



AUDIOPHILE EDITION

MENDELSSOHN

Symphonies

No. 4 'Italian' and No. 5 'Reformation'
The Hebrides Overture

Baltimore Symphony Orchestra
Sergiu Comissiona



Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)
The Hebrides in D major ‘Fingal’s Cave’, Op. 26
Symphony No. 4 in A major ‘Italian’, Op. 90
Symphony No. 5 in D minor ‘Reformation’, Op. 107

The Hebrides in D major ‘Fingal’s Cave’, Op. 26

The *Overture to ‘Fingal’s Cave’* 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 *Overture* was composed within a matter of months following the initial stimulus.

Fingal’s Cave is a spot on the Hebridean Isle of Staffa, some 50 miles off the Scottish coast. According to legend, the cave is the site of what was once the royal castle of Fion na Gael (anglicised to ‘Fingal’), ruler of the kingdom of Morven and father of the celebrated third-century warrior and bard known as Ossian. Every trace of the structure of the supposed castle has vanished, and its floor has given way to the sea. Mendelssohn stood on this spot on a windy day in August 1829 and under its spell wrote down the opening theme of the overture he was to complete (in its initial version) 16 months later. During the period of work on ‘what was to be, beyond any doubt, his masterpiece’ (as stated by his biographer Philip Radcliffe) Mendelssohn, in Donald Francis Tovey’s view, ‘was surely occupied chiefly with the unconscious digesting of his impressions of Hebridean scenery, the roar of the waves rolling into the cavern, the cries of sea-birds, and, perhaps almost more than anything else, the radiant and telescopic clearness of the air when the mist is completely dissolved or not yet formed.’

As an evocation of atmosphere and mood, *The Hebrides* (which Mendelssohn revised substantially in June 1832, a month after he conducted the premiere in London) has not been surpassed by any of the more elaborate tone paintings that followed it – most of which, indeed, owe their very existence to Mendelssohn’s example – but the work’s value is by no means confined to its descriptive quality. On strictly musical grounds, it is an accomplishment which ‘far transcends the typical praises that Mendelssohn’s posterity has consented to assign to him... a masterpiece of delicate and polished orchestration,’ as Tovey put it adding: ‘The perfection of form in the *Hebrides Overture* is the perfection of freedom; it has the vital and inevitable unexpectedness of the classics.’

While *The Hebrides* is regarded as the proper title for the work, it is more often called *Fingal’s Cave* and has known several other titles. Mendelssohn himself introduced the work as *The Isles of Fingal* in London, as *Ouvertüre an den Hebriden* in Berlin, and as *Ossian in Fingal’s Cave* in Leipzig before he settled on the simpler title, and for several decades after his death it was also possible to encounter the *Overture* under the German title *Die einsame Insel* (‘The Solitary Island’), a phrase Mendelssohn had used in letters while working on the composition. Fortunately, this nomenclatural extravagance has not endured, but the music has, and even now one may well understand that Johannes Brahms, who cared little for descriptive music and wrote none himself, was moved to remark: ‘I’d give all of my compositions if I could have written such a piece as *The Hebrides!*’

Symphony No. 4 in A major 'Italian', Op. 90 Symphony No. 5 in D minor 'Reformation', Op. 107

The numbering of symphonies, in the catalogues or some composers, is as complicated as the naming of cats. The numbers affixed to the symphonies of Haydn, Dvořák and Schumann, for example, were always known to be at variance with the chronology or the respective series. The Dvořák enumeration has been successfully and painlessly revised to accommodate the publication of the four early works the composer had left out of his published sequence. The Schumann numbering can be justified on the basis of publication delayed by revisions. No one in his right mind would think of renumbering Haydn's 104 – or 107 – symphonies. A number, after all, need not be a chronological indicator: it is simply a convenient way of labelling a work, and as such is as handy as any other title. In Mendelssohn's case, the whole consideration of chronology is further complicated by the existence of no fewer than a dozen symphonies Mendelssohn composed between January 1820 (a few weeks before his eleventh birthday!) and September 1823 (a baker's dozen if we include the single extended movement written in December of the latter year). Mendelssohn never published these early symphonies, but in recent years they have been published, performed and recorded, together with his several concertos from the same period. He wrote his 'official' *Symphony No. 1* at the ripe age of 15; the two on this recording were the next to be composed, but were given the numbers they bear because Mendelssohn did not finish revising them until much later, and neither was published in its final form till after his death. The fourth in order of composition was the symphony with the elaborate choral sections, the *Lobgesang*, composed in 1840 and eventually published as *No. 2*; last came the *Scottish Symphony*, which Mendelssohn had sketched in part as early as 1829 but completed only in 1842 and published as *No. 3*. Fortunately, four of these five symphonies have titles as well as numbers to identify them.

