PART THREE

# Profiles of the music

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# 6 Symphony and overture

DOUGLASS SEATON

## Orchestral music in Mendelssohn's career

The symphony occupies a remarkably limited place in Mendelssohn's oeuvre. Because he published just two symphonies – one a work of his sixteenth year and the other only after a fourteen-year incubation – one might well imagine that the anxiety of Beethoven's influence overwhelmed him. Certainly, Mendelssohn's history with the symphony demonstrates his intense self-criticism and even self-doubt. It also reflects other factors, however, including his schedule of professional activities and his restless compositional imagination.

Mendelssohn was the most influential and widely admired orchestral composer of his generation. His experience with the orchestral repertoire of both eighteenth-century masters and his contemporaries gave him an unerring sense for original and imaginative structures. His gift for musical characterization, manifest in his concert overtures, captured an aspect of Romanticism in a way that appealed equally to unsophisticated listeners and to critics, whether progressive or conservative. And in a few works he explored the possibilities of complex narrative in music.[1]

## The apprentice sinfonias to Symphony no. 1 (1821–1824)

Mendelssohn gained his orchestral mastery through rigorous study. Karl Friedrich Zelter's tutelage brooked no shirking of assignments in harmonization, elementary forms, and rigorous counterpoint in a tradition extending back to J. S. Bach.[2] After about two years of these studies Mendelssohn began to work in full-scale compositions in more complex forms.

Among his first experiments with fully developed multi-movement works are the twelve sinfonias that he composed in 1821–23. It is not clear to what extent these belong to Mendelssohn's studies or whether they should be regarded as independent artistic works. As study pieces, they go beyond mere exercises in writing for the string choir, developed beyond what purely pedagogical intention would require – indeed, the time consumed in writing movements and passages that did not represent any systematic compositional problem would simply stall didactic progress. On the other



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hand, as independent compositions – either as domestic chamber music, with one player per part, or with a larger, orchestral group – they obviously bear the marks of exploring technical challenges, especially in counterpoint, and their style, at least at first, derives from the eighteenth-century models that formed the basis of Mendelssohn's studies up to this time. Regarded from either viewpoint, the sinfonias must have demonstrated in performances within the Mendelssohn family home how the youthful composer was moving toward independent artistry.

The sinfonias trace a developmental trajectory through several phases, suggesting both progress through a chronological succession of models and Mendelssohn's increasing imagination.[3] The first model seems to have been the Italianate sinfonia of the early eighteenth century, converted from operatic to concert performance in the generation of Sammartini and spread throughout the German-speaking regions in the middle of the century. The first five sinfonias, composed between May and December 1821, feature motoric rhythms, both imitative and free fifth-species counterpoint, chains of suspensions, opening and pre-cadential *unisono* passages, quasi-trio sonata texture (the slow movement of Sinfonia 2), limited and terraced dynamic indications, Baroque dance rhythms (e.g., siciliano in the second movement of Sinfonia 1 and gigue in the finale of Sinfonia 2), cadential hemiola, and the absence of clear thematic material associated with the secondary keys in rounded binary opening movements (see Example 6.1). They also have only three movements each, and in Sinfonias 3 and 4 the slow movements do not conclude with full cadences but lead directly to the finales. We might describe this group as representing a sort of "neo-pre-Classicism."

The next group of sinfonias approach the High Classical style of the Enlightenment. There are moments of Haydnesque wit, as in the three-measure pauses that interrupt the finale of Sinfonia 6, and increasing interest in the "conversational" texture perfected by Haydn and Mozart from about 1780 onward. With Sinfonia 6 the three-movement plan continues, but the interior movement is a minuet with two trios. Thereafter the four-movement plan becomes standard: opening allegro (in Sinfonias 8 and 9 preceded by a slow introduction), slow movement, minuet or scherzo (the latter in Sinfonia 9), and fast finale. Sinfonias 7 and 8 could be characterized as "post-Classical" symphonies, while in Sinfonia 9 the use of a Scherzo instead of a minuet, together with the inclusion of a Swiss folk tune (see Example 6.2) for its Trio, might bring the piece into the range of early Romanticism.[4]

Sinfonia 10, a single movement in the form of a substantial adagio introduction and an allegro sonata form, resembles an overture more than a symphony. Expanding the Classical/early Romantic model, Sinfonia 11 has five movements. The second movement is a Scherzo, again based on a Swiss

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**Example 6.1** Early 18th-century traits in Mendelssohn's sinfonias
(a) Sinfonia 5, mvt. 3, mm. 24–40. Fugal imitation

(Presto)
Violino I
Violino II
Viola
(Vc.)
Bassi

(b) Sinfonia 4, mvt. 3, mm. 6–9. Chain of suspensions

(Allegro vivace)
Violino I
Violino II

folksong, this time – astonishingly – joined by a "Janissary band" of timpani, triangle, and cymbals. After the central slow movement there follows a "Minuet," which, however, employs 6/8 rather than 3/4 meter. The last sinfonia, no. 12, has just three movements, but it does not belong to the pre-Classical style like the first several. Its first movement consists of a slow introduction and a double fugue; the andante second movement perhaps

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**Example 6.1** (*cont.*)
(c) Sinfonia 2, mvt. 1, mm. 1–2. Opening unison

Allegro

Violino I

Violino II

Viola

Bassi

(d) Sinfonia 2, mvt. 1, mm. 68–73. Cadential unison

Violino I

Violino II

Viola

Bassi

suggests a nocturne or, even better, an aubade; and the last movement combines sonata form with a double fugue. The fugal writing demonstrates the influence of Bach both in the highly characteristic subjects and in the working out, but it is embedded in frameworks that include passages of post-Classical and Romantic styles.

