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Mendelssohn's music to A Midsummer Night's Dream:

1826 and Today

For any major orchestral audition, whether it is for the New York Philharmonic or the Grand Rapids Symphony, a violinist today is required to have prepared Mendelssohn's *Scherzo* as well as the *Overture* from the famous incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Did Mendelssohn have any idea that over one hundred years post his writing, thousands of violinists would be slaving away to perfect excerpts from his highly popular masterpiece? Most likely he did not, though he certainly felt the glow of popularity in his day. Since then, Mendelssohn's overture has been consistently hailed as "genius" and "perfectly praiseworthy" (Todd, Hebrides 13). And while it is notable that the composer was remarkably young when he composed it, is the piece truly a work of genius, or should it be considered from a more critical standpoint? Considering Mendelssohn's rich childhood and education heavy in the arts, there is reason to believe that as creative as the music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is, it is a work predictable of Mendelssohn, not a stroke of genius.

On February 3, 1809, a son was born to Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn (Todd, Heritage 183). Jacob Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (Bartholdy was technically added later on when the family converted to Protestantism) was the second child born to the couple, following his sister Fanny born in 1805 (Todd, Heritage 183). From barely three months of age Felix showed his musical taste and even visitors noticed the infant's preference for sounds of soft and refined

character and distaste for brass music and military performances (Todd, A Life 29). The four Mendelssohns resided in Hamburg, Germany until their second daughter, Rebecka, was born in 1811 (Marek 76). They fled to Berlin under the cover of darkness due to the growing political tension in Hamburg and upon arriving safely quickly reestablished themselves under the safety of a government official in Lea's family (Marek 76). Abraham was a banker, and a successful one at that. His financial success gave him the freedom to spend some amount of time with his family (especially the children) which he doted upon marvelously (Marek 79).

The Mendelssohn children had idyllic childhoods. Felix grew up in an environment rich with the labor of learning and discovery balanced with much reward and leisure. The children went horseback riding, visited parks (a favorite of young Felix's), learned to dance and went to parties. These many experiences sparked young Felix's creativity early on and he is said to have completed his first notable composition at age eleven in 1820 (Marek 338). Exposure to fine arts was common (if not required) for children of well-to-do families, and Felix and his siblings were all well instructed in the areas of language and music. Young Felix received formal lessons on the piano and also on the violin, the latter from the notable concertmaster of the area court (Todd, Heritage 183). It is possible that Felix was also given vocal lessons at the local school for voice (Werner 15). It is known that he sang in the choir. Other areas of study included geometry, arithmetic, history, and geography (Todd, Heritage 183). Of the Mendelssohn children (a full brood of four by 1813; a brother, Paul, joining the family that year), Felix was one to show the most interest in language. By just ten years old he read Caesar and Ovid, and of course the family's class required mastery of German, English, and French. With his sister Fanny, Felix explored Greek as well (Werner 14). Even as a child, Felix had opportunities to make phenomenal social connections. He met and spoke with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and

continued a friendship with him until Goethe's death (Todd, Heritage 184). The Mendelssohn family was well acquainted with literary-mastermind August Wilhelm Schlegel, who also happened to be the brother-in-law of Felix's Aunt Dorothea. Shakespeare was read regularly in the Mendelssohn household and the children learned to respect him as "the most perfect poet who ever lived" (Werner 9). Hence, the family had an immense amount of pride in their close connection to Schlegel, the man who had presented "a Shakespeare that the Romantic age (and German people) could understand," who had "made Shakespeare into a contemporary!" (Werner 10). Summer nights spent in the Mendelssohn's family garden were filled to the brim with poetry readings, music, and dancing, allowing the children to grow infinitely in their appreciation for the arts and develop fine social skills.

When it came to the attention of his parents that Felix could easily be a child prodigy due to his significant intelligence and musical skill, their reaction was hardly excited. Instead, Abraham and Lea chose to continue Felix's upbringing in a normal manner, allowing him to pursue the interests of his talents but not encouraging one field any more than another (Werner 14). Felix's father was especially wary of the music field; he did not want his son to enter unless it was Felix's true passion and best chance at success. Of course, such a response would be expected from a well-to-do banker. However, the family did assure that their children received the best instruction in whatever field they chose to explore. Felix received private music lessons from Karl Freiderich Zelter and was profoundly influenced by his teaching. Beyond the fact that Zelter was the first to equip Mendelssohn with a musician's most essential skills—knowledge of harmony, counterpoint, and composition, he was also a unique teacher in that he was strong in his field but did not impress his own personal style upon Felix as law. It was noted that Zelter was known not only for his teaching skills but also for being a man of "strong character." What

better a tutor for a budding “prodigy” than a man who was brilliant yet down to earth? A more suitable teacher for Felix likely could not have been found in all of Germany (Werner 14).

