

**Mendelssohn: Symphonies Nos. 3 & 4 “Scottish”
+ Hebrides Overture**

Gardiner • London Symphony Orchestra



alto

Felix Mendelssohn

❶ *The Hebrides, Op. 26, MWV P7, "Fingal's Cave"* 10:02

Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, Op. 56 "Scottish"

❷ I. Andante con moto – Allegro un poco agitato –
Assai animato – Andante come prima 15:02

❸ II. Vivace non troppo 4:11

❹ III. Adagio 8:56

❺ IV. Allegro vivacissimo – Allegro maestoso assai 9:39

Symphony No. 4 in A Major, Op. 90 "Italian"

❻ I. Allegro vivace 10:10

❼ II. Andante con moto 5:42

❽ III. Con moto moderato 5:47

❾ IV. Saltarello. Presto 5:19

London Symphony Orchestra
Sir John Eliot Gardiner, conductor

On 10 April 1829 **Felix Mendelssohn** set out from Berlin for what was to be his first visit to the British Isles. His sea crossing from Hamburg took several days and was most unpleasant. It was therefore not until 21 April that he finally arrived in London, a city he was soon telling his family was both 'fearful' and 'mad' yet 'the grandest and most complicated monster on the face of the earth'. Once he had recovered from the rigours of his journey, Mendelssohn started to make the most of his time in London; visiting friends, going to hear Rossini's opera *Otello*, attending a debate in the House of Commons and taking part, both as conductor and pianist, in concerts promoted by the Philharmonic Society.

At the end of July, he and his friend Karl Klingemann left London for Edinburgh via York and Durham, both of them making delightful sketches of these cities on the way. They arrived in the Scottish capital on 28 July and were immediately struck by its grandeur. One of the places they visited during their short stay in the city was the Palace of Holyrood. Judging by his keenness to describe this experience to his family, Mendelssohn was obviously very moved by the memories of Mary Queen of Scots and of her Italian musician and secretary, David Rizzio. The revelant passage in his letter home reads as follows: *'In the evening twilight we went today to the palace where Queen Mary lived and loved; a little room is shown there with a winding staircase leading up to the door; up this way they came and found Rizzio in that little room, pulled him out, and three rooms off there is a dark corner, where they murdered him. The chapel close to it is now roofless, grass and ivy grow there, and at that broken altar Mary was crowned Queen of Scotland. Everything round is broken and mouldering and the bright sky shines in. I believe I found today in that old chapel the beginning of my Scotch Symphony.'*

After calling on Sir Walter Scott, the two travellers headed north for the Highlands and spent the first two weeks of August visiting many beauty spots, most famously 'Fingal's Cave' on the Island of Staffa.

Legend has it that Mendelssohn was so overwhelmed with the beauty and grandeur of the famous basalt pillars which form that

cave, that he composed the opening bars of what was to become his Hebrides Overture immediately on sighting them for the first time. Unfortunately, this seems not to have been the case for, on 7 August 1829, the day before he and his travelling companion, Karl Klingemann, made their journey by boat to see the cave, Mendelssohn wrote a letter to his family in which the opening bars of this work are quoted. Having headed the letter 'Auf einer Hebride' (On a Hebridean island), Mendelssohn explained to his parents that he was sending them the music in order to make them realize how extraordinarily the Hebrides had affected him. So it was the Hebrides in general and not the cave in particular that had inspired him. Indeed, Klingemann was later to remark that the turbulent seas on their journey to the cave had made Mendelssohn very ill and went on to describe his friend as being 'on better terms with the sea as a musician than as an individual with a stomach'. It was, therefore, more likely that it was the view towards the Hebrides which provided Mendelssohn with the inspiration for his overture and not the sight of the cave itself.

Mendelssohn was back in London by September where he injured his leg in a carriage accident and was confined to bed for two months. It was, therefore, not until the end of November that he was able to make the journey home to Berlin.

