

PROGRAM NOTES

Felix Mendelssohn - Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64

By Susan Swinburne

An astonishing musical prodigy turned wildly prolific composer as well as a highly regarded pianist and conductor, Felix Mendelssohn is known today as much for having died too young, at 38 (apocryphally attributed to a bicycling accident, but in truth a result of a series of strokes), as for his remarkable body of work. Among his many gifts to music lovers is one of the most riveting and innovative violin concertos of the Romantic period, his Violin Concerto in E minor.

Performing Mendelssohn's virtuosic masterwork is a rite of passage for aspiring violinists, in no small part due to the many "Firsts" associated with his deeply soulful tour de force.

The first "First" was his close compositional collaboration with his childhood friend, Ferdinand David, a skilled and successful violinist whom Mendelssohn appointed as Concertmaster when he became conductor of Leipzig's Gewandhaus Orchestra in 1835. Not only did Mendelssohn dedicate the concerto to his friend, the composer consulted him often throughout the work's six-year gestation from its earliest percolating ideas in 1838 to its premiere by David in 1944. Mendelssohn was not a violinist and relied heavily on David's advice and technical knowledge during the long years of composition.

Another "first" is the work's unexpected continuity between movements. Mendelssohn boldly deviated from the established practice of pausing between movements, when audiences expected to applaud, and instead constructed transitional bridges so that the piece shifts directly from one movement to the next without a break for rest (or applause).

This concerto includes a fully composed cadenza for the very first time, likely another of the many elements of this work influenced by the collaboration with Ferdinand David. Before this concerto's premiere, composers had always left the cadenza to the improvisatory discretion of the soloist. Mendelssohn here takes matters into his own hands, for the first time prescribing the virtuosic display in minute detail. Thereafter, following his trailblazing model, fewer and fewer composers left the cadenza to the soloist to improvise, and today this practice has virtually disappeared.

And last, there is this delightful factoid from the Library of Congress: The very first long-playing disc recording, or "LP" (spinning at 33 1/3 RPM) was produced in June 1948 by Columbia Records. What classical piece of music launched the new age of the LP? It was a recording of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor featuring the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Bruno Walter, with Nathan Milstein as soloist.

So, listeners can thank Mendelssohn and David, Walter and Milstein, and this stunning masterpiece for seven-plus decades of vinyl pleasure emanating from their turntables.