Mendelssohn was well aware of more up-to-date styles, too. We encounter hints of the influence of Rossini's exuberant overtures, and some moments suggest the atmospheric style of Weber, starting with the

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**Example 6.2** Sinfonia 9, mvt. 3, mm. 41–50. Swiss folk tune



nocturne-like slow movements of Sinfonias 4 and 5. Notably, little of this music suggests any influence from Beethoven (although the principal theme of the first movement in Sinfonia 4 somewhat resembles the trio subject in the scherzo of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony). One clear foreshadowing of a distinctively Mendelssohnian device occurs in the minuet of Sinfonia 6. In the second trio comes the unexpected effect of a chorale-like (but apparently original) melody in whole-measure note values set against counter-melodic material in quarter and eighth notes (see Example 6.3). This anticipates the use of such texture in, for example, the "Reformation" and "Italian" symphonies and the second part of the orchestral opening of the *Lobgesang*.

One clear trend among the sinfonias is Mendelssohn's increasing interest in fuller scoring. Beginning in Sinfonia 9 he regularly divided the violas into two sections, producing five-part rather than four-part texture. In the second

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**Example 6.3** Sinfonia 6, mvt. 3, mm. 60–83. Chorale-like style

Trio II
Violino I
Violino II
Viola I
Viola II
Violoncelli
Bassi

movement of that same piece the violins play in four parts, the violas in two, and the cello and bass parts split, creating both high and low four-part string choirs and then, at the very end, eight parts. We have already noted that in the Scherzo of Sinfonia 11 percussion instruments join the strings. This tendency toward enriching and experimenting with scoring culminated in Sinfonia 8, which Mendelssohn composed first for strings but immediately re-scored for full orchestra.

Overall, these sinfonias give the impression of a highly precocious and energetic youngster. While imagination and exuberance emerge everywhere in this music, ambition now and then gets the better of formal sensibility. In the later pieces, for example, Mendelssohn does not seem to have realized that the attempt to integrate a grand double fugue with a sonata form would inevitably overload the capacity of the structure.

The work conceived as Sinfonia 13 ultimately became Mendelssohn's first published work in the genre, the Symphony no. 1 in C minor op. 11. After performances in Berlin (1824) and Leipzig (1827), this work was featured

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**Example 6.4** Symphony no. 1 op. 11, mvt. 1, mm. 1–8, violin 1. Principal theme in "overture" style

Allegro di molto

**Example 6.5** Symphony no. 1 op. 11, mvt. 2. Theme in principal and secondary key areas
(a) mm. 1–8

Andante
Vn. 1

(b) mm. 33–48

Ob. 1
Fl. 1
*dolce espress.*
Ob. 1

in Mendelssohn's London concert on 25 May 1829, during the composer's first visit to England. Mendelssohn presented the autograph manuscript to the Philharmonic Society and dedicated the work to the Society when it was published in 1831.[5]

The Symphony turns sharply away from the heavily contrapuntal and chromatic style of its immediate predecessors and toward a more modern, even operatic style. The fast movements include a number of overture-like gestures: the opening theme of the first movement (see Example 6.4), which Thomas Grey has compared to a number of themes from opera overtures by Cherubini, Weber, and Marschner;[6] the theatrical crescendo in the closing section; and the effective suspension of the rhythm at the beginning of the coda; as well as the "curtain-raising" style of the coda to the finale. Both outer movements exhibit a Mozartean profusion of thematic ideas.

The inner movements offer interesting takes on conventional models. The second movement assumes an unusual sonata deformation. The theme that establishes the principal key (E♭) is a song-like, eight-bar phrase. This returns in the dominant area, this time ending as an antecedent phrase, to which the transposed original phrase responds as consequent (see Example 6.5). An extended transition leads to a reprise that again uses the full antecedent–consequent pairing.

The "Menuetto" is really a scherzo, "Allegro molto" in 6/4 meter. The trio sounds almost hymn-like, with its melody in long notes in the woodwinds

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over a flowing, triadic accompaniment from the strings. As in several of the earlier sinfonias, this ends in a transition that introduces the da capo.[7]

The symphony as a whole demonstrates that Mendelssohn had acquired a thorough familiarity with the symphonic style of late Mozart and Haydn and the early symphonies of Beethoven. It stands as the final foundation stone in Mendelssohn's preparation for a career as an orchestral composer in the mature Romantic style.

