



Bach Keyboard Concertos with Beatrice Rana October 17, 2019 | Carnegie Hall

PROGRAM NOTES

The Hebrides Overture

On March 11, 1829, the twenty-year-old Felix Mendelssohn conducted the first public performance of Johann Sebastian Bach's oratorio the *St. Matthew Passion* in nearly a century. The performance was credited with igniting a renewed interest in the music of J.S. Bach that continues well into the 21st century. In the coming eighteen years before his premature death in 1847, Mendelssohn would continue to bring Bach's music—especially his vocal works and choral cantatas—back into Western European concert halls. But first, he would celebrate this early success with a little vacation.

In April 1829, Mendelssohn embarked on a three-year grand tour of Europe, beginning with several months in Great Britain. Soon after landing in London, Mendelssohn journeyed north to Scotland, where he was immediately awestruck by the picturesque and moody Scottish landscape before continuing further north to The Hebrides, a chain of islands off the west coast of the mainland. Throughout his trip, Mendelssohn wrote frequently to his family, describing his travels in depth. When it came to The Hebrides, he was at a loss for words to describe the untouched, feral beauty of The Hebrides. But he was not at a loss for music. After seeing Fingal's Cave on the uninhabited island of Staffa, Mendelssohn quickly wrote down what would become the opening theme of *The Hebrides Overture* and sent it to his sister Fanny.

Mendelssohn would work on *The Hebrides Overture* for the next three years, revising it several times. First titled *Zur einsamen Insel* (To the Lonely Island), he eventually settled on *The Hebrides*, although the work was sometimes referred to as *Fingalsköhle* (Fingal's Cave), after an 1834 edition of the score which used that title.

The Hebrides Overture is not a theatrical overture with a linear narrative but a tone poem that depicts the landscape and the atmosphere of the Scottish Isles. In the opening theme, Mendelssohn captures the unpredictable, rocking waves and the sense of danger and wonder The Hebrides inspired in him. Like the water that gives The Hebrides its character and life, the overture is constantly shifting from chaos to calm and back again. Nowhere is this more evocative than in the final three minutes of the work, when a lulling clarinet solo suddenly launches into the orchestra's final, heart-racing conclusion, like the relentless crashing of waves against the rocky coast of Staffa.

Keyboard Concerto in D Minor, BWV 1052

Though Bach's extensive oeuvre contains only seven complete keyboard concertos, the form was championed by his sons, who, in their own keyboard concertos, spread the genre throughout Western Europe and inspired the next generation of composers, such as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, to compose their own definitive keyboard and piano concertos.

But it wasn't the influence of Bach's seven keyboard concertos alone that lasted into the next century; the concertos themselves continued to be admired and performed, even while Bach's other scores were forgotten. One of Bach's greatest champions at the end of the eighteenth century was harpsichord virtuoso Sara Levy, who often performed Bach's keyboard concertos—including BWV 1052. Admiration for

J.S. Bach ran in the family; both Levy's grandniece and grandnephew Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn often performed Bach's keyboard concertos in concert throughout their careers.

For his Keyboard Concerto in D Minor, BWV 1052, J.S. Bach repurposed pre-existing material from two of his cantatas: *Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal in das Reich Gottes eingehen*, BWV 146 and *Ich habe meine Zuversicht*, BWV 188. It is believed Bach may have originally composed the concerto for solo violin but later rearranged the material for harpsichord and keyboard, with the virtuosic violin part transformed into the right hand of the keyboard.

The three-movement concerto begins with a driving, menacing opening theme with the keyboard soloist and orchestra playing in unison fifths and octaves, from which the keyboard breaks away in breathless virtuosic passages. The slow middle movement in G Minor builds on the mysterious, dark colors of the first movement. The intricate counterpoint and brisk tempo of the third movement is characteristic of Bach's final concerto movements, with an extravagant keyboard cadenza guiding the movement toward major before a final, enthralling return to D Minor.

Keyboard Concerto in F Minor, BWV 1056

Bach's Keyboard Concerto in F Minor, BWV 1056 is the fifth and shortest of his seven surviving keyboard concertos. Like most of the keyboard concertos in this group (BWV 1052 through 1058, with only a fragment of 1059a remaining), the Keyboard Concerto in F Minor is a pastiche of pre-existing material. Bach's ability to take his own music and transform it, either through changes in instrumentation, orchestration, mode, or function, was one of his defining and most creative features. The material for the first and final movements is believed to have been recycled from a now lost violin concerto, while the middle movement is an arrangement of the Sinfonia to Bach's cantata *Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe*, BWV 156.

The first Allegro movement has the keyboard soloist and the string orchestra playing in opposition to one another from the very beginning: the orchestra imposes a strict binary rhythmic frame that the keyboard rebels against with persistent triplets. In the delicate Largo movement, the keyboard plays a wandering yet contemplative melody while the orchestra keeps time and shapes the harmony with whispered *pizzicati*. The final Presto movement is a virtuosic showpiece for both keyboard and orchestra, with surprising syncopations and sudden pauses that give it an invigoratingly unpredictable air.

Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, Op. 56, "Scottish" composed between 1829 and 1842.

On July 30, 1829, Felix Mendelssohn visited the ruins of Holyrood Chapel in Edinburgh, where a 6-day-old Mary Stuart had been crowned Queen of Scotland in 1542. In a letter to his family back in Leipzig, Mendelssohn described how deeply and quickly the landscape had inspired him:

"Grass and ivy thrive there and at the broken altar where Mary was crowned Queen of Scotland. Everything is ruined, decayed, and the clear heavens pour in. I think I have found there the beginning of my 'Scottish' Symphony."

Along with this letter, he sent his family yet another musical postcard with the opening bars of the symphony. Unlike *The Hebrides*, Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, "Scottish" is a full-length orchestral work, clocking in at nearly 40 minutes. If *The Hebrides* was a snapshot, the "Scottish" Symphony is a complete landscape portrait, one that would take Mendelssohn nearly thirteen years to complete.

Mendelssohn worked on the "Scottish" Symphony sporadically while on tour, eventually abandoning the piece around 1831. He resumed work on it a decade later and at last completed the symphony on January 20, 1842. Mendelssohn himself conducted the world premiere performance of the symphony on March 3, 1842 at the Leipzig Gewandhaus.

The four movements of the “Scottish” Symphony—marked to be performed without pauses—create a vivid aural portrait of a land Mendelssohn had visited only once. In the opening movement, the howling winds and the dramatic undulation of the waves, so expertly recreated in the rising and falling chromatic scales, depict the threat and the excitement of Scotland’s natural elements. The second *Vivace non troppo* movement in F Major is the celebration after the storm and receives much of its character from Scottish folk music, including the brisk dotted rhythm, syncopation, and use of pentatonic scales. The beautiful and refined Adagio movement is thought to be a reflection on the fate of Mary, Queen of Scots. In the final movement, Mendelssohn appears to depict a battle, complete with marching soldiers, Bach-inspired fugues representing the clashing of arms, and even the tears of women lamenting their fallen husbands and sons. To this, Mendelssohn attaches a coda that transforms the menacing opening theme of the symphony into an expression of triumph.