

## **Symphony No. 4 in A major, Op. 90 (“Italian”)**

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

B: February 3, 1809, Hamburg, Germany

D: November 4, 1847, Leipzig, Germany

*Premiered on May 13, 1833 in London with the composer conducting.*

*Scored for two flutes, two oboes, three clarinets, two bassoons, two trumpets, two horns, timpani and strings (approx. 26 minutes).*

In May 1830 the young Mendelssohn set out from his family home in Berlin on what he called “the great trip,” from which he did not return until June 1832. It was Goethe who suggested that expedition, and early in its course Mendelssohn called on him at Weimar for the last time. (Goethe died there in March 1832.) In those twenty-five months he went to several German cities, traveled through Italy, met Chopin in Paris, and made the second of his ten visits to London. He was a talented painter, and brought back his impressions in the form of watercolors and drawings as well as music.

While in Italy Mendelssohn conceived his Italian Symphony and began working on it. He completed the score on March 13, 1833, and conducted the work’s premiere in London exactly two months later. Paganini, who was present, was so pleased to hear one of his own pieces quoted in the new symphony, and so taken by Mendelssohn’s performance of Mozart’s D minor Piano Concerto, that he proposed that he and Mendelssohn team up to perform all the Beethoven sonatas for piano and violin. (That did not happen, but in the following year Paganini commissioned another sort of “Italian Symphony,” Berlioz’s *Harold in Italy*.) Although the premiere was a huge success (the second movement had to be repeated), Mendelssohn had some misgivings about the finale, and he withheld the score from publication for years in order to make revisions; the final version was not published or performed until after his death. (That was how it came to be assigned the number 4 instead of 2, which would have been its chronological position among his mature symphonies.)

Apart from the locale of its conception, the only conspicuously Italian factor in this symphony would seem to be the movement Mendelssohn felt he had to brush up. The finale is the only one of the four movements based on an Italian musical form: the dance called the *saltarello*. Though some scholars have insisted that the music Mendelssohn labeled a saltarello is really a tarantella, it may be noted that there are two real saltarello themes in this finale, possibly drawn from Neapolitan folk material. Another genuine Italian theme he used in this movement is the one that so pleased Paganini: that of the ninth of his twenty-four Caprices for unaccompanied violin - the one in E minor, called *La Chasse* - which Mendelssohn assigned to the flute.

The second movement of this symphony bears a curious similarity to the corresponding section of the parenthetically aforementioned *Harold in Italy*. Mendelssohn’s slow movement, possibly inspired by a religious procession the young composer witnessed in Naples, has even been “unofficially” given the same title Berlioz affixed to his: “March of the Pilgrims.”

Questions of derivation and coincidence aside, the aptness of this symphony's sobriquet seems amply justified by the impetuous sunburst that opens the work, by the warm southern lyricism of the third movement (evidently inspired by Goethe's light-hearted poem "Lilis Park"), and by the sheer songfulness that pervades the entire score—as well as the direct inspiration of simply "being there," which Mendelssohn himself acknowledged

The repetition of the exposition in the first movement of a symphony was for many years considered a mere formal tradition, to be written in but not actually observed in performance. Mendelssohn, however, evidently felt strongly that the repeat should be taken in this work, for he composed a twenty-three-bar passage specifically to lead back to the beginning of the exposition. Leonard Slatkin does take the repeat, allowing this lovely section, which otherwise would go unheard, to add a bit of substance and perhaps even provide a sense of discovery in this much loved work.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra first performed Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 4 on Nov. 24, 1916, with Weston Gales conducting. The DSO last performed the piece Oct. 15, 2005, with Jaime Laredo conducting.

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*Program note by Richard Freed.*