

## ***The Hebrides Overture, Op. 26, “Fingal’s Cave”***

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

B. February 3, 1809 in Hamburg, Germany

D. November 4, 1847 in Leipzig, Germany

*First performed on 14 May 1832 in London by Thomas Attwood (or possibly the composer) and the Philharmonic Society.*

*Scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. (approx. 10 minutes)*

For “Fingal’s Cave,” the 20-year old Felix Mendelssohn was seemingly struck by a bout of anticipatory inspiration. On a summer trip in 1829 to the Hebrides of Scotland, he sketched the opening of the overture on the day *before* his visit to the Isle of Staffa, home of an astounding basalt formation dubbed “Fingal’s Cave.”

Fingal, the hero of a third-century Gaelic epic, became the object of international attention when his saga was “translated” and published by Scottish poet James MacPherson in 1761. (The formation Fingal’s Cave was named later in 1772). Although the authenticity of MacPherson’s purported sources was challenged immediately, this did prevent his work from capturing the imagination of writers, painters, and composers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including Goethe, Schubert, and J.M.W. Turner, who painted *Staffa, Fingal’s Cave* in 1832, the same year that Mendelssohn’s concert overture received its première. It is possible that MacPherson’s literary work, including the prefatory ode, may have provided as much inspiration for Mendelssohn as the actual location:

*Imagination, mighty power!  
Where dost thou guide my roving mind?  
By time, by distance unconfin’d  
On Fancy’s rapid wings I fly  
To Morven’s coast, where mountains tower,  
And break the clouds that roll on high.  
Before my view the dark-brown heath extends,  
From reed-crown’d lakes the creeping mists exhale:  
Down the rock bursting, the rude stream descends,  
And foams along the solitary vale.  
Cona, thy waters murmur in my ear!  
Selma, thy halls unfold!  
There sits FINGAL: — the chiefs of old  
Gaze on the ruler of the war...*

Whatever the source of Mendelssohn’s moody opening, the rest of the overture was not as speedily produced. Mendelssohn did not complete the work until December of 1830 in Rome - a setting quite apart from the isolated Scottish islands. Far from satisfied

with this initial version, the composer deemed it superficial and academic: “The forte, D-major middle section is very silly and the entire so-called development tastes more of counterpoint than of whale oil, seagulls and salted cod - and it ought to be the other way around. But I like the piece too much to have it performed imperfectly...” After considerable revisions were made, the overture was finally premiered in London in 1832, where its dusky hues contrasted sharply with the Rossini aria that preceded it.

“Fingal’s Cave” opens with a mesmerizing rhythmic figure that transforms a delicately embellished downward arpeggio into an undulating melody. As this theme unfolds in a gloomy B minor, extended crescendos and diminuendos in the winds and brass give the impression of ocean swells. The opening theme gradually gives way to an exquisitely lyrical statement sung by cellos and bassoons. Though the melody is set in the major mode, the darker timbres give this emotive passage a distinct melancholy character that complements the opening theme. A fanfare heralds the end of the work’s thematic exposition and it is with these martial, brassy tones that Mendelssohn may allude, as musicologist R. Larry Todd has suggested, to the heroic exploits of Fingal.

In contrast to Mendelssohn’s overture for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1826), in which mysterious and shadowy musical utterances are balanced with lively, enthusiastic melodies, *Fingal’s Cave* is more introspective throughout. When, for example, the lyrical secondary theme returns in the overture’s recapitulation, it is rescored for two clarinets, creating a sound that is distilled, clear, and fragile as a recollected memory. The overture’s conclusion is especially well wrought—the opening melodic figure returns in the clarinet, only to waft away on the gentle breeze of a solo flute.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Mendelssohn’s *The Hebrides Overture*, Op. 26, “Fingal’s Cave,” on October 11, 2004 with Resident Conductor Thomas Wilkins conducting.

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*Program note by Nathan Platte, doctoral candidate in musicology with a focus on film music at the University of Michigan.*