



# Felix Mendelssohn

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) was a romantic whose music was deeply rooted in classical tradition. He was born in Hamburg, Germany, to a wealthy and famous family. His father was a banker, and his grandfather was the distinguished Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Felix, a brother, and two sisters were raised in the Protestant faith.

Mendelssohn's talent was as phenomenal and precocious as Mozart's. By the age of nine, he was a brilliant pianist; by age thirteen, he had written symphonies, concertos, sonatas, and vocal works. And the quality of this youthful work is even more astounding than its quantity. His Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1826), which he composed when he was seventeen, is a masterpiece of startling originality. As a teenager, Mendelssohn tried out his compositions with a private orchestra in the family dining room at a series of Sunday musicales. These gatherings were attended by the intellectual and artistic elite of Berlin, where the Mendelssohns had settled.

In 1829, at twenty, Mendelssohn conducted Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in its first performance since the composer's death. This historic concert rekindled interest in Bach's music and earned Mendelssohn an international reputation. He often performed as a pianist, an organist, and a conductor in Germany and in England, where his own music was especially popular. When only twenty-six, Mendelssohn became conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and transformed it into one of the finest performing groups in Europe. He directed the posthumous premiere of Schubert's *Great C Major Symphony*, which his friend Robert Schumann had discovered, as well as the first performances of two Schumann symphonies. As though all these accomplishments weren't enough, Mendelssohn founded the Leipzig Conservatory when he was thirty-three.

Besides his musical achievements, Mendelssohn was a talented painter, a fine writer, and a brilliant conversationalist in four languages. He was extremely polished and charming and felt at ease in aristocratic salons. In England, Mendelssohn

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often visited the young Queen Victoria, who sang his songs while he accompanied her on the piano. His personal life was more conventional than that of many romantics; he was happily married and the father of four children.

The high point of Mendelssohn's career was the triumphant premiere of his oratorio *Elijah* in Birmingham, England, in 1846. The *London Times* reported that "the last note of 'Elijah' was drowned in a long-continued unanimous volley of plaudits, vociferous and deafening." But constant travel and exhausting work sapped Mendelssohn's strength. The death of his beloved sister Fanny in 1847 was a violent shock, and he himself died five months later at the age of thirty-eight.

## Mendelssohn's Music

Mendelssohn's music radiates the elegance and balance of his personality. It evokes a variety of moods but avoids emotional extremes. His pieces typically convey an elfin quality through rapid movement, lightness, and transparent orchestral texture. He was a musical landscapist who could depict a particular atmosphere in orchestral program works. For example, the *Hebrides Overture* (1830–1832; also called *Fingal's Cave*) suggests an agitated sea through swells and surges of sound. But even when Mendelssohn evokes something extramusical, his compositions have a logical form, and we can enjoy them without knowing their sources of inspiration.

Mendelssohn wrote an enormous amount of music in all the forms of his day except opera. Today, only a few of his works are in the concert repertoire, but these are extremely popular. Among his best-known compositions are the Violin Concerto—which we'll study—the *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hebrides* overtures, the *Italian* and *Scotch* symphonies (1833, 1842), the oratorio *Elijah*, and Trio in D Minor for Violin, Cello, and Piano (1839). His collection of short piano pieces *Songs without Words* (1829–1845) has now returned to favor after a period of neglect. These pieces convey youthful dash and vigor as well as lyricism tinged with melancholy, basic qualities of Mendelssohn's art.

## Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in E Minor, Op. 64 (1844)

Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor, Op. 64, was inspired by his friendship with the concertmaster of his orchestra, the famous violinist Ferdinand David. "I should like to make a violin concerto for you next winter," Mendelssohn wrote.

“One in E minor runs in my head and its beginning gives me no rest.” With David as soloist, the Violin Concerto met with great success at its premiere in 1845. Ever since, its unique fusion of lyricism and virtuosity has made it one of the best-loved concertos.

The concerto’s three movements are played without pause, in a characteristic linking technique used by romantic composers. Mendelssohn’s love of balance is reflected in the cooperation and interplay between soloist and orchestra. Themes pass from one to another, producing a beautiful contrast of tone color and expression. At one moment, the violinist plays a melody while the orchestra discreetly accompanies; at another, the woodwinds present thematic fragments while the soloist has dazzling running passages.

### First Movement: *Allegro molto appassionato (very impassioned allegro)*

Though Mendelssohn is usually considered a conservative composer, a “classical romantic,” his opening movement departs from classical concerto form. Traditionally, the opening movement of a concerto began with an extended section for orchestra. But Mendelssohn’s first movement begins with the soloist, who presents the main theme. This ardent, expansive melody is heard high above a murmuring string accompaniment. The orchestra then expands the violin’s theme and introduces a new, flowing melody that begins the bridge section of this sonata-form movement. Toward the end of the bridge, the excitement is gradually relaxed to prepare for the second theme, a tranquil woodwind melody which the soloist accompanies with a single sustained tone. This unusual combination of instruments produces a delicate, intimate sound. Following this, the violin reclaims the spotlight and sings the tranquil theme while the woodwinds support it.

