

Classics 6

Program Notes by Ken Meltzer

THE HEBRIDES OVERTURE, OPUS 26 (“Fingal’s Cave”)

Composed in 1830

Premiered on May 14, 1832 in London, at Covent Garden, with Thomas Attwood conducting the London Philharmonic Society

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born in Hamburg, Germany on February 3, 1809

Died in Leipzig, Germany on November 4, 1847

The first performance of this work by the Charlotte Symphony took place on February 19, 1937 with Guillermo S. de Roxlo conducting in the auditorium of Alexander Graham Junior High (now Middle School). The seventh and most recent performance set was heard on March 30 & 31, 2001 with Volker Schmidt-Gertenbach conducting in the Belk Theater of the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.

In April of 1829, 20-year-old Felix Mendelssohn departed his native Germany to embark upon a series of journeys throughout Europe. These travels would provide the inspiration for several of Mendelssohn’s finest compositions. Mendelssohn first traveled to England. Then, in the summer of 1829, Mendelssohn and his friend, the poet Carl Klingemann, journeyed to Scotland.

On August 7, Mendelssohn and Klingemann endured a rather treacherous voyage to visit Fingal’s Cave on the Hebrides island of Staffa. Named for the legendary hero of Scottish and Irish folklore, Fingal’s Cave is a magnificent natural structure that measures 227 feet in length, with pillars made of richly-colored basalt. Sir Robert Peel described Fingal’s Cave as “the temple not made with hands.” When the sea is calm, one can actually row into the mouth of the cave, whose murmuring waters have inspired the Scots to call the sight “the cave of music.”

Two days after the visit to Fingal’s Cave, Klingemann wrote: “a greener roar of waves surely never surged into a stranger cavern, whose many pillars made it look like the inside of an immense organ, black and resonant, utterly without purpose, completely isolated.”

Mendelssohn chose to express his own reactions with music. In a letter to his sister, Fanny, penned on the day of the visit, the composer wrote: “In order to make you understand how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me, I am sending you the following which came into my head there.” Mendelssohn was referring, of course, to the brooding and atmospheric opening of what was to become known as The Hebrides Overture, or “Fingal’s Cave.”

The overture begins with the famous undulating theme that seems to evoke the waters of “the cave of music.” The cellos and bassoons introduce the majestic *cantabile* second theme. The ensuing development section conjures images of the stormy waters that surround the Cave’s imposing edifice. The recapitulation leads to a vigorous coda. For all of the Overture’s intensity, however, the work finally ends as quietly and mysteriously as it began, perhaps suggesting the timelessness of the natural wonder that so captivated Mendelssohn.

The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

Duration: c. 10 minutes

SCOTTISH FANTASY FOR VIOLIN AND ORCHESTRA, OPUS 46

Composed in 1880

Premiered in September 1880 in Hamburg, Germany, with Pablo de Sarasate as soloist

MAX BRUCH

Born in Cologne, Germany on January 6, 1838

Died in Friedenau, Germany on October 2, 1920

The first and only performance of this work by the Charlotte Symphony took place on November 28 & 29, 1997 with Peter McCoppin conducting in the Belk Theater of the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.

German composer Max Bruch once commented: “As a rule, a good folk tune is more valuable than 200 created works of art.” In the early 1860s, Bruch made the acquaintance of *The Scots Musical Museum*, a late 18th-century anthology of 600 Scottish melodies. *The Scots Musical Museum*, compiled by James Johnson in collaboration with Robert Burns, attempted to catalogue every known Scottish air. Burns hoped: “to future ages (*The Scots Musical Museum*) will be the text book and standard of Scottish Song and Music.” This resource served as the basis for Max Bruch’s 1864 composition for voice and piano, *Twelve Scottish Folksongs*.

Fifteen years later, Bruch again turned to *The Scots Musical Museum* for one of his most famous compositions, the Scottish Fantasy. Bruch composed the work—whose full title is *Fantasia for Violin with Orchestra, and Harp, with the Free Use of Scottish Melodies*—during the winter of 1879-1880.

Bruch designed the Scottish Fantasy for the talents of the fabulous Spanish virtuoso, Pablo de Sarasate (1844-1908). It was Sarasate who appeared as soloist in the world premiere of the Scottish Fantasy, which took place in Hamburg in the fall of 1880. That performance—featuring a Spanish violinist performing a work based upon Scottish melodies by a German composer—was most certainly a testament to the adage that “music is the universal language.”

Prelude: *Grave* – The Scottish Fantasy opens with a somber orchestral statement, soon yielding to the wide-ranging flights of the soloist.

