

## ASO Program Notes

# Violin concerto in E Minor

Felix Mendelssohn (1809 - 1847)

In 1838 Felix Mendelssohn wrote to the German violinist, Ferdinand David, telling him that he would like to compose a violin concerto for him “next winter.” The two had been boyhood friends, born in the same neighborhood in Hamburg eleven months apart. They remained close friends, working together and sharing musical projects well into adulthood. David was pleased at the prospect of this new concerto, but the work was not finished until the fall of 1844.

Throughout the process David was consulted for technical advice and reassurance that it was suitable for solo violin, although Mendelssohn was himself an accomplished violinist. One biographer noted that “Mendelssohn was the architect and David his technical advisor.” The result was Mendelssohn’s most mature work, premiered in March of 1845, and David said that it “pleased extraordinarily well” its earliest audiences.

The concerto is novel in that it opens with the violin entering immediately, rather than following an orchestral preview as was typical of Classical-era works. The violin proceeds through a masterpiece of key changes, minor to major shifts and a three-octave span. The three movements are melodically connected and flow into one another without pause, another novel feature. This makes the transition between movements very important and Mendelssohn handles these masterfully. The first movement ends with a single bassoon note, linking it to the slow movement and it in turn ends with a passage of about a dozen notes signaling its end and preparing the listener for the finale. The finale is a dazzling display of virtuosity in which the soloist covers the whole instrument and ends in a high E flat that sends the listener soaring. The orchestra is a provider of accompaniment and structure, but the brilliance and detail of the orchestral score shows how important that accompaniment was to the composer.

The Violin Concerto in E minor was composed at a point in Mendelssohn’s career when his skills were seen as diminishing. His masterpieces had primarily been produced in his teens. Even the *Italian* and *Scottish* symphonies had not been as popular as his earlier works. This new work, however, was seen as a return to his earlier brilliance. Its warm reception seemed to promise more such compositions in the future. It was, sadly, Mendelssohn’s last orchestral work. He died two years later, at the age of 38. Interestingly, Ferdinand David’s violin, a priceless Guarnerius del Gesu named “the David” and the one believed to have been played when this Mendelssohn concerto was introduced, is still played each week by the concertmaster of the San Francisco Symphony.

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