The cadenza has a new function in this movement. In classical concertos, the cadenza was improvised by the soloist and played near the end of the movement. Here, the composer has written it out and placed it at the end of the development section as a transition to the recapitulation. Mendelssohn wanted the cadenza to be an integral part of the movement, not merely something tacked on to display the soloist’s virtuosity. Listen for the magical moment when the violinist’s rapid arpeggios are joined by the orchestra softly playing the first theme of the recapitulation.

Basic Set:

CD 5 **26**

Brief Set:

CD 5 **1**

## Listening Outline to be read while music is heard

Basic Set: CD 5 Brief Set: CD 5

### MENDELSSOHN, Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in E Minor

#### First Movement: *Allegro molto appassionato*

Sonata form, duple meter ( $\frac{3}{2}$ ), E minor

Solo violin, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 French horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, 1st violins, 2d violins, violas, cellos, double basses

(Duration, 12:01)

## Exposition

First theme

26 1 0:00

1. a. Strings, *p*, introduce solo violin. Main melody in minor, high register, legato.

**Allegro molto appassionato**  
Solo violin

0:29

- b. Running notes in solo violin. Crescendo, climbing phrases.

0:53

- c. Orchestra, *ff*, main melody. Increased rhythmic motion leads to cadence.

Bridge

27 2 1:22

2. a. Violins, flowing bridge theme. Solo violin repeats bridge theme an octave higher.

Violins

1:35

- b. Solo violin phrases sweep downward and upward through wide range. Flute joins. Crescendo. Running passage rises and falls. Decrescendo, mood calms.

Second theme

28 3 2:34

3. a. Clarinets and flutes, *pp*, calm melody in major. Solo violin accompanies with sustained tone.

Clarinet

2:49

- b. Solo violin, *pp*, calm theme expanded. Woodwinds, then strings accompany.

3:53

4. a. Main melody in solo violin, major. Brilliant running passages, pizzicato accompaniment. Crescendo.

4:40

- b. Climactic orchestral trills alternate with solo violin, opening of main melody. Decrescendo.

## Development

29 4 5:00

1. a. Solo violin, *p*, flowing bridge theme. Violins, *f*.

5:13

- b. Running passage in solo violin and fragments of main melody in orchestra.

5:38

2. Solo violin, *p*, main melody varied. Decrescendo. Violin melody slowly descends. Orchestral crescendo to *ff*.

**Cadenza**

30 5 6:27

- Unaccompanied solo violin, broken chords. Ascents to high tones, trills, fragment of main melody. Rapid broken chords lead into

**Recapitulation**

First theme

31 6 8:01

Bridge

8:18

Second theme

8:48

9:02

10:09

10:55

- Main melody in orchestra, *p*. Broken chords continue in solo violin. Crescendo.
- Orchestra, *ff*, bridge theme.
  - Solo violin, *mf*, bridge theme carried downward. Decrescendo.
- Woodwinds, *pp*, calm melody in major. Solo violin accompanies with sustained tone.
  - Solo violin, *pp*, calm theme expanded. Woodwinds, then strings accompany.
- Brilliant running passages in solo violin. Pizzicato accompaniment. Crescendo.
  - Climactic orchestral trills alternate with solo violin, opening of main melody. Decrescendo.

**Coda**

11:14

- Solo violin, bridge theme. Tempo becomes faster. Crescendo. Brilliant running passages. Full orchestra, *ff*.

## Second Movement: Andante

A single bassoon tone links the brilliant opening movement with the hushed introduction to the slow second movement. The C major andante is a songlike, intimate piece in A B A' form. Its opening section (A) features a warm, expansive melody in the solo violin's high register; a string accompaniment gently emphasizes the 3/4 meter (1–2–3–4–5–6). The middle section (B) becomes more agitated, and the accompaniment is rhythmically more active. The orchestra plays a more important role as it engages in dialogue with the soloist. Mendelssohn requires the solo violinist to play a melody and a trembling accompaniment figure at the same time. The soloist also presents the melody in full-sounding octaves. The transition to the concluding A' section is very smooth because the trembling accompaniment figure is maintained. The andante ends quietly with a tender epilogue for solo violin and woodwinds.

