

Felix Mendelssohn

(1809-1847)

**CONCERTO IN
E MINOR
(OPUS 64)**

Played by

Fritz Kreisler

and the

London Philharmonic Orchestra

Conducted by

Sir Landon Ronald



M-277

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The Mendelssohn Violin Concerto

BETWEEN the two mighty landmarks of the romantic violin concerto—the Beethoven and the Brahms' concertos in D—stands this concerto by Mendelssohn, somewhat more delicately conceived, though, in every way, as brilliantly executed. Taken together; this trio of concertos forms a unity, sharing in common the stress and the fervor of the 19th Century romantic spirit, and a violin technique more broad and full sounding than the classical Mozart models. Yet there are differences considerable enough to define the Mendelssohn concerto from the concertos of Beethoven and Brahms. The Mendelssohn concerto is perhaps the most violinistic of the three, in that it lies most easily to the hand. (The pains which Mendelssohn took to make it so will appear further on.) All three concertos were written by men of "feeling," though Mendelssohn's minor mood is apt to be refined where Beethoven is deeply troubled; and where Mendelssohn's passion is eased with a good mixture of melancholy, Brahms maintains always a rugged, unweeping grandeur. Of the three, Mendelssohn, for his delicacy and refinement, approaches most often the classicism of the preceding century. Indeed, if we do not press the comparison too literally, we may follow Schumann's description of him as the "Mozart of the 19th Century."

Schumann held the highest opinion of Mendelssohn and exalted in him those very virtues which are most evident in this concerto. "It is really a fact, dear Mendelssohn," he writes to him (October 22, 1845), "no one writes such pure harmonies, and they keep getting purer and more inspired." Because of his sincerity and his complete mastery of musical form, Mendelssohn was a welcome addition to Schumann's band of heroes

who fought the musical philistinism of the time. Mendelssohn did not possess Schumann's journalistic ability, his capacity for polemic, or his many-sided literary style. Mendelssohn's sole weapon was musical creation and this he wielded effectively, together with Schumann, in the battle against those who saw in art only "the good cow that provides them with butter."

Although this is the only violin concerto which Mendelssohn ever published, we know that in his youth he made a few attempts in that form. This concerto, though dated on the score September 16, 1844, and composed for the most part during that year, occupied Mendelssohn intermittently for a period of six years. As early as July 30, 1838, in a letter to Ferdinand David (the violinist to whom the concerto is dedicated and whose professional advice Mendelssohn found invaluable in the writing of the concerto), he writes: "I should like to write a violin concerto for you next winter. One in E minor runs in my head, the beginning of which gives me no peace." A year later, we hear the decision that the whole of the first solo is to be on the high E. He describes the concerto as swimming about in his head in a shapeless condition, with a genial day or two necessary to bring it into shape. The first draft may possibly have been made at Soden near Frankfort where Mendelssohn was taking a well-earned rest after the somewhat hectic though triumphant visit to England. From one biographer (Lampadius) we learn that it was here that he first played it on the piano for Moscheles.

Perhaps more than anything else, this concerto owes its popularity with budding violin virtuosi to its extreme playableness, to the ease with which the violin part can be made to lie under the player's hand. Mendelssohn was, of all things, most especially concerned with achieving just this "playableness" and "ease." From David, his guide in the intricacies of violin technique, he is constantly making inquiries concerning the ease with which one passage or another can be played. For

example, concerning the cadenza: “. . . is it playable and correctly noted? I want the arpeggios to begin at once in strict time and in four parts up to the tutti. I hope this will not be too exacting for the performer. . . .” Again, he asks: “Is the alteration at the end of the first movement easy to play?” This matter of being “easy to play” was almost of first importance with Mendelssohn. His reiteration of the phrase is continual. “Is the return to C major, without the flute, quite easy to play now?” he asks, and then with insistence: “Really quite easy, so that it could be executed with the greatest delicacy.” And finally, to make sure that his concerto was not lacking in any violinistic accomplishment, he instructs David to “please alter the end of the first movement entirely according to your wish.”

The music of this concerto is unquestionably too well known to require an extended formal analysis. After a one bar introduction the principal subject of the first movement appears in the solo violin. A subsidiary theme which appears frequently, and the second subject in the relative key of G major, complete the lovely trio of themes in this movement. The second theme will be recognized by its introduction in the woodwinds over a long “g” held as a pedal-point by the solo violin. The first movement glides into the second via a lovely, faintly mysterious transition passage which is one of the most beautiful moments in the concerto.

The second movement features two themes: the first, with which the movement opens, graceful and sweet; the second more troubled, almost agitated. The third movement runs briskly along, taking in its stride three deservedly famous and popular melodies which the listener will readily identify.

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