Felix Mendelssohn excelled quickly in his compositional skills: his first dated composition at age eleven and his first symphony were only separated by four years. He rarely lacked inspiration as he found his muse in literature. Above all, he read Goethe, Jean Paul and Shakespeare (these preferences being no surprise due to his upbringing) (Todd, Heritage 184). His acclaimed “Octet for Strings, Op. 20” was completed when just he was sixteen (Marek 39). It was not even a full year later that Mendelssohn was to write one of his most renowned works, surprisingly not in the form of a symphony, string quartet or even an opera (Todd, Hebrides I).

Mendelssohn’s *Overture to a Midsummer Night’s Dream* was likely composed while the near-adult Felix was still living at home. The year was 1825 and a reissue of Schlegel’s translations had been released, so Shakespeare’s plays were certainly at the forefront of societal interest and consideration (Jacob 8). It is likely that Mendelssohn became quite familiar with the A Midsummer Night’s Dream at this time, and that thoughts of Shakespeare’s writing were often present, consciously or subconsciously, in his mind. It is supposed that one July evening Mendelssohn was outdoors absorbing the midsummer night’s air in the family garden and was struck with inspiration to write a piece honoring Shakespeare’s comedy of the season (Jacob 9). Not only was it summer, but the characters in the story of A Midsummer Night’s Dream were near Mendelssohn’s age. The composer could relate to the topic of his new piece on more than one level. He wrote to his sister Fanny about his idea for his new piece in early July, asking for her input on some opening chords. The piece, turning out to be an overture, was completed by August sixth of that year, a commendably fast completion for what would turn out to be one of Mendelssohn’s most recognized compositions (Marek 129). He took the early version of the

piece to his friend and teacher Adolf Bernhard Marx for critique and revisions (Todd, Hebrides 12). Marx recalls his own first encounter with Mendelssohn's innovative opening for the overture. Prophetically he said, "A new music begins here," (Jacob 8).

The four famous opening chords of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* mark some of Mendelssohn's boldest harmonic ideas. The term most often used to describe them is "wandering," as they seem to fall into no specific, or perhaps multiple home key[s]. This is significant as it is supposed to represent the two young couples of the play (Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena) as they wander into the enchanted wood (Todd, Heritage 185). Though the progression finally lands on an E major chord played just by wind instruments, the following music is not in E major or for winds. Rather, Mendelssohn changes to E minor and writes for the strings. He creates a very light, airy texture by employing just violins in the beginning of this section. They play many quick, short (*staccato*) notes very, very quietly (*pianissimo*). This gives the music a sense of mystery and magic, appropriately representing the introduction of the fairies into the play. Their unpredictable nature is captured in the surprising transitions from the fairy theme (E minor section with staccato in the violins, as described before) into strongly contrasting sections each time the fairy theme is presented. The first contrasting section introduces the listener to reality and regality—the very loud entrance of the brass instruments in E major resonates as a type of fanfare, both a nod to Shakespeare's noble characters Duke Theseus and Hippolyta as well as a clear transition from the make-believe and magic of fairies to the rule-bound, black and white setting of the human part of the plot.

Perhaps the most bluntly symbolic section is that which comes directly after this section. The music remains in E major but takes on a distinguishably sillier and simpler quality. This change in mood is to signify the switch of focus from the sane and respectable individuals of the

play (Theseus, Hippolyta, and lovers in some circumstances) to the mechanicals—Bottom and his fellow “actors.” The key and instrumentation remain the same to continue the theme of reality and humanity, but the mood contrasts the different humans’ mentalities. In this section there is a two note motif written in to mimic the sound of a donkey braying “Hee-Haw,” alluding to Bottom’s experience with some physical characteristics of an ass, in addition to his normal mental ones (Lee 118). (This can be found specifically in measures 199-201 [Mendelssohn 18]). The fairy theme recurs four times in the overture, suitably noting the fairies’ multiple appearances in the play (Mendelssohn 1-56). This use of “theme music” is significant for the times because the idea of motifs and development exploded in popularity not long after Mendelssohn’s years. It can be noted that he was certainly “up with the times,” and it is his use of motifs and theme music that brings him into the realm of Wagner and Strauss, who used these techniques as masters later on. Mendelssohn consistently uses certain instruments to portray certain character groups. The high woodwinds symbolize the fairies; bassoons, horns and trumpets relate to mankind; the strings serve as neutral, intensifying whatever character or mood Mendelssohn wishes to evoke, serving much like a spice in a dish (Werner 411). Whether or not the symbolism was intentionally this clear in the overture is debatable, but it certainly served to Mendelssohn’s advantage seventeen years later (when he had doubled his age) when he was asked to write more music on the play. While Mendelssohn may have first encountered Shakespeare in a garden, he was about to encounter him on the stage as well.