## Third Movement: Allegretto non troppo (transitional section); Allegro molto vivace (very lively allegro)

A pensive transitional section for solo violin and strings connects the andante with the concluding movement of the concerto. The very rapid finale, in sonata form, creates the lightness, joy, and brilliance so typical of Mendelssohn's art. Forceful chords in the woodwinds and upward solo figures usher in the playful



## Hilary Hahn, Violinist, Playing the First Movement of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor, Op. 64

Though still in her twenties, Hilary Hahn is one of the most prominent concert violinists of our time. In 1999, when she was nineteen, *Time* Magazine called her “America’s best” young classical musician.

As with most concert artists, Hahn’s extraordinary musical talent was recognized at a very early age. When not quite four, she began studying violin, and at age ten she was accepted to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. At sixteen, she signed a recording contract, made her debut at Carnegie Hall with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and completed the requirements for her bachelor of music degree. However, she chose to delay her graduation from Curtis for three years: “I loved the school, so I stayed as long as I could. There were a lot of classes that interested me that I hadn’t taken yet; for extra electives, I enrolled in poetry- and fiction- writing workshops and several literature classes, in addition to continuing with German.”

For Hahn, “communicating music to people is something that I feel very lucky to be able to do.” She writes her own liner notes for her recordings and maintains an online journal (on her Web site, HilaryHahn.com) of her experiences in cities where she performs. To expand children’s musical horizons, Hahn often plays in grade schools. “I always play solo Bach, a slow and a fast movement. The music casts a spell. They really like it.”

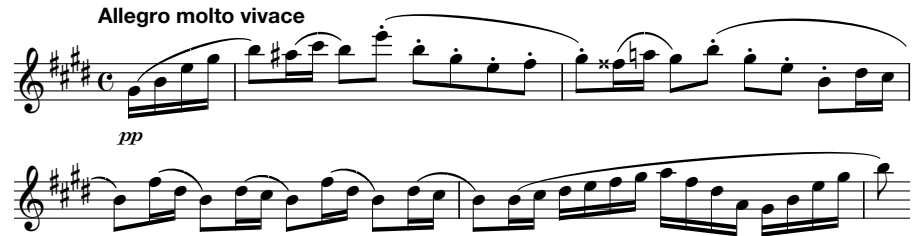
Hahn enjoys music in a wide range of styles, from blues and world music to trip-hop and classical. Her prizewinning recordings include works by Mendelssohn, Bach, Beethoven, and Bernstein, and she performs on the sound track of the M. Night Shyamalan film *The Village*, as well as on an album by Austin alt-rockers . . . *And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead*.

Hahn learned the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto when she was eleven and performed excerpts with the Curtis Orchestra the following year. (Her performance of the first movement of the concerto is included in the Basic CD Set.) “Not long after, I performed the entire concerto with a chamber orchestra in Florida, and since then the Mendelssohn concerto has been a staple of my repertoire.” For Hahn, the first movement of the concerto is full of “lyricism, fire, drama, and contrast.”

Hahn observes that performing a concerto requires close cooperation with the conductor and members of the orchestra. “Sometimes the conductor and I will disagree about something and meet in the middle. There’s a system of give-and-take, opinions, and compromise—though as a musician, you try to never be compromised or compromise someone else’s interpretation. Musicians inevitably interact with each other, so we have to be aware of what the others are doing. For example, if I share a solo line with the flute, I will pay attention to how the flutist plays the line so that it sounds like a duet. The conductor coordinates some of that, but in a concerto, the minutiae are really decided by the musicians, by listening to each other and reacting to the musical ideas that we hear.”

For Hahn, playing before a live audience is very different from recording in a studio. “The audience influences performing to a large extent because the presence of people affects the way the concert hall sounds. The energy in the hall is hard to describe, but there is a different feeling when you know people are there to absorb the music (both acoustically and psychologically). It’s quite energizing and inspiring. In recording, you have a limited time and an empty hall—any tiny noise can ruin a take, so no audience is allowed in the studio—and you have to get it right, so that situation takes a different approach. I try to keep the feeling as similar as possible, though, by imagining an audience listening in the hall, or in their car, or to their stereo.”

and mostly staccato opening theme of the exposition; it is presented by the solo violin and high woodwinds.



A dazzling series of running passages and a long upward scale lead directly into the second theme, which is also a carefree one. With great effect, it combines a loud, marchlike phrase by the full orchestra with a softer motive from the opening theme.



In the development, the woodwinds softly present the marchlike phrase while the soloist plays brilliant running passages. A highlight of the development comes when the violinist presents a new legato melody which the strings lightly accompany with fragments of the opening theme.



Then there is a reversal of roles: the strings sing the lyrical melody while the soloist gracefully presents the fragment of the opening theme.

At the beginning of the recapitulation, the two themes are combined once again. The French horn and lower strings play the warm legato melody while the soloist brings back the sparkling first theme. After a return of the second theme, the movement builds to an exciting climax in the coda, which is fuller in sound than anything that has come before.