

Program Notes

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Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750):

Concerto in D Minor for Two Violins, Strings & Continuo, BWV 1043 (ca. 1720)

The music director at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, Germany, 1723-1750, was a keyboard technician and an exceptional organist. He had a wide hand span and powerful, pedal-pumping legs. He'd even use a stick in his mouth to reach more notes. Praise his virtuosity and he'd just say, "There is nothing remarkable about it. All you have to do is hit the right key at the right time, and the instrument plays itself."

Nothing remarkable about his job either. He organized music for the four principal churches of Leipzig, formed choirs of students from the St. Thomas school, taught singing and Latin lessons, rehearsed ensembles, and provided music for various ceremonies and events around town.

He wrote weekly cantatas in his first several years there, then added the enjoyable job of directing the Collegium Musicum. Hardly any of his music was published during his lifetime, and he didn't expect it to be. The music was for an immediate purpose. That was the gig.

So what would Johann Sebastian Bach have said if he'd been informed that two centuries into the future he'd be regarded as the greatest composer who ever lived? Or that shortly thereafter, three of his ditties would be launched into the heavens in the Voyager spacecraft along with record-playing equipment? (Hopefully whoever finds them will have ears.) We imagine him glancing skyward for a moment and then saying, "Sounds about right."

We string players thank the heavens that before Leipzig, Herr Bach had a stint in Cöthen as Capellmeister for the 25-year-old Prince Leopold, an aficionado of the harpsichord, violin, and viola da gamba who loved nothing more than jammin' with his Court musicians, treating them as his equals.

Bach's Concerto in D Minor for Two Violins may or may not be a direct product of that freewheelin' composition period, but it certainly is in spirit. The equal solo voices sound off and converse, gloat and poke, sing and support, and tease in tandem.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847):

Symphony No. 4 "Italian" (1833)

"**Bright, sunny, laughing freshness.**" Care for a sip of that? You've come to the right place. (The outstanding 256-page book about Mendelssohn's 4th Symphony by John Michael Cooper boils it down to those four fun words.)

Whether or not you've given it thought, if you love symphonic music for its dramatic range of sound, complex harmony and expression, and emotional, even erratic, intensity, then you're in love with music of the Romantic era. It's chiefly from the 19th century but was ushered in by Classical masters (read: Beethoven), consists of three sprawling stretches of development, and is cherished for its range of volume and orchestration, expanded tonality, and unprecedented heights of expression.

Beat your aesthetic chest! Get into a tonal tizzy! Sound your barbaric yawp over the staid stylistic roofs of the world!

Or...just *sparkle*. With Mendelssohn, you get all of the above. You get the punch and pizzazz, but always endowed with glistening grace.

Can you imagine your dad telling you upon your 21st birthday to get outta town? That's what Felix's dad did. He encouraged his son to go on a series of travels, learn from the wider world, grow and share his gifts. Thanks, Dad! (And thanks for being a successful banker and paying for it all, Dad!)

Wouldn't you send Dad a postcard of appreciation? Well, no, of course you wouldn't. You would send **selfies** from Venice, Rome, Naples, Pompeii, Genoa and Milan, sure! And so did Felix Mendelssohn: one single, sunny selfie (in four movements) that has delighted the world ever since.

After a long, belabored introduction (haha, **not**), the first movement breaks out with such energy, you'd swear Felix was on a cycling team. In the *Andante con moto* second movement, we're *walking with motion* in thoughtful reflection. Our stroll then enters a formal garden – the formal structure of a minuet and trio – gentle menagerie and puckish glee. Dissolving in a hush, we then bound into the finale's *Saltarello* paired with a tarantella: dances of southern Italy, spry then exhilarating. Yep, Felix had a ball in Italy!

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957):

Violin Concerto in D Minor, Op. 47 (1902-1904, rev. 1905)

With the polar bear classified as Vulnerable by the Endangered Species Act, the Sibelius Violin Concerto is of greater relevance than ever.

The most celebrated composer of Finland did not originally wish to be a composer. His dearest wish and overriding ambition, as he put it, was to be a violin virtuoso. But though he got to play in the Vienna Conservatory orchestra when he was a student there, his late start (age 14) and audition hives shoved him to the other side of the music stand.

Lucky for us! Instead of storming the stage himself, Jean Sibelius composed a concerto that has stirred souls for generations. Some famous concerti are written with a particular soloist in mind, and this is certainly one of them: it's just what *he* would have wanted to perform. (Little wonder that he hemmed and hawed over who would premier it. And from what we've read, we would expect to see liquor and lobster stains all over the original manuscript.)

When do you know you're hearing something amazing: when you hear a soft entrance that's dissonant and off the beat? (No, that's how you tell it's a viola player. KIDDING.) Seven seconds in, the ethereal solo voice alights from a dream world into our own. Or turns our world into a dream world. Whichever the case, the solo voice has much to say. It never goes sit in the corner. No jovial jaunts with string-section homies, no banal back-and-forth's with the woodwinds and brass. The solo violin dishes out profound discourse. Subdues, propels and commands the orchestra. The first-movement cadenza turns the opening theme into a paradigm shift of musical space and time. Such solo-voice dominance by one of the greatest symphonists of the 20th century! At the beginning of the second movement, the clarinets and oboes create a simple door through which the solo violin enters and speaks expansive truth in warm, familiar terms. It's perhaps the loveliest melody Sibelius ever wrote.

Back to our opening remark, we annotators can't resist musicologist Donald Francis Tovey's description of the third movement. He called it "**a polonaise for polar bears.**" But make no mistake, Tovey loved it. And so will you!