

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847) Piano Trio in D Minor, Op. 49, "Grand Trio" (1839)



Most listeners would not think of Felix Mendelssohn as a conductor, but at the time that he composed his *Piano Trio in D Minor* (1839), he was conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and was doing a very impressive job. He moved to Leipzig with a new wife and growing family and a resolve to improve the musical scene in Leipzig. Over the next few years he expanded the size of the orchestra, improved the working conditions of the musicians, overhauled the orchestra's programming and instituted several new concert series not only in the orchestral medium, but also through chamber music performances, quartet evenings, and performances of cantatas or oratorios, as well as added "historical concerts" which were overviews of music from the time of Bach up to his contemporaries Schumann and Weber. Mendelssohn's orchestra introduced the Bach orchestral suites, premiered Schubert's *Great C Major Symphony*, fostered interest in Mozart's and Beethoven's symphonies, and initiated concert versions of Weber's operas. Robert Schumann owed much of his musical development and early recognition to Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn also introduced a new breed of virtuosic pianists to Leipzig – Anton Rubinstein, Liszt, Chopin, Clara Schumann – along with the violinists Vieuxtemps and Joachim, and vocalists such as Jenny Lind. The musical life of Leipzig thrived during Mendelssohn's tenure.

Music for all instruments, the piano in particular, was becoming more virtuosic and this is evident in Mendelssohn's own *Trio*, regardless of his tendency to write with more of an eye on the Classical past than on the Romantic future. The keyboard part in tonight's *Trio* is a virtual *tour de force* and the entire work is a source of memorable melodies. After a single hearing, one departs humming any number of themes and it is easy to see why this work found immediate success when it was introduced.

The first movement starts with a soaring phrase in the cello which is then passed to the violin, while the piano accompanies both instruments in turn. A second theme also is introduced by the cello. The movement is in sonata form and when the two melodies return in the recapitulation, the cello melody is decorated by a violin counter-melody above it. The coda displays the piano in its virtuosic role.

The *Andante Con Moto* must be called a "song" and one that the listener will never forget. Begun as a piano solo, it resembles very much Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*. It unfolds in the piano, aided and answered by the other two instruments, giving the individual performers ample opportunity for self-expression. A contrasting melody in minor, not quite as carefree, follows first in the piano, then cello, and finally the violin, with triplet accompaniments. The last two chords of the movement remind one of an Amen.

The Scherzo could have been lifted directly from Mendelssohn's incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It sounds so light and elfin, so deceptively simple to play. For those listeners who are familiar with the incidental music, the coda may sound as if it could easily have been written as an alternate accompaniment to Shakespeare's phrase, "Trip away: Make no stay: Meet me all by break of day."

The *Finale* is built almost entirely around a rhythmic figure – one accented note followed by two quicker unaccented notes – somewhat akin to, and almost a continuation of, the preceding Scherzo. It seems surprisingly light for the final movement of such a long work. A *legato* cello solo near the end of the movement balances with the strong cello themes that began the *Trio*. In this movement as well, the piano has very difficult passages to execute.

Robert Schumann summed up his feeling for this *Trio* with the commendation: “This is the master-trio of our time, even as Beethoven’s in B \flat and D and Schubert’s in E \flat were the masterpieces of their day; it is an exceedingly fine composition which will gladden our grandchildren and great-grandchildren for many years to come.” I think we would all agree that this has proven to be true.

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