The title *Italian* designates the symphony Mendelssohn began writing during a visit to Italy in 1830–31 and completed in Berlin on 13 March 1833, a few weeks after his 24th birthday. When he conducted the first performance two months later, at a Philharmonic concert in London, the work was very well received, and the second movement had to be repeated, but there were some misgivings expressed regarding the final movement, most notably those of Mendelssohn himself, who withheld the score from publication for several years in order to make revisions. The final version of the symphony was not performed until the second anniversary of his death.

Ever since Robert Schumann mistook Mendelssohn's *Scottish Symphony* for the *Italian* and remarked that that work compensated the listener who had never visited Italy, there has been some discussion of the appropriateness of these titles. There have been those who, paraphrasing Samuel Johnson's observation that 'all of Shakespeare's foreigners are Englishmen,' maintained that there is nothing really Scottish or Italian in Mendelssohn's symphonies, but to most listeners the title *Italian* seems eminently suitable for the well-loved symphony in A major – not so much, curiously enough, for its final movement, the only one of the four actually based on an Italian musical form (the dance called the *Saltarello*), as for the impetuous sunburst with which the work opens, the warm southern lyricism of the third movement, and the sheer songfulness that characterises the entire symphony. The similarity of the second movement to the corresponding section of Berlioz's *Harold in Italy* (composed a year after the Mendelssohn symphony) can hardly go unnoticed: the Mendelssohn slow movement, possibly inspired by a religious procession the young composer observed in Naples, has been 'unofficially' given the very title Berlioz affixed to his: 'March of the Pilgrims'.

Carl Reinecke (1824–1910), the composer and pianist who in his youth was a member of Mendelssohn's circle in Leipzig and eventually became one of his successors as conductor of the Gewandhaus concerts there, once remarked

that the *Italian Symphony* embodied all one needed to know about the art of orchestration. Since Reinecke's time, Ravel, Stravinsky and numerous others have given us some intriguing texts on orchestration in their works, but the *Italian Symphony*, a model of exquisite balance between the Classical and Romantic elements in Mendelssohn's polished and distinctive style, continues to hold its own and more with musicians who love to play it and audiences who love to hear it – neither for its instructional qualities nor its descriptive ones, but simply for the undimmed freshness and vitality that have kept it among the most satisfying works in the category of the symphony.

The *Reformation Symphony* was begun in Wales in September 1829, a few weeks after Mendelssohn made his first sketches for the *Scottish Symphony* during his very productive first visit to Britain. While the *Scottish* was set aside for more than a dozen years, the *Reformation* was completed in 1830, for Mendelssohn intended it for a presentation in the celebration of the tercentenary of the Augsburg Confession in June of that year. That event did not take place, however, and the symphony was not performed until 1832, when it was introduced in Berlin. Mendelssohn, as noted above, then set the score aside for revision and left it unpublished at the time of his death.

The Augsburg Confession is the name given to the document drawn up to set forth the principles of Protestantism in June 1530, the inauguration of the movement known as the Reformation; the first and last movements of the symphony contain symbolic references to the event. The solemn introduction to the first movement concludes with a citation of the 'Dresden Amen', more familiar from Wagner's use of it in his *Parsifal* a half-century after the premiere of this symphony; the motif returns at the end of the development section. The final movement is based largely on the hymn *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* ('A Mighty Fortress Is Our God'), attributed to Martin Luther himself. It cannot be said that Mendelssohn treated either of these themes in a particularly ecclesiastical manner, though he made effectively *dramatic* use of both of them.

