

Music of the Masters

Saturday, August 1, 2009 • 8 p.m.

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy

(born February 3, 1809; died November 4, 1847)

The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave) Overture (op. 26, 1830, revised in 1832)

This year marks Felix Mendelssohn's 200th birthday, and in celebration, the Britt Orchestra will perform a number of his works, including this evening's opener.

Mendelssohn was known as one of the most gifted and versatile child prodigies of his era. He played piano and organ, in addition to some violin, plus he learned the art of conducting, all before the age of 20. Above all else, he was known as a composer with a number of influences, including the complex counterpoint of Bach, the formal grace of Mozart and the dramatic force of Beethoven. Most evident in tonight's work, *The Hebrides Overture*, is his influence from Beethoven.

The Hebrides Overture (also known as *Fingal's Cave Overture*) was inspired by Mendelssohn's trip to Scotland in 1829. While there, Mendelssohn visited the Hebrides, a group of islands off the western coast of Scotland. On the uninhabited island of Staffa lies Fingal's Cave, a sea cave about 35 feet wide, 70 feet tall and over 200 feet deep. The original Gaelic name for this cave was Uamh-Binn, which means "cave of melody." Visitors to this cave would see this as a very fitting name, as the echo of the waves crashing inside produces an eerily beautiful sound. Mendelssohn visited Fingal's Cave during his Scottish adventure, and was inspired by it so much that he had to write a piece about it.

Originally titled *Die einsame Insel* ("the lonely island"), this work is a concert overture. Most overtures precede some other grander work, like a play or an opera, but *Hebrides* stands alone as a concert piece. Some scholars claim that the first theme of this piece, stated in the low strings and bassoon right at the beginning, was written while Mendelssohn was in Fingal's Cave. However, it appears that he had begun work on this piece before he visited the Hebrides, as a sketch for the work appears on a postcard that he sent to his sister, Fanny, before he left for the islands. Either way, the theme evokes a feeling of solitude, even loneliness or melancholy. This mood seems fitting for a piece about a huge, stunning sea cave on an uninhabited island, and it appears that Mendelssohn had this in mind when writing the piece, considering how he decided to score it (low strings and bassoon). The first theme gets passed around to different parts of the orchestra, until the key changes and a second, more lyrical theme is stated by the cellos and bassoons over a soft undulating passage in the violins. This theme seems to depict the ocean waves rolling in and out of the cave. Mendelssohn then develops these themes, in typical sonata-form fashion. Listen for restatement of the first theme and how it is different from the beginning of the piece. The piece then winds up, as though a storm is moving in and the sea is getting rougher and rougher, until a somewhat surprising conclusion leaves the audience wondering when they will get to make a trip to Fingal's Cave.

Recommended Recording: Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, Leonard Bernstein, conductor (1995, Deutsche Grammophone).

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

(born January 27, 1756; died December 5, 1791)

Piano Concerto in C Major (No. 25, K. 503, 1786)

I. Allegro maestoso

II. Andante

III. Allegretto

Mozart's mastery of the concerto medium is expressed in its fullest in this piano concerto. Along with his piano concerti in A Major (K. 488) and in C Minor (K. 491), this concerto in C Major stands as the last of Mozart's three great piano concertos written in 1786. In fact, between February of 1784 and December of 1786, Mozart composed twelve piano concerti, an output any composer would be jealous of (this doesn't include other works he completed in this time frame, including *Le Nozze di Figaro* and several symphonies).

According to Mozart's *Verzeichnuess aller meiner Werke* (List of all my Works), the K. 503 concerto was completed on December 4th, 1786, and premiered the next day in Vienna by Mozart himself. Although not as well known as the previous two concerti (mentioned above), this work is no less remarkable in its distinct style, boldness of form and depth of expression.

In the first movement, Mozart seems to emphasize the contrast between light and dark, or major and minor. The work begins with a triumphant statement by the full orchestra. There is a short interlude in the woodwinds, and triumph quickly returns. We then find the contrast, as the same interlude comes back, first in C Major, then restated again in C minor. Listen for other places in this work where this contrast is exhibited, as there are many.

Pianist and critic Charles Rosen said of the concerto genre in his book *The Classical Style*, "The most important fact is that the

audience waits for the soloist to enter, and when he stops playing, they wait for him to begin again.” The initial wait in this concerto seems to last quite some time, until the soloist finally enters, alternating brief passages with the strings. As is common in Mozart’s music, virtuosity comes out of musical challenges rather than technical difficulty. The shaping of phrases, the contrast between melody and accompaniment and the fluid movement up and down the keys are the true tests of a soloist’s prowess in Mozart’s concerti, rather than flashy technical playing (as you might see in, for example, Franz Liszt’s music).

There are two basic ideas in the first movement of this work. The first is a motive similar to that of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, albeit much less ominous. This motive is used to accentuate chords in the orchestra, with the timpani often serving as punctuation. The other idea is a march-like motive, which is wonderfully developed in the middle section of the movement. Towards the end of the movement, a cadenza is played by the soloist, which propels the listener and the orchestra to the end.

