

PROGRAM NOTES

Violin Concerto in E Minor, Op. 64

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809 – 1847)

Without Felix Mendelssohn, one might wonder if J.S. Bach's music will forever be forgotten. It was because of Mendelssohn's effort that Bach's music was once again performed in 1820 when he programmed his St. Matthew's Passion in one of his concerts that sparked the revival of public interest in the music of Bach.

Felix Mendelssohn was the son of Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn, and he has three other siblings including the famous woman composer, Fanny. He was brought up in Berlin and was surrounded by a cultured circle of family friends. His family organized concerts regularly at their home which gave Mendelssohn the opportunity to write music for various ensembles. It is widely believed that he wrote his string symphonies at this time between the ages of 12 – 14.

Even though Mendelssohn was a child prodigy, he did study with some prominent musicians of his time such as composition and counterpoint with Carl Friedrich Zelter (a person who had a tremendous influence on his development as a composer); and piano with Ludwig Berger. Although Mendelssohn was considered a composer in the Romantic period, his musical style is rather conservative because he favoured musical forms of the Classical period.

As for his musical employment, Mendelssohn received his first paid position as the music director in Düsseldorf in 1833. In 1835, he was named conductor and director of the Gewandhaus Orchestra, a post which Johannes Brahms also held in later years. He also founded the famed Leipzig Conservatory.

Violin Concerto in E minor was dedicated to the famous French composer Ferdinand David and he premiered this wonderful work in Leipzig in 1845. In a letter to David in 1838, Mendelssohn said, "I should like to write a violin concerto for you next winter. One in E minor runs through my head, the beginning of which gives me no peace." It has three technically challenging movements (fast-slow-fast) and is considered a major work in the violin repertoire together with the concertos of Brahms, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky.

Piano Concerto No. 23 in A Major, K. 488

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born on January 27, 1756 in Salzburg, Austria to Leopold and Anna Marie Mozart. At the time of Mozart's birth, Leopold was employed by the Archbishop of Salzburg as the vice-Kapellmeister of his orchestra. When Leopold realized that his son was a child prodigy, he decided to showcase Mozart's talents all over Europe. However, this did not help Mozart in securing a decent employment in the Viennese court later on in his life. In fact, at the time of his death, he was so deep in debt that he had to borrow money from his close friends to pay his bills. Mozart died on December 5, 1791; the cause of his death is unknown. During his lifetime, Mozart wrote over 600 compositions including 27 piano concerti, 5 violin concerti, numerous operas such as *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute*, 41 symphonies, several sonatas for piano and violin, and his final work, *The Requiem*.

According to Mozart's own records, his *Piano Concerto No. 23 in A Major* was completed on March 2, 1786 (the same year that he finished writing the opera, *Marriage of Figaro*) and most likely premiered by himself in the spring. It has three movements and followed the Italian concerto structure: Fast-Slow-Fast. It is scored for one flute, two clarinets, two bassoons, two French horns and orchestral strings.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major, Op. 15

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany in 1770 to a family of seven children and died in Vienna in 1827. Over 20,000 Viennese attended Beethoven's funeral; one of the torchbearers was Franz Schubert, who was buried beside him a year later in 1828. Beethoven's father was his first teacher and he made his first public performance at age seven in 1778 in Cologne. He later studied with Gottlob Neefe, Haydn, Albrechtsberger, Salieri, among others, and quickly gained a reputation as a virtuoso pianist. Knowing how Leopold Mozart exploited Mozart, Beethoven's father, Johann, also attempted to do the same but without success. Beethoven was never married but there is no doubt that he had had a few romantic relationships during his life time. During the late 1790's, Beethoven noticed that there was a problem with his hearing but was unsuccessful in finding a cure. Although no one knew for certain his actual cause of death, some of the medicine that he had taken contained so much lead that there was common belief that he died of lead-poisoning.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major was completed in 1791 and was dedicated to Beethoven's pupil, Anna Louise Keglevic, Countess of Bratislava. It was premiered in Prague in 1798 with Beethoven as the soloist. It consists of three movements and is scored for flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two French horns, two trumpets, timpani and orchestral strings.

The Largo movement is in ternary (ABA) form, which means the music in the first and last sections are similar but with contrasting new themes in the middle (B) section. The third movement is a Rondo, a musical form that is characterized by a repeating main theme with several episodes of new musical materials (ABACABA). What is unique about this movement is that Beethoven has written two cadenzas instead of the usual one. A cadenza is a brief interlude of music found in concertos where the soloist is given an opportunity to show off his/her skills and virtuosity.

Piano Concerto No. 4 in D Minor, Op. 70

Anton Grigorevich Rubinstein (1829 – 1894)

Anton Grigorevich Rubinstein was born on November 16, 1829 into a Russian-Jewish family. He and his brother, Nikolai, both studied composition and theory with Siegfried Dehn. Rubinstein gave his first concert at the age of nine and achieved a reputation of being a rival to Franz Liszt, a great Hungarian piano virtuoso of the same period. In 1848, Rubinstein was hired by the Tsar's brother in St. Petersburg, Russia and worked there until 1862 when he and his brother Nicholai established the St. Petersburg Conservatory; the first of its kind in Russia. Notable students from the conservatory included Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Sergei Rachmaninoff.

Although Rubinstein has established himself as a piano virtuoso in Europe, he always felt that he was an outsider. He once lamented that "*To the Christians, I am a Jew; to the Jews, I am a Christian; to the Russians, I am a German; to the Germans, I am a Russian.*"

Rubinstein passed away on November 20, 1894 in St. Petersburg of heart failure. His body was interred in the Necropolis of the Masters of Arts at St. Aleksander Nevsky Monastery next to Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. In honouring his contribution to Russian music, the street in St. Petersburg where he was born was named after him as was the main concert hall of St. Petersburg Conservatory – The Rubinstein Hall.

Rubinstein has written five piano concertos but *Concerto No. 4 in D Minor* is the most performed. Even though he completed the work in 1864, it was not until 1872 that he was finally satisfied with it after three revisions. It was dedicated to Ferdinand David, the same dedicatee of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor. This piano concerto is considered as a "pianist's" concerto by some scholars because of its challenging scales and arpeggios, powerful chords and virtuosic passages throughout the entire piece. There is some notion that Tchaikovsky might have used this concerto as the model of his Piano Concerto No. 1.

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