Program Notes: Mozart to Mendelssohn

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**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**
b. 1756, Salzburg, Austria
d. 1791, Vienna, Austria

**Symphony No. 1 in E-flat Major**
In June 1763, the Mozart family left Salzburg for a three-and-a-half-year grand tour of Europe to earn their fortune through displaying the prodigious talents of their two children: Marianne, then aged twelve, and Wolfgang Gottlieb, only seven. Wending their way through the German states, Brussels, and Paris, in April 1764 they arrived in London, where the children were received so rapturously they stayed on for nearly a year. Received twice by the king and queen at Buckingham Palace, the Mozarts were taken up by the nobility and showered with money and precious gifts. In an advertisement, Leopold Mozart enumerated the wondrous feats his son performed before hundreds of English gentry: “The boy will also play a concerto on the violin, accompany symphonies on the clavier, and play on the cloth [covering the keyboard] as well as though he had the keyboard under his eyes; he will further most accurately name from a distance any notes that may be sounded for him either singly or in chords, on the clavier or on every imaginable instrument including bells, glasses, and clocks. Lastly, he will improvise out of his head, not only on the pianoforte but also on an organ.”

Despite this atmosphere of a circus sideshow, little Wolfgang did manage to mature artistically during this period. He was exposed to the best music of the period at the various courts he visited and rapidly absorbed their styles and techniques. In London at age eight, he began seriously composing. His First Symphony (he was to go on to produce 41 during his career) was probably written during the summer or fall of 1764 when his father’s serious illness temporarily curtailed the Mozart family performances. It was likely premiered in London in the winter of 1765.

In three movements and the key of E-flat Major (a favorite key of the mature Mozart), Symphony No. 1 faithfully mirrors the style of older composers of this period while exuding the high spirits of a little boy with the world at his feet. Its brisk, chirpy first movement shows a fondness for stormy string tremolos. The slow movement has a marvelous nocturnal atmosphere, with a spooky little theme for the cellos under vibrating string triplets and slow-moving woodwind chords. In the infectious finale, Mozart exults in colorful chromatic writing (using altered pitches outside the key); note the playful little upward whoop of strings that links two of these chromatic passages.

**“Scherzo” from String Octet in E-flat Major**

**Arranged for String Orchestra**

Felix Mendelssohn was truly a golden child, blessed with brains and prodigious talent, and a near-ideal environment in which to cultivate them. His grandfather Moses Mendelssohn had risen from poverty to become an esteemed Enlightenment philosopher; his father, Abraham, was one of Germany’s leading bankers and had made the family fortune. Both of Felix’s parents were highly educated people and determined that their offspring should realize their full potential. The four children, all bright and eager students, were provided with the finest tutors and books. As Felix’s musical genius hatched, he was able to spread his wings into all the areas that distinguished his adult career. Sunday musicales at the Mendelssohn household drew a crowd of Berlin’s artistic and intellectual elite, and featured the younger as impresario (planning the concert programs), piano soloist, conductor (the Mendelssohns sometimes hired a professional orchestra), and composer. In 1825 when the family moved to a grand estate on Berlin’s Leipzigerstrasse, they converted the summerhouse in the garden into a concert hall seating more than 200. Here Mendelssohn was to gain the invaluable experience of trying out his new works with capable musicians and a sophisticated audience and learning what worked and what didn’t.
That year, at age 16, he unveiled his String Octet, which many commentators consider the greatest chamber work he ever wrote. Even Mozart had not composed anything on this level of artistic originality and technical mastery at such a tender age. Simply to write an octet for string players — four violins, two violas, two cellos — was a bold innovation. In his score, Mendelssohn instructed the performers to play “in a symphonic orchestral style,” and the Octet thus hovers in its own special land between chamber ensemble and chamber orchestra, exploiting the possibilities of both genres. (At these concerts, we will hear it arranged for string orchestra by the composer). It was completed in 1825 as a birthday present for Mendelssohn’s violin teacher Eduard Rietz.

After spending his apprenticeship studying Bach, Beethoven, and above all Mozart, the teenaged composer appears in this work as a creator with a fully formed voice of his own. No movement embodies this better than the effervescent third-movement Scherzo. When Mendelssohn was 12, his composition teacher Carl Friedrich Zelter had taken him to meet the great German writer Goethe. An unlikely friendship was launched between the aging poet/philosopher and the precocious youngster. Once when the boy was improvising with special passion for Goethe, Zelter exclaimed: “What goblins and dragons have you been dreaming about to drive you along so wildly?” All those goblins appear in this movement, the first of Mendelssohn’s signature lighter-than-air scherzos. This scampering, faintly menacing music was actually inspired by the Walpurgis Night scene of satanic revelry in Goethe’s Faust, according to Mendelssohn’s sister Fanny.