He was to return to this overture while in Vienna in August 1830 and he completed it in Rome in the December of that year. By then it had gone through several titles – notably *Die einsame Insel* ('The lonely island') and *Die Hebriden* ('The Hebrides') – but when it was given its first performance – by the Philharmonic Society in London on 14 May 1832 – it was given under the title *Overture to the Isles of Fingal*. When the piano duet version was eventually published in London and Leipzig in October 1833 it appeared as *Ouverture aux Hébrides* (Fingals Höhle), that is 'Overture, the Hebrides (Fingal's Cave)'. It seems that it was the publisher who had decided to include the reference to 'Fingal's Cave' in the title and not the composer.

The following May saw Mendelssohn off on his travels again, this time to Austria, Italy, Switzerland and France. Although he spent

many hours sight-seeing and making more sketches of the places he visited, he still found time to compose. Apart from completing his overture '*Fingal's Cave*' he also started work on a setting of a ballad by Goethe entitled *Die erste Walpurgisnacht* and on two symphonies. Of these symphonies it is not surprising that while staying in Italy he found it much easier to work on the one in A major that he was eventually to call the 'Italian' for, although he did make some progress with the A minor symphony, he soon put it aside claiming that Rome was not the place in which to recapture the 'misty mood' he had experienced in Scotland.

It would seem that this 'misty mood' took a long time to recapture for the '**Scottish' Symphony** was not completed until 1842. Mendelssohn gave the first performance on 3 March of that year in Leipzig and it proved an immediate success. Three months later the composer was back in London where, on 13 June, he conducted the new symphony for the Philharmonic Society and enjoyed another enthusiastic ovation for it. A week later, he found himself at Buckingham Palace as guest of the young Queen Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert. He played some of his *Songs without Words* to the royal couple and then improvised on some themes that they gave him for the purpose. He was invited back on 9 July and on that occasion he played the organ and accompanied both the Queen and the Prince as they sang some of his songs. (Apparently the Queen asked that her parrot be removed from the room for fear that 'he will scream louder than I sing'.) Before leaving the royal presence, Mendelssohn offered the dedication of his '*Scottish' Symphony* to the Queen and Her Majesty was pleased to accept it.

Although Mendelssohn had not found Rome conducive for work on his '*Scottish' Symphony*, he did compose there a setting of the *Ave Maria* whose opening bars he was later to quote in the coda to the symphony's final movement. It was, however, just the place in which to work on his '**Italian' Symphony**. In February 1831, Mendelssohn was reporting to his family 'rapid progress' with this piece, adding that 'it will be the jolliest piece I have so far written, especially the last movement. I have not yet decided on the *adagio* and think I shall reserve it for Naples'.

In 1832 the Philharmonic Society in London commissioned from Mendelssohn 'a symphony, an overture and a vocal piece'. The symphony that he offered the Society was this new one in A major and it received its first performance in London on 13 May 1833 during a concert at which Mendelssohn also played the solo part in Mozart's *Piano Concerto in D minor*, K466. Although composed during the winter months, this '*Italian' Symphony* is one of Mendelssohn's sunniest works. The first movement is high spirited from beginning to end and the *finale*, a lively *salterello* is bursting with energy. Between these comes an *andante* (rather than the intended *adagio*), which it is said was inspired by a procession of pilgrims (a not too solemn one, it would seem), and a *minuet*, in whose *trio* can be detected echoes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

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Sir John Eliot Gardiner (b. 1943) was educated at Bryanston School and King's College, Cambridge, where he read history before turning fully to music. He studied conducting with George Hurst and took an early interest in historically informed performance, founding the Monteverdi Choir in 1964. Acknowledged as a key figure in the early music revival, he later created the English Baroque Soloists and Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique, with whom he became a leading interpreter of Bach, Mozart, Berlioz and Beethoven. The extent of Gardiner's repertoire is illustrated by over 250 recordings he has made for major record companies. His recordings with the LSO cover complete symphonies of Mendelssohn and Schumann and were recorded during 3 seasons of live performances from 2014 - 2016 to great acclaim.

Sir John Eliot Gardiner's numerous awards and honours include Honorary doctorates from the University of Lyon and the New England Conservatory of Music, Honorary Fellowships of King's College London and of the Royal Academy of Music, Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, and Germany's Verdienstkreuz (first class). He received a knighthood in the 1998 Queen's Birthday Honours list.

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