The second movement is a tuneful Andante full of charm. This is Mozart at his best, as the opening theme gives way to dramatic runs up and down the keys. This serves as a perfect interlude to the majesty and triumph of the first movement and the brilliant style of the finale. Overall in this work, we hear Mozart at the pinnacle of his style, where contrast and vigor meet head on with grace and wit.

Recommended Recording: Academy of St. Martin in the Field, Neville Marriner, conductor; Alfred Brendel, soloist (Philips).

Ludwig van Beethoven

(born December 16, 1770; died March 26, 1827)

Symphony No. 2 in D Major (Op. 36)

I. Adagio molto; Allegro con Brio

II. Larghetto

III. Scherzo: Allegro

IV. Allegro molto

We turn now to arguably the greatest composer to ever grace our ears, Ludwig van Beethoven. Without the work of Beethoven, music would not be the same as it is today. He revolutionized virtually every genre he wrote for, and composed music so vivid and imaginative that much of it is still played today.

Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 2* falls right at the end of his Early Period. He completed the score sometime around April 1802 while staying in Heiligenstadt, a small village near Vienna. It was here that Beethoven wrote the famed Heiligenstadt Testament, a letter addressed to his brothers Carl and Johann which describes Beethoven’s increasing deafness and his desire to overcome his ailments to fulfill his artistic vision. The letter is dated October 6, 1802, so it came a few months after Beethoven completed the Second Symphony. Beethoven never mailed this letter, and he kept it a secret from the world until his death. Since tonight’s symphony and the Testament were both written in the same year, one may assume that the Second Symphony would be laden with despair, but this is not the case; the piece as a whole comes off very positive and boisterous, although there are certainly parts that may have been influenced by the loss of his hearing.

By the time of the premiere of his Second Symphony (April 1803), Beethoven had already established himself as one of the important composers following Haydn and Mozart. He’d had a number of very successful pieces, including twelve of his 32 piano sonatas, his First Symphony, and the Op. 18 string quartets. By this time, Beethoven began to show signs of discontent with some of the formal aspects of the Viennese Classical style (that of Haydn and Mozart), and many of his scores exhibit a longing for something new. According to Carl Czerny, a pupil of Beethoven’s at this time, Beethoven spoke of a “new path” he was following, which became apparent in his Op. 31 piano sonatas (including *The Tempest* and *The Hunt*). He explored virtually every aspect of Classical music: tonal range, instrumentation, formal structures, motivic unity (as evidenced in his Fifth Symphony), and more. With the Second Symphony, he seemed to have found a way to meld all this together into his vision of a large concert piece.

Although it is not considered among his greatest works, the Second Symphony is nonetheless a wonderful work of art that sets the stage for Beethoven’s later exploration of the symphonic genre. The work is in four movements, with a slow introduction before the first movement. The introduction begins much in the same way as the Mozart Piano Concerto on this evening’s program. A triumphant unison D scored for the full orchestra announces that the music has begun. Almost immediately, Beethoven begins his exploring new terrain for the symphonic genre, as he quickly modulates the key from D Major to B Flat Major, a seemingly unrelated key. The rest of the introduction meanders through various keys, creating a sort of mysterious aura about the music, until he brings us triumphantly back to the original key of D Major, where the first movement truly begins. Hector Berlioz, a composer and music critic of the same time period, wrote extensively on Beethoven and his symphonies. He remarked that the Second Symphony “is smiling throughout.” With the exception of the introduction, this holds true for much of this movement.

The second movement is a simple song, wonderfully scored first in the strings, then moving to other parts of the orchestra. This movement is clearly smiling throughout, as joyous lines are passed around, with the occasional interjection of orchestral punctuation.

The third movement is interesting in that it is the first time Beethoven included a Scherzo as the third movement of symphony. In Haydn and Mozart, the third movement was generally a Minuet and Trio movement. Beethoven did maintain a similar formal plan to the Minuet and Trio (which can be described as ABA), but a Scherzo is a good deal faster than a Minuet. The word scherzo means “joke” in Italian; keep this in mind as the movement progresses, as there is certainly a good amount of humor included.

The finale seems to pick up where the Scherzo left off, and has an even more joyous and rollicking feel to it (although a little less humorous). You can hear Beethoven’s new-found confidence in the symphonic genre. We can also hear the beginnings of his revolutionary ideas that lead him to write his Third Symphony, which completely changed the way the musical world thought about the symphony. One thing to remember about this work is that it was written while Beethoven was coming to grips with the fact that he was going deaf. Toward the end of the piece, right when you think it is about to wrap up and end, Beethoven diverts the listener to a very unexpected place. This seems to represent that he hasn’t forgotten about his impending deafness. He then quickly winds the orchestra back up to an exciting conclusion.

On the whole, the most unifying element of this work is its exuberance. It seems that this work is Beethoven’s attempt to stay positive amidst the dark thought that he may not be able to hear for very much longer. Although it was not well received by the general public when it premiered, one critic said, “It is a noteworthy, colossal work, of a depth, power, and artistic knowledge like very few. It has a level of difficulty, both from the point of view of the composer and in regard to its performance by a large orchestra (which it certainly demands), quite certainly unlike any symphony that has ever been made known.” If only they knew what Beethoven had up his sleeve for his next three symphonies!

Recommended Recording: London Classical Players, Roger Norrington, conductor (1986, EMI).

Program notes by Mark Knippel