Violin Concerto in E minor, op. 64

During the years he served as director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Felix Mendelssohn was blessed with an outstanding concertmaster: Ferdinand David, one of the 19th century’s finest and most versatile violinists. As early as 1835, the composer promised David a concerto to show off his remarkable abilities. But the promised concerto did not appear for nearly a decade, despite the violinist’s frequent reminders, preserved in some charmingly wheedling letters.

This delay was uncharacteristic of Mendelssohn, usually a man who promptly fulfilled his obligations, musical or otherwise. But the early 1840s were particularly trying times for him. Already in demand all over Europe as composer and performer, Mendelssohn in 1841 was summoned to Berlin (his family’s home) by King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia to be his court musician and establish a grandiose new conservatory. For three years, the composer dutifully served the king’s constantly changing whims while chafing to return to Leipzig. The enchanting incidental music to A Midsummer Night’s Dream was about the only good thing to come out of this frustrating period. As soon as he could gracefully extricate himself from Berlin, Mendelssohn turned to the long-delayed concerto and completed it in September 1844. It was premiered by David, with the Leipzig Gewandhaus, conducted by Niels Gade, on March 13, 1845.

Generations of violinists and audiences can attest that the concerto — one of the most perfect ever written for this instrument — was worth the wait. As Brahms would later do with his Violin Concerto for Joseph Joachim, Mendelssohn constantly sought David’s advice and scrupulously tailored his concerto to the violinist’s skills and musical personality.

Mendelssohn is usually regarded as a conservative composer, who despite his allegiance to Romanticism, followed the classical forms of Mozart and Haydn more closely than his contemporaries. But, as Sir Donald Francis Tovey has pointed out, Mendelssohn was also a true Romantic, who felt free to break the rules of the classical concerto.

First Movement: The most famous examples of Mendelssohn’s Romantic concerto style are the bridge passages that seamlessly link each movement to the next. The breaking of old rules, however, begins immediately as the violinist launches the buoyant principal theme in the second measure, dispensing with the customary orchestral exposition. The key of E minor adds a touch of poignancy to this expansive, openhearted melody.

The most magical moment of this sonata-form movement comes at the end of the development section when in a hushed, mysterious passage the soloist begins searching for the home key. Just as he seems to
have found it, Mendelssohn pulls a surprise: launching the soloist’s cadenza, which is customarily placed after the recapitulation just before the movement ends. It concludes with chains of rapid arpeggios that continue as the orchestra reprises the principal theme, thus binding cadenza seamlessly to recapitulation.

At movement’s end, we hear a lone bassoon holding onto the pitch B. That pitch then rises a half step for the new key of C Major for the second-movement Andante, which the soloist begins after a brief orchestral bridge passage. This movement is in three-part song form — most appropriate here because Mendelssohn has given the soloist one of his “songs without words.” The middle section interjects passionate agitation amid the lyricism.

Another bridge provides harmonic and tempo transition to the E-Major finale. Here we have one of Mendelssohn’s celebrated scherzos: a joyous, scampering romp for the soloist. Conjuring up the world of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the woodwinds are agile companions to the violin’s gambols.

Mother Goose Suite

Although he remained a bachelor all his life, Maurice Ravel adored children. Two of his small friends were Mimie and Jean Godebski, the offspring of Cipa and Ida Godebski, a Polish-born couple whose Paris apartment and country house, La Grangette, in the Loire valley was a gathering place for Ravel and many of his artistic colleagues. A child at heart himself, Ravel told them stories, invented ingenious toys and games, and sent them funny postcards when he was away.

The composer’s ultimate gift — completed at La Grangette in 1910 — was a five-part piano work for four hands entitled Ma Mère l’oye, or Mother Goose after Charles Perrault’s 17th-century collection of fairy tales. He hoped they would learn it for performance, but Jean and Mimie found the work a bit too advanced for their modest skills. Instead Jeanne Leleu, age six (who would have a successful career as a pianist) and Geneviève Duroy, age seven, gave Mother Goose’s first performance in Paris on April 20, 1910 before a distinguished audience. Everyone was charmed, and by 1911 Ravel had turned it into a ballet with a few additional numbers and orchestrated with the consummate skill that was one of his greatest talents. But most often one hears Mother Goose in its orchestral suite version — as we will tonight — containing just the original five pieces.

Ravel wrote of this enchanting music, “My intention of awaking the poetry of childhood … naturally led me to simplify my style and thin out my writing.” And nothing could be simpler or lovelier than “The Pavane of Sleeping Beauty,” with which the suite opens. This is a dream-like dance with a slowly circling theme played by various woodwind soloists, delicately punctuated by plucked strings.

“Tom Thumb” (or “Petit Poucet” in French), is more of a nightmare for its tiny hero lost in the woods. Ravel quotes Perrault in the score: “He thought he would easily find his way thanks to the bread he had scattered wherever he had passed, but he was quite surprised when he couldn’t see even a single crumb. Birds had come along and eaten every bit.” Wandering lines in muted strings grope their way through the forest, while the plaintive sounds of oboe and English horn evoke the child’s tears. Cheeping and trilling solo violins, flute, and piccolo reveal the culprits.