The main theme of the first movement, following that first citation of the Dresden Amen, bears a resemblance to the opening of Haydn's last symphony, *No. 104* in D (Mendelssohn's introduction is also in D major), but the treatment here is uncompromisingly austere. Philip Radcliffe, in his valuable book on Mendelssohn, noted that, despite the tempo marking *Allegro con fuoco*, much of this movement 'seems really to be slow music in disguise.' The hushed return of the Dresden Amen between the development and recapitulation is not so much in the nature of a contrast as that of a seal of confirmation on the overall tenor of the movement.

Both of the inner movements are quite short, and thoroughly characteristic of their composer. The second is an eminently likable scherzo with a particularly felicitous trio. The third is an exquisitely simple 'song without words' which leads, by way of a reminiscence of the second subject of the first movement, directly into the introduction to the finale. This begins with the solo flute's statement of the chorale tune (somewhat different from the version used by Bach, but quite recognisable), which gradually spreads through the orchestra. New material is introduced in the finale proper (in sonata form), but the chorale returns from time to time in part or in whole, and forms the basis of the suitably jubilant coda.

Richard Freed

Booklet notes reprinted from the original LP release

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

For over a century, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (BSO) has been recognised as one of America's leading orchestras and one of Maryland's most significant cultural institutions. With a focus on world-class music, community engagement and music education, the BSO has been able to impact lives through its many initiatives, including OrchKids. Launched by Music Director Laureate, Marin Alsop and the BSO in 2008, OrchKids provides children with educational resources and fosters social change through the power of music in some of Baltimore's underserved communities. The BSO performs annually for more than 350,000 people throughout the State of Maryland. Since 1982, the BSO has performed at the Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall in Baltimore. In 2005, with the opening of the Music Center at Strathmore in North Bethesda, MD, the BSO became the nation's first orchestra with year-round venues in two metropolitan areas.

BSOmusic.org



First released on QTV-34604 in 1975 and QTV-34643 in 1976

Felix Mendelssohn's childhood precocity as a composer is regarded by many as exceeding that of Mozart – the works recorded here retain much of that sense of youthful inspiration and vitality. The *'Italian' Symphony* is a model of exquisite balance between Classical and Romantic elements filled with warm lyrical charm reflecting a visit the composer made to Italy in 1830. From its solemn opening to a jubilant coda, the expressive world of the *'Reformation' Symphony* derives largely from a dramatic use of famous hymn tunes. Unequaled as an evocation of atmosphere and mood, *The Hebrides* served as an example to the numerous tone poems that followed. These classic Vox recordings by the Baltimore Symphony are conducted by Sergiu Comissiona, the orchestra's Romanian-born Music Director from 1969 to 1984, who forged it into one of America's finest.

The Elite Recordings for Vox by legendary producers Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz are considered by audiophiles to be amongst the finest sounding examples of orchestral recordings

**Felix
MENDELSSOHN**
(1809–1847)

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| 1 | The Hebrides in D major 'Fingal's Cave', Op. 26, MWV P7 (1832) | 8:52 |
| | Symphony No. 4 in A major 'Italian', Op. 90, MWV N16 (1833) | 28:49 |
| 2 | I. Allegro vivace | 10:57 |
| 3 | II. Andante con moto | 5:53 |
| 4 | III. Con moto moderato | 6:16 |
| 5 | IV. Saltarello: Presto | 5:43 |
| | Symphony No. 5 in D major 'Reformation', Op. 107, MWV N15
(1829–32) | 28:31 |
| 6 | I. Andante – Allegro con fuoco | 11:02 |
| 7 | II. Allegro vivace | 6:32 |
| 8 | III. Andante | 3:06 |
| 9 | IV. Andante con moto – Allegro vivace | 8:10 |

Baltimore Symphony Orchestra
Sergiu Comissiona

New 192 kHz / 24-bit high definition transfers of the original Elite Recordings analogue master tapes

Recorded: 26 **1**, 27 June **1**–**9** and 7 November 1974 **2**–**9** in Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Producers: Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz • Engineering: Elite Recordings

Tape transfers: Mike Clements • Re-mastering engineer: Andrew Walton

Booklet notes: Richard Freed

Cover photograph: *Roman Forum* (www.istockphoto.com)

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