## The "characteristic" – literary inspirations

From symphonies Mendelssohn turned to a new kind of orchestral project, which inspired him to something more original and personal: musical interpretations of two literary works. The programmatic concert overture, despite some notable operatic and non-programmatic predecessors, really constituted a new genre.[8]

The first concert overture demonstrates unarguable genius: the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1826). The piece works something like an operatic medley overture, in the manner of Weber's overture to *Der Freischütz*. In this case, however, no preexisting operatic numbers were available to be mined for material, so Mendelssohn constructed themes as representations of the characters or images in the play. Because he had the opportunity to compose the incidental music for a performance of the play seventeen years later, and the overture's themes return as underscoring, we do not need to guess at their intention. The opening chord progression accompanies the application of the love potion to the eyes of the young mortals and Titania. With its "reversed" order of chords and major-minor ambiguity (I–V–iv–I), it also serves in the overture to lead the listener into a "looking-glass world" of magic and mystery. The principal theme proper is one of the great examples of the Mendelssohnian elfin style, and it comes as no surprise that it accompanies Puck in the incidental music. The bold, Weberian transition theme turns out to be associated with Theseus, while the lyrical secondary theme, with its long descending lines, evokes the lovers. A particularly felicitous touch is the abandonment of decorum in the closing theme, in order to depict the "hempen homespuns."[9] Not just the obvious braying sound here to represent Bottom in his ass's head but also the simple, formulaic melody creates this effect.

The design is not programmatic in the sense that the overture follows the action of the play. Rather, it adopts a relatively straightforward sonata form, the themes clearly functional in terms of the conventional tonal plan. Framing and articulating this are the ritornello-like returns of the opening chords at the reprise and the very end of the overture. The coda

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presents an interesting effect, reinterpreting the transition theme, associated with the character of Duke Theseus, in a slow, sleepy style. The passage thus suggests that the overture as a whole might be heard as Theseus's dream.[10]

Mendelssohn next turned to Goethe, with the overture *Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt* (Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage). Zelter had introduced Mendelssohn to Goethe several years earlier, and the old poet and boy composer had taken to each other immediately.[11]

Goethe's poems describe the terror of a sailing ship becalmed at sea, followed by the coming of wind and the joy of returning to land. The first poem captures the motionlessness of the ship in eight lines of trochaic tetrameter and long vowels:

| | |
|---|---|
| Tiefe Stille herrscht im Wasser, | Deep stillness rules over the water, |
| Ohne Regung ruht das Meer, | The sea rests motionless, |
| Und bekümmert sieht der Schiffer | And the sailor looks troubled |
| Glatte Fläche rings umher. | At the smooth surface all around. |
| Keine Luft von keiner Seite! | Not a breeze from any direction! |
| Todesstille fürchterlich! | Terrifying deathly stillness! |
| In der ungeheuren Weite | And in the uncanny distance |
| Reget keine Welle sich. | Not a wave moves. |

The second poem features ten short lines of amphibrachic dimeter, with a pattern of lines and rhymes that rushes ahead by forcing two "extra" lines into what it sets up as a second quatrain.

| | |
|---|---|
| Die Nebel zerreißen, | The mists are rent apart, |
| Der Himmel ist helle, | The sky is bright, |
| Und Aeolus löset | And Aeolus releases |
| Das ängstliche Band. | The fearful bond. |
| Es säuseln die Winde, | The winds rustle, |
| Es rührt sich der Schiffer. | The sailor rouses himself, |
| Geschwinde! Geschwinde! | Quickly! Quickly! |
| Es teilt sich die Welle, | The waves divide, |
| Es naht sich die Ferne, | The distance approaches, |
| Schon seh' ich das Land! | Already I see the land. |

At this time in his life Mendelssohn had never undertaken a sea voyage. Beyond Goethe's poetry, he may have learned something of the horrors of being becalmed at sea from the popular literature of nautical disasters that circulated at the time. And, of course, it is the artist's ability to construct both a world and an experience in the imagination that finally determines a successful work. Mendelssohn expressed Goethe's two-part design through an overture with slow introduction. The work is unified by a recurring

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motive, first introduced by the bass in the opening measures and developed though a variety of permutations in both slow and fast tempos. In this case, the introduction expands to unusual dimensions in order to allow time to establish the seemingly unending calm. A transition leads into the fast, compact, sonata form that represents the ship's swift sailing into port.

The Adagio tempo, repressed dynamic level, and lack of forward-directed activity in the *Meeresstille* section effectively express both the sea's flatness and the ominousness of the situation. The transition creates a remarkably realistic impression of rising breeze and sea, beginning with the slightest gust from the flute, then gradually growing and accelerating, as it builds up harmonic anticipation. The *glückliche Fahrt* becomes a lively, rollicking trip, with plenty of motion but never confronting any threat from wind and waves. By way of coda the overture brings celebratory brass fanfares and even some cannon shots from the timpani.[12] Perhaps most striking from a programmatic point of view, Mendelssohn departed from the end of Goethe's poem, so that at the very end of the work the slow tempo and flatness of the first part return, closing the overture with a plagal cadence. R. Larry Todd considers this to represent "ultimately a circular, self-renewing act of discovery," and Grey takes it to "recall the calm sea of the beginning, now recollected in a new tranquillity."[13] One might consider an alternate interpretation, however, in which the entire happy voyage is framed as only the hallucination of the dying mariner, and the conclusion, yielding to the reality of the calm sea, represents his death.