In 1842, Mendelssohn received a commission from the King of Prussia asking for some music to accompany the performance of Shakespeare’s comedy A Midsummer Night’s Dream. While his overture had been a great success and deemed “happy in mood” (pleasing to the ear), the King was interested in more than a twelve minute character introduction (Marek 105). The

King also asked for music to Racine's *Athalie*, Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. But it was only *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that made the cut (Marek 345). Perhaps this was because Mendelssohn had already written music on the play, or perhaps simply because he much preferred the subject matter! Either way, the then thirty-three year old Mendelssohn got right to work on his assignment. His quick writing made it quite obvious that he enjoyed the topic matter. His sister Fanny, upon hearing of his return to write more music for the play, mentioned,

From our youth on we were entwined in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Felix made is particularly his own. He identified with all of the characters. He recreated them, so to speak, every one of those whom Shakespeare produced in the immensity of his genius. (Marek 277)

The results of Mendelssohn's venture yielded twelve (or thirteen, fourteen, or sixteen depending on the reference book) additional numbers to the overture to accompany the play's performance (Marek 277, Lee 118). Some were vocal pieces scored for solo singers and/or chorus, while others were purely instrumental. The first performance of the Incidental Music took place in 1843 in Potsdam (Marek 345). After the rousing *Wedding March*, the audience is said to have risen to their feet, as though they, too, were wedding guests (Jacob 307)! Upon the completion of the play, the "applause simply would not stop!" (Jacob 308). But Mendelssohn, perfectionist that he was, was not happy with the performance. He was annoyed that the director of the play had divided the play into three acts instead of using Schlegel's respected scene divisions, hence forcing some of Mendelssohn's pieces to be performed at unplanned times. But the audience was not the least bit dismayed. "Shakespeare's words became Mendelssohn's songs," and the music was used in thousands of productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from then on (Jacob 308).

While this history of the composition of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture and Incidental Music* is a fine story, there is more to consider than merely the intriguing plot. Two conceptions regarding these compositions exist, and whether or not they are true is debatable. The first claim is that this work of Mendelssohn's is a "work of genius" and has "no false tones" (Marek 279). But considering that Mendelssohn spent his entire childhood reading and studying literature, and that his family was friends with Schlegel, is it not expectable for him to write a piece so appropriate for Shakespeare's play? Also, in view of Mendelssohn's most superior training in theory, harmony, counterpoint, and composition, isn't it predictable that his composition would be very theoretically correct? Mendelssohn's upbringing was very dignified and proper. So were the characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (or at least, they should have been). So we can see, Mendelssohn was more qualified than any other composer to write suitable music for the play simply due to his past. His background explains his so-called "genius."

The second claim is that Mendelssohn's obvious use of the character themes from his overture in his incidental music is a sign of artistic laziness (Werner 411). And it is true, when listening to the incidental music from a critical perspective, the "Hee-Haw" mechanicals' theme does jump out very obviously in *A Dance of Clowns*—but isn't it supposed to be obvious that the clowns are indeed just that? The only other parts of the overture referenced in the incidental music are the first four opening chords and the fairies theme. The *Wedding March* and *Nocturne* have attitudes all their own, completely separate from the overture, with a brass fanfare in the *March* and such a peaceful mellifluous melody in the *Nocturne* (Werner 410). Mendelssohn knew how to use his resources and balance old with new; certainly that is no reason to deem him lazy.

Today many concert halls are still graced by performances of selections from Mendelssohn's incidental music to A Midsummer Night's Dream. Audiences continue to be captivated by the *Overture*, *Scherzo*, *Intermezzo*, *Nocturne*, and of course the famous *Wedding March*, which has for decades since Mendelssohn's death been a favorite of many brides, despite the fact that was originally written to celebrate the wedding of the "Queen of the Amazon" (Lee 119)! This music is referred to as one of Mendelssohn's only masterpieces and even his only major successful work (Marek 282). While this may be true on some level, it is a vast exaggeration to say only. Mendelssohn is, however, known best for the music written for A Midsummer Night's Dream and he is the only composer noted to have written successful music on the play. Yet the music is still virtually unknown in today's society, of course with the exception of auditioning violinists. To me Mendelssohn's creative brilliance will always remain significant. My ability to musically articulate Mendelssohn's symbolization of fairies (measures 8-55 of the *Overture*) will someday soon play a part in determining my hopeful placement in a professional orchestra. What better preparation for this experience than to discover the history and true significance of the piece!

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