

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Overture (Opus 21) and Incidental music (Opus 61) to
Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

First performance of the overture: April 29, 1827, in Stettin, Carl Loewe cond. *First performances of the incidental music:* October 14, 1843 (private performance), Potsdam; October 18, 1843, Berlin (first public performance). *First BSO performances of individual movements:* March 1882, "Wedding March," Georg Henschel cond.; February 1883, Overture, Henschel cond.; October 1883, Nocturne, Henschel cond. *First BSO performances of complete incidental music:* April 1894, Emil Paur cond. *First Tanglewood performance:* August 10, 1963, Erich Leinsdorf cond. (Overture and complete incidental music). *Most recent Tanglewood performance:* August 22, 2003, Sir Neville Marriner cond., in an arrangement by Michael Lankester and Christopher Plummer, with Christopher Plummer, speaker; Kendra Colton, soprano; Zheng Cao, mezzo-soprano; Women of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, John Oliver, cond.

The case of Mendelssohn allows us a glimpse into the mysteries of musical genius afforded by only a few other youthful masters (Mozart and Schubert come to mind). Though both Mozart and Schubert traveled farther on their musical paths after a precocious beginning, neither of them had produced, before their eighteenth year, a work as brilliant as Mendelssohn's Octet (composed when he was sixteen) or the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (written a year later).

Mendelssohn had every opportunity to develop his musical culture once his talent became evident. His father provided the best teachers available in Berlin and organized regular Sunday musicales in the Mendelssohn house, engaging performers from the orchestra of the royal court. It was for these events that the boy began to write music himself and to learn important lessons in musical structure and effect by hearing performances almost as soon as the ink was dry. (Felix was not the only composer in the family either; his sister Fanny had a remarkable creative talent as well.) Just as he was entering into his teens, he turned out a remarkable assortment of twelve string symphonies in just over half a year.

In addition to music, Felix received the best possible general education. He was bright, quick, and receptive, spoke several languages well, danced exquisitely, illustrated his letters and journals with pen and ink drawings of considerable flair, and translated one of Terence's comedies from the original Latin. He traveled widely and enjoyed a wide acquaintance of creative and intellectual leaders. By 1825 he had met Cherubini, Hummel, Moscheles, Rossini, Meyerbeer, and other leading musicians in Paris; his family was personally acquainted with Goethe. Once the family settled in Berlin in 1825, the Mendelssohn home became the most important salon in the city, frequented by the scientist Humboldt and the philosopher Hegel, as well as by people who were to play various roles in the young composer's life, among them the critic Adolf Bernhard Marx, who became a musical confidante and adviser.

The idea of writing his **Overture to "A Midsummer Night's Dream"** evidently came to Felix when he and Fanny were reading the play together (in the translation by Schlegel). He originally wrote the overture for two pianos, so that he could perform it with her. But he orchestrated it almost at once, and it quickly attained performance and general popularity. Without question it is one of Mendelssohn's most remarkable accomplishments. Into the presumably restrictive context of an overture, cast in sonata form, he introduced a varied panoply of musical ideas, each with its own distinctive color and character that could be taken to represent elements of the play, then shaped them into a pattern that is thoroughly satisfying whether one knows the play or not. He created the very image of fairydom for music—delicate and light-footed—while not forgetting the low comedy of Bottom's dream.

The first four measures instantly transport us to a mysterious world: four woodwind chords in the key of E, beginning with just two flutes and adding clarinets in the second measure, bassoons and one horn in the third, and oboes and a second horn in the fourth. Of these opening measures, the third is the most magical of all; it surprises us by borrowing its harmony from the minor key, hinting at subtle dark worlds behind the brightness. Then the upper strings enter and whirl us off into the delicate world of the fairies' dance. The entrance of the full orchestra brings on the world of the two pairs of lovers who get so frightfully mixed up during the course of the plot. A heavy pounding repeated note in the bass brings on the rustics with their antic dance and the "hee-haw" of poor "translated" Bottom.