What makes these two first concert overtures particularly important in Mendelssohn's development as a composer is the remarkable nature of their melodic material. The thematic ideas in these works no longer suggest Classical (or Baroque) models, for the themes owe more to expressive content than to the functional requirements of their forms. In this way the music appeals to the aesthetic that Friedrich Schlegel identified as the "characteristic,"[14] moving Mendelssohn decisively from a post-Classical style to a Romantic one.

## The "characteristic" – music and place

Mendelssohn's travels in the years 1829–32, then a common practice for well-to-do young men as a means of developing cultural literacy and taste, produced orchestral works that reflected his experience. Such a Grand Tour generally included the major European capitals, especially Paris and Vienna – for the sake of the great museums, concert halls, and opera houses – and Italy as the garden bed of culture for both classical antiquity and the Renaissance. There were various ways to capture the experiences of one's

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Grand Tour. One obvious means was by writing a journal or a series of letters to one's family at home, letters that the family would keep or return to the writer for later reminiscing.[15] Another was through drawings in pen or pencil, or paintings in watercolor, at which Mendelssohn was highly skilled. For Mendelssohn not only letters and pictures filled this function, but also music. Here we shall consider one overture, *The Hebrides*, and one symphony, the so-called "Italian" Symphony in A major.

Mendelssohn's visit to Britain in 1829 – not necessarily a standard part of the Grand Tour for young Germans – brought both professional success and personal adventure. He made a very positive impression in London through his musical appearances, which led to nine later visits to England. More important from the viewpoint of compositional creativity, he undertook a walking tour of Scotland with his friend Carl Klingemann. At the historic palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh he conceived the opening of an A minor symphony. We shall discuss the work itself later; for the moment, however, it is noteworthy that he seems to have deliberately sought such inspirations from his Scottish adventure. Writing to his family, he says, "I believe I found today in that old chapel the beginning of my Scotch symphony,"[16] as if he had been expecting to find it. The ruined palace chapel, and the story of Mary Queen of Scots that it inevitably represents, triggered the musical idea.

Similarly, when Klingemann and Mendelssohn arrived at the west coast of Scotland, Mendelssohn found the opening of the *Hebrides* overture. In this case, again, inspiration seems to have arisen from intention. The composer notated the beginning of the overture, in remarkable detail and nearly in its final form, before actually visiting the famous cave associated with the story of Fingal. Indeed, Mendelssohn's reading of James Macpherson's invented "translations" of poems by the legendary third-century Gaelic bard Ossian colored his view of the physical setting. The work is part seascape and part evocation of bardic poetry; hence the variety of titles that Mendelssohn attached to it: *Overture to the Lonely Island*, *The Hebrides*, *Overture to the Isles of Fingal*, *Overture to the Hebrides*, and *Fingal's Cave*.[17]

Like the *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture, *The Hebrides* is not narrative but "characteristic." Its first theme unfolds as six repetitions of an ornamented descending triad, twice on B minor, twice on D major, and twice on F♯ minor. The use of A rather than A♯ (the leading tone does not appear until m. 12) gives a modal character that implies both the ancient and the exotic. The static, repetitive appearances of the motive belong to the conventions of the pastoral, though here the waves of the sea, rather than fields, are evoked. The sequential, non-functional harmonies open up a sense of distance. The theme associated with the secondary key (D major) is a wide-ranging melody featuring the cellos (with woodwind assistance).

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Its song-like lyricism is romanticized by asymmetrical phrasing, and, like the first theme, it manifests a tendency to shift phrases to different pitch levels. The closing area employs martial fanfares derived from the rhythm of the first motive. The development proceeds in an episodic rather than a dramatic fashion, not unlike Macpherson's epic tales. A compact reprise of the two main themes leads to an extensive coda that climaxes in a wild storm scene. The very end brings the descending opening motive and the rising gesture of the lyrical theme simultaneously in contrary motion, as the music fades to silence.

The compositional process of *The Hebrides* is quite revealing. Todd has demonstrated that in revising the overture Mendelssohn worked to eliminate the impression of a lurking contrapuntism, striving, as he himself put it, to evoke more of "train oil, sea gulls, and salt fish."[18] At the same time, he found ways to impose the rhythm and contour of the opening motive on a number of formerly rather featureless passages. The work thus not only lost any trace of the "learned" but gained far greater organic unity than its original version.

The other important work to come from Mendelssohn's Grand Tour was the Symphony in A major, known as the "Italian." Because this piece has become one of his best known, it is difficult to keep in mind that not only did he never publish it, he thoroughly revised the second, third, and fourth movements and believed that the first needed fundamental revisions, as well.[19] Thus the version familiar to audiences today does not represent even his latest conception, much less a definitive one.