I. *Adagio cantabile*— Following the Prelude, the orchestra offers another brief statement, this time serving to introduce the soloist’s presentation of the affecting Scottish melody, “Auld Rob Morris.” The soloist’s lovely, ascending trills lead to the opening movement’s hushed conclusion.

II. *Allegro*—The lively second movement begins with a vigorous orchestral introduction. The orchestra soon takes on the character of bagpipes, accompanying the soloist’s presentation of the spirited dance tune, “Hey the Dusty Miller.” The soloist’s thrilling display finally resolves to a pensive section, recalling the melody from the opening movement. This serves as a bridge to the ensuing slow movement, which follows without pause.

III. *Andante sostenuto*—The violin sings the beautiful melody, “I’m a-Doun for Lack o’ Johnnie.” This haunting tune is the basis for several majestic flights by the soloist.

IV. *Finale. Allegro guerriero*—The final movement is inspired by the Scottish war song, “Scot’s Wha’ Hae,” or “Hey Tuttie Taitie,” a melody associated with the June 1314 Battle of Bannockburn. The finale is the most technically brilliant of the four, with the soloist engaging in virtuoso fireworks throughout. A final, hushed reprise of “Auld Rob Morris” leads to the Scottish Fantasy’s exuberant closing bars.

In addition to the solo violin, the score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, harp, and strings.

Duration: c. 30 minutes.

SYMPHONY NO. 3 IN A MINOR, OPUS 56 (“Scottish”)

Completed in 1842

Premiered on March 3, 1842 at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Germany, with the composer conducting

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born in Hamburg, Germany on February 3, 1809

Died in Leipzig, Germany on November 4, 1847

The first performance of this work by the Charlotte Symphony took place on February 8, 1976 with Jacques Brouman conducting at Dana Auditorium on the campus of Queens College (now University). The fourth and most recent performance set was heard on November 28 & 29, 1997 with Peter McCoppin conducting in the Belk Theater of the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.

During his 1829 visit to Scotland (see, The Hebrides Overture, above), Mendelssohn wrote to his family from Edinburgh:

We went, in the deep twilight, to the palace (of Holyrood) where Queen Mary lived and loved. There is a little room to be seen there, with a winding staircase leading up to it. That is where they went up and found Rizzio in the little room, dragged him out, and three chambers away is a dark corner where they killed him. The adjoining chapel is now roofless; grass and ivy grow abundantly in it; and before the ruined altar Mary was crowned Queen of Scotland. Everything around is broken and moldering, and the bright sky shines in. I believe I found today the beginning of my Scottish Symphony.

That day, Mendelssohn sketched the symphony's first 16 measures.

In 1830, Mendelssohn traveled to sunny Italy. In a letter of October 10, 1830, Mendelssohn exulted: "This is Italy. What I have been looking forward to all my life as the greatest happiness is now begun and I am basking in it." On October 23, Mendelssohn described Florence in the following manner: "The air is warm and the sky cloudless; everything is lovely and glorious." He later remarked, "The whole country had such a festive air that I felt as if I were a young prince making his entry."

It is not surprising that while in Italy, Mendelssohn found it difficult to recreate the atmosphere that served as the inspiration for the opening of his "Scottish" Symphony. In March of 1831, Mendelssohn confided to his family: "Who can wonder that I find it impossible to return to my misty Scottish mood? I have therefore laid aside the symphony for the present." Instead, Mendelssohn turned his attention to another orchestral work that more closely reflected his jovial frame of mind, the "Italian" Symphony, Opus 90 (1833).

In fact, it was not until January 20, 1842—almost thirteen years after the visit to Holyrood—that Mendelssohn finally completed his "Scottish" Symphony. Mendelssohn conducted the work's premiere at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on March 3, 1842. The composer later revised the score. He conducted the first performance in England at the Philharmonic Society on June 13, 1843. Mendelssohn dedicated the Symphony to Queen Victoria.

The "Scottish" Symphony is in four movements. The first begins with a slow introduction (*Andante con moto*), inspired by the mysteries of Holyrood. The introduction's thematic material serves as the basis for the ensuing, dramatic fast section (*Allegro un poco agitato*). The second movement Scherzo (*Vivace non troppo*) is, according to Mendelssohn, based upon "an old Scottish bagpipe melody." The beautiful slow movement (*Adagio*) features two central themes. The finale begins with a martial outburst (*Allegro vivacissimo*). The Symphony's sublime closing measures (*Allegro maestoso assai*) feature a majestic variant of the finale's second principal theme, in turn based upon the principal melody of the first movement.

The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

Duration: c. 40 minutes.