years were to pass before he got down to work on the composition, and in those years he produced three other symphonies – two of which were assigned letter numbers than the *Scottish* because they were revised and first published after the completion of this work.

It is a great convenience that Mendelssohn gave names to all four of these symphonies, for referring to any of them by number almost invariably seems to call for pointing out that the enumeration does not correspond to the actual chronology of the works – with elaborate explanations which serve little purpose. Not that the titles themselves have always been fool-proof: Robert Schumann, under the impression that he was listening to the *Italian Symphony*, enthused over what was actually the *Scottish* as a work ‘so brilliantly evocative of Italy that it compensated the listener for never having visited there’. In this case, one might question the genuineness of Schumann’s reaction, for there is nothing of the south in this work; in his initial sketch for the introduction Mendelssohn captured the bleak expanse of a landscape probably without parallel anywhere – but again, as in *The Hebrides*, descriptiveness is only the least of this splendid work’s virtues.

The symphony, which Mendelssohn dedicated to Queen Victoria following the English premiere of 23 June 1842 (both Victoria and Albert sang songs by Mendelssohn and themselves when he visited them that summer), is, like his concertos for violin and for piano, to be played without a break between movements. A certain melancholy solemnity prevails in the first and third movements, with the intervening scherzo (one of Mendelssohn’s most brilliant) providing a stunning contrast; the scherzo’s main theme, introduced by the clarinet, is decidedly Scottish in character. In the *Adagio* Philip Radcliffe has noted ‘several obvious reminiscences of Beethoven: the main theme looks back to the central section of the *Allegretto* of the *Seventh Symphony* and a cadential passage that appears a little later to a similar phrase in the *Adagio* of the ‘*Harp Quartet*.’ After the expressive sentiment of the slow movement the finale comes in briskly: its particular kind of animation well suits the marking *Allegro guerriero*

(though the exquisite second subject is anything but warlike), and the majestic coda, for which there is no preparation other than a momentary hush, is in the nature of a victory celebration or, in this context, a ritual solemnising the gathering of the clans.

Richard Freed

Booklet notes reprinted from the original LP release

A Midsummer Night's Dream, Op. 61 (excerpts)

Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was an early favourite of the Mendelssohn family and in 1826 Felix Mendelssohn had written an *Overture*, a musical summary of the play, inspired by the German translation of August Wilhelm Schlegel, brother-in-law of Mendelssohn's Aunt Dorothea, and by the

beauty of a summer evening in the garden of the family house in Berlin. The incidental music to the later production of the play starts with this *Overture*. The *Scherzo*, a first entr'acte, depicts the gossamer elegance and the humour of what follows in the dispute between Oberon and his wife, the Fairy Queen, Titania. *Notturmo* shows night in the forest, as the lovers sleep and Puck applies a magic potion to their eyes, so that when they wake all will be well and 'every Jack shall have his Jill', and Titania, in the scene that follows, lavishes her bewitched affection on Bottom the Weaver, translated by Puck's spell into a donkey. The *Wedding March* celebrates the marriage of Duke Theseus to Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, a match that provides a formal mortal framework for the enchantment at the heart of the play.

Keith Anderson

Sergiu Comissiona

The Romanian-born conductor Sergiu Comissiona (1928–2005) made his conducting debut with the Bucharest Opera Orchestra at the age of 18; by the time he was 22 he was music director of the Romanian State Ensemble, and five years later he became principal conductor of the Romanian State Opera. In 1959 Comissiona fled the communist regime in Romania and emigrated to Israel where he became music director of the Haifa Symphony; the following year he organised the Israel Chamber Orchestra, with which he recorded and toured Europe and America. His US debut was made with The Philadelphia Orchestra in 1965, the year in which he became Music Director of the Göteborg Symphony Orchestra in Sweden. He held that post until 1969, when he took up his position in Baltimore as Music Director raising the orchestra's profile to one of national prominence and receiving widespread acclaim. He also held music directorships with the Vancouver Symphony, Houston Symphony, Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, Asian Youth Orchestra and New York City Opera and appeared as guest conductor with virtually all the leading orchestras of Europe and America.

Baltimore Symphony Orchestra

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