Thomas Grey has suggested that the four movements of the symphony might be understood as a series of *tableaux vivants*. There is no plot line across the entire symphony but rather a quartet of scenes around the topic of Italian life – seen, of course, through German eyes.[20]

The composer spent much of his Italian sojourn in Rome, where he experienced the brilliant, lively carnival season, which he described in colorful letters. It is easy to hear the festive activity in the acrobatic, Harlequinesque opening theme of the symphony's first movement. The second theme maintains the overall spirit, superimposing on it just enough lyric relaxation to provide contrast. One distinctive aspect of this form, the entrance of a jaunty new theme in A minor early in the development, seems to have resulted from Mendelssohn's revisions to the work; the theme had actually appeared in the exposition, in a passage that the composer excised. The effect in the symphony as we know it is that this intrusion, soon juxtaposed with the movement's opening motive, helps to launch the development. The concise reprise incorporates the jaunty theme, again in the tonic minor, after the lyric theme, and integrates it into the coda.[21]

The second movement belongs to the processional *topos*, also famously illustrated in the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and

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the pilgrims' march in Berlioz's *Harold en Italie*. The movement opens with a unison invocative recitation. A "walking bass," part of Mendelssohn's background from his training in Baroque styles, accompanies a hymn-like melody in D minor, with counter-melodic material in the flutes added to the repetitions of the two strains. After this reflective tune comes a brief interlude, its first half based on the movement's opening formula and the second half consisting of some new material that seems to stand apart from the style up to this point. A. W. Ambros, writing in 1856, suggested that in this movement "the eye of the poet also smiles sadly through,"[22] aptly capturing the impression of this Germanic-sounding intermezzo. The second half of the movement begins at the dominant but returns quickly to D minor by means of a striking, modal B♭ at the end of the first phrase. Here, as in the first movement, "foreign" material introduced in the middle of the movement is integrated into the return. The second movement concludes with the intonation, the return of the walking bass, and fragments of the hymn melody fading to *pianissimo*. In another context this might serve as a symbol for tragedy, but probably here it merely represents the singing procession receding into the distance.

Rather than either a stately minuet or a boisterous (or elfin) scherzo, the next movement takes the form of a gliding, weaving dance. At the same time, by means of a quiet signal-call rhythm in horns and bassoons, the Trio also evokes the German forest and hunting, arguably adducing a mood of nostalgia for Germany in the midst of the Italian setting. After the return of the gliding dance motion the two styles unite in the coda – perhaps once again suggesting the integration of a foreign element.

The carnivalesque first movement having approached so close to what in another work might have been a finale style, the finale of this symphony must perforce become truly wild. Mendelssohn titled the movement "Saltarello," but it comes closer to the popular dance style that would now be referred to as a tarantella.[23] The folk dance is suggested not only by the breakneck tempo and compound meter but also by the scoring, which from the beginning sets up the jangling sound of tambourines and *tamburo*-drumming, together with a piping flute duet. In addition, the use of the tonic minor for the finale of a major-key symphony suggests a shift in the direction of folk-based modality. The movement treats sonata form rather loosely, with an attenuated reprise that fades into the distance in a manner that suggests the pictorial and spatial, so that formal conventions seem to yield to programmatic considerations.

Criticism must not reduce the "Italian" Symphony (or *The Hebrides*, for that matter) to simplistic program music in the sense of underscoring for a travelogue. Nevertheless, the aesthetic of the "characteristic" extends here to one of Romantic local color. Despite Mendelssohn's not having left much in the way of specific interpretive indications, the symphony clearly

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does not manifest post-Classical epigonism. How far one wishes to carry hermeneutic interpretation depends on each critic or listener. It seems at least safe to identify the thematic styles as more "characteristic" than conventional, and their manner can reasonably be taken as Italian rather than German, except for the German in both the "symphonic intermezzo" of the second movement and the nostalgic sylvan music of the Trio. Structurally, the idea of something foreign introduced into the scene after the midpoint and then integrated into the picture forms a recurrent trope in the first three movements. At the same time, the sense of spatial separation from a scene is evident, especially in the second and fourth movements, in closing passages where the music seems to recede. In short, while we should not read the work as autobiography, we need not contrive any other explanatory model for the symphony than that of a set of Italian vignettes seen through the eyes of a German observer. The "Italian" Symphony thus constitutes a sophisticated manifestation of Romanticism in which the persona or aesthetic subject is made evident.