In 1889 at the Paris World Exhibition, Ravel first heard a Javanese gamelan orchestra, and it inspired a lifelong fascination with the exotic Orient. In “Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas,” he conjures up the bell-like magic of gamelan music using the sparkling high timbres of Western instruments and the Asian pentatonic scale (the scale using just the five black notes between C and C an octave above). Laideronnette, meaning “the little ugly one,” is the heroine of a tale by the Baronesse D’Aulny; she has been made ugly by an evil spell, but the happy ending will restore her beauty. The scenario Ravel included in the score reads: “She undressed and entered her bath. At once, mandarins and mandarinettes set to singing. … Some had lutes made of nutshells, some had viols made from the shells of almonds, for their instruments had to be in proportion to their own scale.”

“Conversations of Beauty and the Beast” is based on one of the most famous of French fairy tales, written in the 18th century by Marie Leprince de Beaumont. In this sumptuously romantic waltz, Beauty is portrayed by a silky-voiced clarinet and the Beast by the ungainly contrabassoon. Eventually, their jarringly different voices unite in a love duet. A sweep of the harp and eerie high notes in the violin mark the undoing of the spell, and the Beast is transformed into a handsome prince, sung by solo cello.
The Mother Goose Suite ends with a glorious apotheosis: a child’s vision of paradise, “The Fairy Garden.”

**Symphony No. 94 in G Major, “Surprise”**

Life began anew for Joseph Haydn late in 1790 when the German-English impresario Johann Peter Salomon appeared without warning on the 58-year-old composer’s doorstep in Vienna. “I am Salomon from London and have come to fetch you,” he briskly announced. “Tomorrow we shall conclude an agreement.”

Since his employer Prince Nicholas Esterházy had recently died, Haydn found himself free at last to pursue creative opportunities in the larger world, and he had long dreamed of traveling to England, whose flourishing musical life exceeded even Vienna’s. Salomon offered him a princely sum to come to London to write and perform symphonies and other works for his ambitious concert series. Though Haydn spoke virtually no English and was at an age when most men were either dead or retired, he accepted.

The first six of Haydn’s “London” Symphonies, numbers 93–98, were composed and premiered during the composer’s first London sojourn of 1791–2. The composer immediately became the toast of London society, his concerts were packed, and Salomon made lots of money. An encore was obviously needed, and in 1794–5, Haydn returned for another 18 months. Six more symphonies were born (numbers 99–104). Collectively, all twelve were the greatest of the Austrian’s prolific career.

Premiered in London on March 23, 1792, Symphony No. 94, now known as the “Surprise,” ranks as one of Haydn’s most popular symphonies then and now. It received its nickname because of what happens in the second movement, but, as Michael Steinberg has written, it is actually “full of surprises of every kind.” Symphony No. 94 is anything but a one-trick pony; it is an ingenious invention of comedy and splendor mixed together.

The first movement’s slow introduction does not seek to demand our attention, but rather to draw us into a world of tantalizing mystery. Woodwinds propose a serenely lovely melody, but harmonies soon appear that darken and unsettle this mood. After a pause, the opening of the fast section is still more unusual: a quiet, rhythmically vague statement in the violins that receives a boisterous response from the entire orchestra. Introduced by an om-pa-pa accompaniment, the second theme is a little whirling dance, and the atmosphere becomes even more bucolic when that is succeeded by a winsome country theme in low strings, eventually adorned by birdsong trills.

With all this diverse material to work with, Haydn builds a fine, questing development section. All the themes are imaginatively reconsidered, including in the satisfying closing coda.

As Haydn had noticed, after over-generous dinners lubricated with plenty of wine, British audience members had a tendency to nod off in the concert hall. In the Andante second movement, he came up with a perfect way to jostle them awake. A little nursery tune begins modestly and very quietly, modulating between C Major and C minor and back again. At its reprise, the entire orchestra answers with a fortissimo shout. Having unloosed his surprise, Haydn is careful not to repeat it (although he knows we are expecting it). Instead, he spins his simple tune out in a series of variations, both charming and dramatic and alternately in Major and minor. Then he closes with a beguiling coda full of harmonic shadows brightened by the glimmering of a flute.

The third-movement Menuet is no court dance, but a trip to the Austrian countryside, where the common folk sway to an emphatic om-pa-pa accompaniment. A bassoon leads the middle trio section, which tends to get dizzy as it keeps spinning around.

The last movement is one of Haydn’s best whirlwind finales: a high-speed romp in which, again, the bassoon contributes to the manic rondo theme. Haydn even manages to squeeze in a little minor-mode development section. And this deliciously sly music closes with another explosive “surprise.”