

# *Tafelmusik*

## Sizzling Strings

### PROGRAMME NOTES

This week's programme was inspired by the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Felix Mendelssohn. Musicologist Karl-Heinz Köhler describes Mendelssohn as "one of the most naturally gifted musicians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century," and he displayed these gifts from a remarkably early age. He was arguably as prodigious a pianist and composer as Mozart before him, but his parents chose a different childhood for their son. Rather than parading his talents around the courts and concert halls of Europe, they kept him at home and concentrated on a comprehensive education. The Mendelssohn home was a remarkable one: Felix's paternal grandfather was the great philosopher of the Enlightenment, Moses Mendelssohn, and the family house was host to many of Germany's leading thinkers and artists. Felix's well-to-do parents provided a strong intellectual, cultural and artistic education, and the young Felix exhibited talent not just for music, but also for poetry and visual art. At the age of ten, Felix's musical education was expanded to include the study of composition and theory with Carl Friedrich Zelter, principal of the Berlin Singakademie, at the suggestion of his maternal great-aunt Sarah Levy. Levy was a celebrated harpsichordist, a student of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach and friend of his brother Carl Philipp. (Her collection of Bach family manuscripts forms the basis of the great Bach collection at the Singakademie.) Her choice of Zelter was to prove significant in forming Mendelssohn's style as a composer. Zelter insisted on careful and thorough study of the works of baroque and classical composers, music that appealed to Mendelssohn and to which he would continue to turn throughout his life. Early homework assignments included numerous small keyboard pieces and two short Singspiels. By 1721, Zelter determined that his 12-year-old pupil was ready to tackle larger forms, and assigned him the task of composing several symphonies for string orchestra. By the following year he was ready to tackle concertos, writing a Concerto for piano in A Minor and a Concerto for violin in D Minor, both scored for solo instrument with string orchestra. The symphonies and concertos were very much in the style of Mozart and his contemporaries. They were performed at concerts at the Mendelssohn home by a private orchestra, led from the keyboard by Felix, with the intellectual elite of Berlin in attendance.

Mendelssohn went on to a very successful career, not only as composer, but also as conductor and educator. He became director of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig, and where in previous generations orchestral music was directed by the leader from the violin or keyboard, Mendelssohn was among the first to establish the new tradition of conducting symphonies and concertos. He insisted on orchestral players receiving decent salaries, and on showcasing the leading soloists of the day. His programming was revolutionary, combining the performance of contemporary works with those of the past. He famously revived interest in the works of J.S. Bach, and championed the oratorios of Handel, and the symphonies of Mozart and Beethoven. He premiered Schubert's C-Major Symphony, the manuscript of which had been found by Schumann ten years after Schubert's death. His work as composer and conductor was popular in Britain as well as Germany, and the style of his own compositions remained more classical than romantic throughout his life. In 1843 he founded the Leipzig Conservatory, assembling a remarkable faculty, and devoting a great deal of time and thought to the establishment of a comprehensive system of music training.

His legacy is undeniable, but his renown quickly diminished after his death. This was in no small part due to anti-Semitism, fuelled initially by Wagner. Almost a century later, the Nazis destroyed the Mendelssohn memorial in Leipzig and banned all performances and publications of his works. Another factor contributing to the wane in Mendelssohn's popularity in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the increasingly romantic trend in performance: the expansive approach did not serve Mendelssohn's elegant, classically proportioned works well. Thankfully, recent years have seen a revival of interest in Mendelssohn both as composer and musician.

Period-instrument ensembles are especially enjoying this Mendelssohn year, celebrating the man who introduced 'early' music to his audiences and did so much to keep Bach's and Handel's music alive. This summer we explored some of Mendelssohn's best-known music with Bruno Weil at the Klang und Raum Festival: the Hebrides Overture, Scottish Symphony and the E-Minor Violin Concerto. This week we look to a few of his very earliest works for string orchestra, those written for his teacher at ages 12 and 13, and pair these, as Mendelssohn might have done himself, with works for string orchestra by earlier composers.

Arcangelo Corelli was among the first composers to write music for the orchestra independent of the opera, the dance and the church. A highly skilled violinist, Corelli arrived in Rome at the age of 20 to play in the numerous orchestras in the city. He quickly rose to the position of leader, and his fame spread throughout Europe. Corelli's orchestra was renowned for its "uncommon accuracy" and flawless intonation. Said to be the first Italian to insist on uniform bowing in the string sections, Corelli was a strict orchestra leader and insisted on extensive rehearsal. In his compositions for orchestra Corelli turned to the

concerto grosso, a form with which the Roman composer Stradella had begun experimenting. It was based on the popular form of the trio sonata for two violins and continuo, to which was added a four-part orchestra: when the two groups played in alternation a wonderful chiaroscuro was created. It was an ideal vehicle for combining virtuosity, supplied by the solo or concertino trio, and richness of sonority, supplied by the supporting orchestra. Corelli started composing and performing concerti grossi as early as 1670, but only 12 were ever published, and those posthumously, as Opus 6, in 1714. Their publication had long been awaited throughout Europe, and provided the model for many composers of the late baroque, but their simplicity, classical proportions and utterly idiomatic string writing were never entirely surpassed. In a very fitting tribute, the anniversary of Corelli's death was marked for many years by the performance of the Opus 6 concertos in the Pantheon, where the composer was buried.

If Corelli was the master of the concerto grosso, the Venetian Antonio Vivaldi was the master of the baroque solo concerto, in which a soloist plays virtuosic or expressive passages accompanied by a string orchestra. Vivaldi wrote some 500 concertos, and although the majority are for solo instrument(s) and orchestra, he also experimented with other possibilities, among them the so-called "ripieno concerto," in which the orchestra performs without any soloist or concertino group – in essence, it is the string orchestra itself that is the soloist. Vivaldi's orchestra at the Pietà in Venice was renowned across Europe, not only because its players were all female, but also because it was an extraordinarily polished ensemble, and these concertos would have been an ideal vehicle to show off its abilities. Many of Vivaldi's concertos were published by Roger in Amsterdam for circulation throughout Europe; others were circulated in manuscript form by travelling musicians. J.S. Bach was a particular fan of Vivaldi's concertos, transcribing several for keyboard.

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach wrote 19 symphonies, eight of them scored for string orchestra. Six of the latter were commissioned by Baron Gottfried van Swieten, Austrian ambassador to the Prussian court, in 1773. Van Swieten was very active and influential in Viennese musical circles, presenting concerts at his Viennese Academies and Aristocratic Concerts (Haydn, Mozart and eventually Beethoven were frequent participants). Bach was employed in Hamburg as Director of Music, and van Swieten travelled to Hamburg expressly to see Bach. Before the symphonies were handed over to van Swieten they were played through at the house of Professor Büsch in Hamburg. The violinist J.F. Reichardt led the ensemble on this occasion and wrote: "the original, bold concepts, the wide variety of forms and modulations as well as their novel treatment were received with enthusiasm." These works bridge the baroque concerto and classical symphony, and as such directly influenced the works of Mozart.