

Music 320

Felix Mendelssohn

(1809-1847)

Biography: Mendelssohn's life had many similarities with that of Mozart:

- died young
- child prodigy as pianist and composer (first opera mid teens)
- grew up in musical, artistic family; introduced to Goethe at age 9; met lots of other important art figures because of family culture

Other biographical traits:

- Mendelssohn was also a talented painter and writer
- Entire family converted to Protestantism, but Jewish ancestry left him open to anti-semitic attacks
- traveled (grand tour), then wrote music about his travels
- promoted works of other composers, including from the past: much responsibility for Bach revival (St. Matt Passion 1829), wrote organ music (unusual in 19th century)
- An important conductor (Gewandhaus in Leipzig)

Piano Works:

- wrote two piano concertos (not much played today: “student works”)
- 48 Songs Without Words, also often used as teaching pieces. Melodies are very romantic

Chamber Music:

- lots of string pieces and string and piano; also some violin and cello sonatas. Octet and piano trios are the best chamber music

Orchestral Works: universally agreed that these are his best works; many were very programmatic

- Violin concerto is very popular with audiences, soloists, critics etc. It is very virtuosic sounding, and also exotic: uses harmonic minor (aug 2 interval)
- Earliest success in orchestral music was suite of incidental music for Midsummer Night's Dream
- **Symphonies:** contain many of the gestures present in Midsummer Night's Dream, e.g. very light, virtuosic string parts, many classical aspects of form. Two are named

for and based upon his travels: "Scotch" (or "Scottish") Symphony (numbered the 3rd); "Italian" (4th)

- This music is programmatic in depicting scenes from Mendelssohn's travels, also tends to retain a classical attention to formal ideals.