## Toward the narrative – historical inspiration

Shortly after his return to Berlin from his Grand Tour, Mendelssohn's Symphony in D, the "Reformation" Symphony, received what appears to have been its only performance during his lifetime. He had composed the work in 1829–30, responding to the celebration of the three hundredth anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. He had failed to get the work played in Berlin during the festival in 1830,[24] and possible performances in other German cities at the start of his travels had come to naught. On the return leg, swinging through Paris, the piece got as far as rehearsal, but the musicians rejected it as too learned and unmelodious – perhaps this amounted to saying that the work seemed too "German" for Parisian tastes.[25] Several passages manifest a seriousness of style and content that belongs to German history, Lutheran tradition, and Germanic identity; Paris seems a highly unlikely place to have introduced it. Mendelssohn himself had doubts about the work, though. Having at last heard it in Berlin in 1832, he set it aside; it was published only posthumously, as op. 107.[26]

The aesthetic and style of the "Reformation" Symphony occupy a somewhat peculiar position in Mendelssohn's oeuvre. Conceived after the first two concert overtures, at the time of the inspiration for the *Hebrides* and the A minor Symphony, it tends toward the historical in its approach to the "characteristic" and might appear a bit pedantic. While it does not have the studied contrapuntism of the late sinfonias, it still leans backward toward the post-Classical style. These qualities suit the intention of the occasion

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of its composition, but they did not suit audience tastes in a time when historicism in concerts had not yet replaced novelty and virtuosity as the guiding principles, and it must already have seemed *veraltet* to Mendelssohn himself. Nevertheless, the work is both imaginative and well constructed, far beyond merely occasional value.[27]

The symphony opens with a slow introduction in D major, not of the stately, ceremonial type but suggesting a sort of awakening. After the first few measures[28] the focus is entirely on the woodwinds; although the lower strings give some support, the violins are held in reserve, and the block-like scoring resembles organ registrations. A declamatory fanfare crescendos to a *fortissimo* from the winds. This is then followed by the strings, with the first appearance of the violins, in a "celestial" *pianissimo* statement of the "Dresden Amen," a liturgical formula more associated with Catholicism than Protestantism at the time.[29]

The first movement proper is in D minor, reversing the more conventional Classical prototype of a minor-key introduction progressing to a main movement in the parallel major. The sonata-form body of the movement is devoted to a militant theme and energetic activity, interrupted momentarily by a quieter, more lyrical secondary theme. The relation of this latter idea to the surrounding belligerence is not immediately clear – it certainly does not fit some of the obvious possibilities for a contrasting theme in such a context, such as the fearful prayers of the wives and families left at home, or the pleas of the vanquished. In the development, the dotted rhythm of the principal theme evolves into the fanfare motive of the introduction. At the end of the development the Dresden Amen leads into the reprise, which now starts softly and soberly, quickly dispatching the thematic returns in order to resume an aggressive, martial style for the coda.

The second movement is in B♭, the expected key (submediant) for a slow movement in a D minor symphony but not for one in D major, in which this symphony begins and ends, and in any case this is not the slow movement but the scherzo, headed "Allegro vivace." Its homorhythmic texture and dotted rhythms, combined with the 3/4 meter, make it something between a dance and a march. The Trio, in G major (unusually distant from B♭ but subdominant to D major) has a more lilting rhythm and comes across as a folksy Ländler.

The very brief slow movement in G minor, an arioso full of sighing figures, injects a personal voice into the symphony. Critics have described this as a lament,[30] but it is difficult to identify whose lament this might be, or what its cause. One might hear it as expressing nostalgia, a voice from outside the main action of the symphony that tends to turn the symphonic plot into narrative rather than direct dramatic action.[31] In this case, the slow movement embodies the "modern" or "present" narrative persona,

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and the other movements act in the narrative past. The Andante concludes by citing the secondary theme of the first movement, which retrospectively could itself be considered a narrative interruption in or observation of the action rather than an otherwise inexplicable part of it.

Out of the closing unison G of the slow movement come the flutes, playing the Lutheran Reformation chorale "Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott." Like the opening of the symphony, this introduction to the finale proper is scored only for winds and the lower strings, with groups of instruments added in stages, again producing the organistic effect of adding registration. This gives way to a preparatory crescendo that brings in the body of the Allegro maestoso, a rather pastiche-like succession of ideas ranging from overture-like flamboyance, to contrapuntal seriousness, to military-band-like ceremony, to cantus firmus quotations of the phrases of the chorale. The coda somewhat recalls the ship's arrival in the *Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt* overture but ultimately gives way to a triumphal, homorhythmic setting of the first two chorale phrases.

Although critics have expressed skepticism about the symphony for its obvious use of quotation and the apparent primacy of plot over musical form in the finale, even these presumed weaknesses deserve reconsideration. The citations of the chorale theme in particular work interestingly into the texture and form. Semantically, musical ideas extend over a spectrum, from the "abstract," to references to *topoi*, to actual quotation, and in recent decades we have learned the impossibility of ignoring the semantic even in the most seemingly "absolute" music of the Classical/Romantic period. In the case of the "Reformation" Symphony, the variety of contrasting materials, including learned and antique fugue, military style, and chorale quotations, demonstrates how relative the specificity of meaning can be. If we hear the bulk of the symphony as framed within a narrative level of discourse, that would also justify the eclecticism of the materials. At the very least, if the symphony fails, it does so as a remarkably sophisticated experiment and not as naive programmaticism or epigonism.

## Returns to legend and history – developing the narrative

In his maturity Mendelssohn returned to inspiration from legend and history, but with a new and more evidently narrative approach. From this period come two overtures and a symphony.

