

**Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 21**  
**Selections from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 61**

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

B. February 3, 1809, Hamburg, Germany  
D. November 4, 1847, Leipzig, Germany.

*Scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, continuo, cymbals and strings (Overture approx. 11 minutes; Selections approx. 19 minutes).*

Felix Mendelssohn was an astoundingly brilliant composer and performer, a child prodigy who grew up to become one of the most broadly educated, well-traveled, sensitive musicians of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was the grandson of the famed Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn. In 1829, he conducted a historic performance of J. S. Bach's neglected century-old B-minor Mass, largely reviving public interest in Bach's music among 19<sup>th</sup>-century audiences.

In 1825, the Mendelssohn family moved into a spacious new home in Berlin, whose adjoining garden became the site of fanciful games and adventures for the 16-year old Felix and his sister, Fanny. The following year, he began work there on the piece that most closely represents its verdant environment, the magical overture, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Shakespeare's plays were first translated into German at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and these translations were re-issued in 1825, possibly prompting Mendelssohn's inspiration to compose the overture. Only on the second draft did the young composer come up with a piece properly alluding to the myriad events in Shakespeare's woodland fantasy of mismatched lovers, mischievous fairies, clowning simpletons and quarreling royalty. But the finished product has always been considered an inspired blend of formal perfection, descriptive content, joyous melody and astute orchestration.

As many as six themes have been identified making up the exposition of its sonata form: the opening woodwind chords, signifying the mysterious forest; a quick, bouncing staccato theme in the upper strings describing the fairies; a martial, full-orchestra theme for the entrance of Theseus and his courtiers; a song-like theme for the lovers; a rustic theme for Bottom and his clownish companions; and finally, a horn-call theme for the royal hunting party. Several of these themes are imaginatively developed, restated and neatly packaged in a dainty coda to the overture.

At the overture's first performance in 1827, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was purely a concert piece, unattached to any stage production. Mendelssohn did not have occasion to write his remaining pieces of incidental music to Shakespeare's play until 1842 when he served as music director of the newly established Berlin Academy of Arts under the Prussian king, Frederick Wilhelm IV. A dozen additional numbers were added to the overture and the acclaimed production, which opened Oct. 14, 1843, was one of the happier moments of Mendelssohn's artistically unsatisfying years at the Prussian court.

The chief numbers include four entr'actes composed to separate the five acts of Shakespeare's fantasy about quarreling Titania and Oberon, the misadventures of four

young lovers, the antics of dim-witted clowns and the mischievous Puck. The feathery Scherzo precedes Puck's conversation with the Fairy at the beginning of Act Two and is noteworthy for its wispy concluding flute solo depicting the fairy's effortless flight. The form of the movement is that of a teasing rondo whose main theme keeps returning in altered shapes.

The Nocturne elaborates upon that magical moment at the end of Act Three, when Puck has again coaxed the four confused lovers back to sleep, has sorted out their mixed-up affections and redistributes his love pollens correctly among them. The deep mystery of the German forest is evoked in the opening horn melody, a magical moment when Mendelssohn's resourceful orchestration is evident in pairing the horns with the bassoons, which absorb some of their warm, brassy tone. The end of the Nocturne depicts daybreak and the awakening of the four lovers at the beginning of Act Four.

The final entr'acte, the joyous and familiar Wedding March, picks up on Theseus's speech at the end of Act Four, inviting the properly reunited lovers to join him and Hippolyta in a triple wedding ceremony. In the century and a half since it was first heard, the Wedding March has probably united millions of couples in marriage, but because of their hasty retreat out the church door, few wedding-goers have heard the many different musical verses Mendelssohn composed between the march's stirring refrain.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed portions of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on February 25, 2006 with DSO Resident Conductor Thomas Wilkins conducting.

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Mendelssohn, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Overture, Paul Paray conducting the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Mercury Living Presence 434396.