Mendelssohn might never have returned to his early masterpiece had not King Friedrich Wilhelm IV ascended the throne in Berlin upon the death of his father on June 7, 1840. Great reforms in all aspects of political and cultural life were expected from the new monarch, who wanted Mendelssohn to be in charge of his new plans. This meant moving from Leipzig, where he was happy with his work at the Gewandhaus, for undefined responsibilities in the capital. In the end, Mendelssohn arranged to receive only half-salary in Berlin so that he could retain the position in Leipzig as well. By 1843 the king expressed a wish that a series of dramatic productions with incidental music should be continued. Several productions were proposed; of these, Mendelssohn chose to expand his music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into a full score of incidental music, including entr'actes, dances, songs, and some brief melodramas (that is,

instrumental music that would accompany spoken parts of the play). In undertaking this task, he made the conscious decision to return to the overture, written when he was half his current age, and, whenever possible, use it as a basis for the expansion. He did this with wonderful skill and effectiveness, so that no one who did not happen to know the history of the work would ever guess that it was not created in a single act of the imagination.

The **Scherzo** introduces the second act; its feather-light, staccato woodwind dance anticipates the opening of Act II and the gathering of the fairies. A “march of the fairies” accompanies the entrance of the fairy king Oberon from one side of the stage and his queen, Titania, from the other. Titania bids her attendants “Sing me now asleep,” and they oblige with a lullaby, set by Mendelssohn as a **Song with Chorus** for women’s voices.

You spotted snakes, with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen;
Newts and blindworms, do no wrong,
Come not near our Fairy Queen.
Hence away, hence away!

Philomel, with melody
Sing in our sweet lullaby;
Lulla, lulla, lullaby; lulla, lulla, lullaby;
Never harm,
Nor spell nor charm
Come our lovely lady night.
So good night, with lullaby.

Weaving spiders, come not here;
Hence, you long-legged spinners, hence!
Beetles black, approach not near;
Worm nor snail, do no offense.

Philomel with melody, *etc.*
Hence away! Now all is well.
One aloof stand sentinel.

[Act II, scene 2]

The **Intermezzo** serves as an entr’acte between acts II and III; Mendelssohn begins with passionate music expressing the anguish of Hermia, who has awakened to find herself deserted by her beloved Lysander, but this fades away and yields to lightly comic material anticipating the rise of the curtain, when we will see the assembled rustics ready to rehearse their play in the woods.

The **Nocturne** suggests the picture of the sleeping lovers. Puck’s application of the love potion to the wrong parties has made a splendid mess of things, but by the end of Act III, all four of the lovers have been led a merry chase until they collapse in exhaustion. The solo horn evokes the tranquility of the woods and the lovers’ sleep, though intimations of foregoing passions still remain in the middle section. The brightening at the end suggests the soft approach of dawn’s light to prepare for the rise of the curtain on Act IV.

Theseus (Duke of Athens), Hippolyta (Queen of the Amazons), and Hermia’s father encounter the four lovers in the woods, with romantic sentiments once again properly directed. The Duke gives them permission to be married jointly with him on the day set for his own wedding to Hippolyta. The act ends with intimations of nuptials, signaled by its entr’acte, the **Wedding March**, probably the best-known piece Mendelssohn ever wrote.

During the final act, the rustics offer to present their play, guaranteed to be both “tedious and brief” as well as “merry and tragic.” Following the evening’s entertainment, all the mortals betake themselves to bed. A brief reprise of the Wedding March makes way for the return of the fairies. As Oberon and Titania appear, we hear again the four woodwind chords that opened the overture; the fairies trip in to spread their music and charms throughout the house.

Through this house give glimmering light,
By the dead and drowsy fire,
Every elf and fairy sprite
Hop as light as bird from brier.
And this ditty, after me,
Sing, and dance it trippingly.

First rehearse the song by rote,
To each word a warbling note.
Hand in hand, with fairy grace,

Will we sing, and bless this place.

Through this house give glimmering light, *etc.*

Then, at Oberon's command, the fairies trip away, leaving Puck to take his leave of the audience to the final sounding of the four magical woodwind chords.

—Steven Ledbetter