The first of these, the overture *Die schöne Melusine*, was composed in 1834. It seems to have been partly a response to a production of Conradin Kreutzer's opera on the subject, which Mendelssohn had seen and found displeasing.[32] He took up the fairy tale of the ill-fated water sprite who adopts

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human form when she falls in love with a mortal, a story well known from La Motte Fouqué's *Undine* (1811) but most likely familiar to the composer in Tieck's version (1800).

The thematic material reflects the images and characters in the story. The opening motive, a waving melody introduced by clarinets, suggests the water from which Melusine emanates and which sustains her. This F major material diminuendos peacefully, after which a galloping theme intrudes in F minor, representing the character of the knight Reymund. The contrasting key then turns out to be A♭, the relative major of F minor, expressed in a passionate, lyrical song theme – or rather a duet, since the cello is repeatedly seduced into joining the first violins.

The piece employs a version of sonata form, and it might therefore seem primarily concerned with the characters of the themes, as in the *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hebrides* overtures. Certain aspects of this sonata deformation, however, might derive from the plot. After the exposition – Melusine introduced in her natural habitat, the arrival of Reymund, the lovers together – the development proceeds to work up the conflict. The undine is seen bathing, with a longing oboe theme, then the Reymund music intrudes again, followed by the love theme, intensified into conflict. The water music reemerges, now with a sad countermelody in the clarinet, leading into the considerably varied reprise, in which the love music returns directly, and surprisingly in D♭. When the galloping theme arrives, it is punctuated by wailing slurs in the winds. The coda once again brings the water theme, the key of F major, and a rather tenderly sad diminuendo to the end.

The composer's sense of humor, and his aversion to excessive programmaticizing, can be found in an anecdote that Schumann tells in a footnote to his review of the piece: "Someone once asked Mendelssohn what the overture *Die schöne Melusine* was actually about. He promptly answered, 'Hmm . . . a *mésalliance*.'"[33] One should not attempt to describe the details of the story too closely in the form of the music. After all, sonata form fundamentally follows the basic outline of a plot in any literary genre, and Mendelssohn reminds us that words express less precisely than music. As with every story, the details make the retelling both unique and worthwhile. There is no such thing as *merely* presenting the characters of a story in a sonata deformation, since plot is inevitable. Mendelssohn neither replicates another narrator's plot nor offers a textbook form. The Melusine *Märchen* here is his own.

In 1839, initially quite in spite of himself, Mendelssohn found himself composing an overture to Victor Hugo's play *Ruy Blas*. He held a very low opinion of the play and originally declined the commission from the Leipzig theater for the occasion of a benefit performance for their theater

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fund, pleading that the time was too short. When the delegation returned to apologize for such short notice and request an overture for the next season, Mendelssohn's pride got the better of him, and he composed the overture more or less overnight. The piece succeeded so well that he used it a few days later for a concert with the Gewandhaus Orchestra, joking in a letter to his mother that, while he did not like the play, he was rather pleased with himself about the brilliant, rousing overture, though he would call it not the Overture to *Ruy Blas* but the Overture to the Theater Pension Fund.[34] The work was published only posthumously.

The overture opens with a solemn call to arms from the brass and winds, based on a descending minor (or Phrygian) tetrachord in the bass. This motto returns at several points, variously harmonized. As William Pelto and Siegwart Reichwald have shown, in several ways the motto generates contours of the thematic material in the remainder of the piece.[35] After a couple of "false starts" the first theme is launched, a breathless, rushing melody introduced over agitated syncopations. The motto establishes E♭ for the second theme, a rather corny tune that first tiptoes in with the strings and is then sung by clarinets, bassoons, and cellos as a sort of congenial university song. The closing theme is a rollicking, tonally simple idea based on arpeggiated figures. The development works with all the themes. The reprise of the principal theme leads to a return of the motto, in the form in which it appeared at the very opening of the overture, and then the secondary and closing themes, now in C major. The coda, which features a crescendo to *fortissimo*, combines the principal and closing materials for a rousing finish.

Commentators have usually emphasized that the Overture to *Ruy Blas* is basically a potboiler and have turned up their noses at it, taking their cue from Mendelssohn's attitude toward Hugo's play. At the least, however, the work should receive its due as an extremely effective and skillful potboiler, as well as demonstrating the composer's astonishing facility. More important, though, it may have provided a breakthrough for Mendelssohn. As Reichwald points out, Mendelssohn had seemingly come to a sort of barrier in his career, as far as orchestral composition is concerned, and the revival of Schubert's Great C major Symphony, with its own noble beginning, spurred his imagination in this overture. Further, the innovations in form here – the uses and variants of the motto – helped to launch a new interest in composing large-scale forms for Mendelssohn. Shortly after this, of course, he took on the *Lobgesang* project, again using motto material to open the work and integrating it into the structure; this became op. 52. His return to the abandoned *Die erste Walpurgisnacht* of 1831–32, which develops material out of its introduction in an organic fashion, led to its publication as op. 60 (1844). Between the two, and again employing

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such a cyclic approach, the A minor Symphony, first conceived in Scotland in 1829, at last reached completion and publication as op. 56 in 1842.

Mendelssohn's Symphony in A minor, as noted earlier, stems from an inspiration during his visit to Edinburgh with Klingemann. The immediate situation was the Palace of Holyroodhouse, though neither the edifice itself nor even the picturesque ruin of the royal chapel there suggested the idea, but rather the romantic history of Mary Queen of Scots and David Rizzio. Thus the work belongs not with the scenic *Hebrides* overture and "Italian" Symphony, but to the class of pieces based on history and legend. Although Mendelssohn suppressed the fact that this was his "Scottish" Symphony, when it was performed and published, the tone and form clearly suggest the epic-historical, and there is enough in the content to identify the locale.[36]

The symphony opens with a slow introduction in 3/4 that presents the contour that will come to dominate the thematic material, rising from $e'$ to $a'$, then on up to $b'$ and $c''$. At the tempo change to Allegro un poco agitato this is transmuted into a 6/8 galloping theme. An approaching crescendo and increase in instrumentation lead to the battle-like transition theme. The material of the secondary area (E minor) combines the principal theme with a new clarinet countermelody, and the battle soon returns. The closing theme might suggest the melody of Schubert's Lied "Gute Ruh" from *Die schöne Müllerin*. The development employs all of the thematic material of the exposition, working through a number of key shifts to reach E to set up the recapitulation. Here the principal and secondary themes are combined before the entry of the transition material, then the closing theme fades away. A second development ensues, bringing roaring chromatic swells that clearly suggest a wild storm. The transition theme interrupts, more or less forcing a conclusion. Before the movement ends, however, the slow opening returns.

Mendelssohn indicated that the movements should follow each other without pauses. The first movement declines to a couple of pizzicato, *pianissimo* chords, and the second begins immediately with a measured tremolo and some distant pipe and horn calls. The main idea here is a lively, quasi-pentatonic melody with a "snap" rhythm at its phrase endings, the most explicitly "Scottish" moment in the work; the second theme exploits a dotted rhythm. The overall character is military, an important *topos* for the symphony. This movement, like the first, ends in pizzicato chords.

The third movement begins in a lyrical style in an A major heavily shaded toward the minor side. The contrasting material evokes a funeral march clearly in the manner of the *Marcia funebre* from Beethoven's Third Symphony, though the form of the movement resembles more the double-variation structure in the slow movement of Beethoven's Fifth. The ending is

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tragic, however, with a diminuendo, fragmentation of the thematic identity, and emphasis on the minor mode.

The fourth movement, marked Allegro vivacissimo in the score but also described by the composer as Allegro guerriero, is full of rhythmic energy and brilliant orchestration, with horn signals and timpani like cannon shots. The relief theme, softer but still undergirded by agitation, seems more at home in the *fortissimo* in which it later appears. The development actually features a fugal section, recalling the Mendelssohn of the sinfonias but only within the context of the ongoing battle. At the end of the sonata form the secondary theme sounds in the distance, fading away in clarinet and bassoon.

The symphony ends in an independent coda to the work as a whole, derived from the opening of the first movement but here treated in A major as a hymn of triumph. The melody sounds three times, in the manner of a strophic song. The expansion of the scoring at each repetition suggests a gathering of people joining to welcome the victors.

As a whole, the symphony's gestures repeatedly evoke two impressions that bring it into the world of historical epic. The first of these is, of course, the battle music that appears in the first, second, and fourth movements, along with the funeral march in the third. The succession of conflicts, variously leading to tragedy and victory, implies a series of episodes in history. The second important device is the suggestion of the past and of distance. The slow opening of the symphony famously has this effect; Grey attributes to it "the feeling of a narrative frame" and mentions that writers have found in it a "ballad tone."[37] But a number of other soft passages give the feeling of distance – physical or temporal. The crescendos often create a palpable sense of approaching forces. Together the interplay of the signs of the distant and the obvious reporting of events across the cyclic composite work make this Mendelssohn's grandest instrumental narrative.

## Conclusion – from the post-Classical to the "characteristic" and narrative

What, then, is Mendelssohn's place in the history of the Romantic symphony and overture? Beginning as a prodigious technician with an unparalleled grasp of the eighteenth-century styles of the symphony, Mendelssohn worked his way through a dozen apprentice and journeyman sinfonias to a Beethovenian *Habilitationsschrift* in the Symphony no. 1. He then turned surprisingly quickly into a Romantic with the "characteristic" music of the first overtures, responding initially to literature and then to the scenes of his travels, inventing themes and scorings that could not possibly belong

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to Classicism. The "Reformation" Symphony demonstrates that he could find individual responses to events and to historical moments. The A minor Symphony brought him fully into the world of Romantic narrativity, though always in the most authentically musical terms, without the slightest suggestion of trivial programmaticizing. Far from merely a Classicistic symphonist operating in the shadow of Beethoven, one more at home in the lyricism of the song without words than in symphonic struggle, Mendelssohn holds a striking and individual place in the orchestral music of the nineteenth century.

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