

Beethoven & Mendelssohn Epics

Overture to *The Italian Girl in Algiers*—Gioachino Rossini

There are any number of great composers who have been able to produce overtures that entertain, lift the spirits, and bring musical “sizzle” to a symphony concert. But almost none excel those of Gioachino Rossini in sparkle, wit, and vivacity. Their droll wit, sly contrasts of mood, and careening drive to the end are simply inimitable. From their conception for Italian opera audiences primarily in the first decade of the nineteenth century, to their familiar use as springboards for movie and television high jinks today, they simply endure.

Rossini was the most important composer of nineteenth-century Italian opera before Giuseppe Verdi. And while he is historically significant for his innovations in serious Italian opera, clearly his *opere buffa*, or comic operas, are his lasting contributions for opera fans everywhere. These are works of his early maturity, roughly before 1820, before he began to focus upon a more serious style. American audiences are most familiar with *The Italian Girl in Algiers* (1813) and *The Barber of Seville* (1816), but there are other masterpieces, as well. After wide European success in the 1820s, Rossini wangled a lifetime annuity from the French government about the time of the composition of his crowning achievement, *William Tell* (1829)—a French grand opera—and promptly retired at the age of thirty-seven. For the next forty-odd years he enjoyed the largess of the French government, and composed very little, certainly no major operas. It’s not that he was lazy, although a famous anecdote relates that while composing in bed (which he usually did) he dropped an unfinished aria on the floor, and rather than go to the trouble of getting up to retrieve it, he simply composed another one! In his defense, we should recognize how much work that he had accomplished early: 34 operas by the time that he was 31.

The Italian Girl in Algiers was given its first performance in Venice in May of 1813, and if there is an award for the most zany of Italian comic operas, then this one surely gets the plume. The plot is impossible to summarize briefly, but it consists of the usual mistaken identities, exotic settings, implausible relationships, and in this case, a Turkish Bey, or lord, who needs an Italian girl to alleviate his boredom with his harem. The overture begins quietly with soft pizzicatos in the strings, lulling the listener, only to be startled by a sudden *fortissimo* outburst from the whole orchestra. A poignant oboe solo follows. Soon, the *allegro* kicks in, and we’re off to the races. A series of vivacious, brief solos by the various woodwinds follow, aptly illustrating why this work is a perennial favorite of woodwind players. Here and there, and especially towards the end, the famous “Rossini *crescendo*” (a passage with a repeating figure over static harmonies, that constantly gets louder) generates the excitement for which Rossini is famous, and which never fails to please. It all simply reminds us that great art isn’t always profound, but can also stir with adroit simplicities.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in D Minor, opus 40—Felix Mendelssohn

Mendelssohn was a prodigy, born into a distinguished family of Jewish bankers and philosophers. He and his sister Fanny—also a talented composer, conductor, and pianist—were raised in a warm, intellectual, highly supportive artistic family. They matured early, and a stream of musical compositions flowed from them both. Mendelssohn was clearly one of the

most important German composers of his time, and infused the expressiveness of early romantic music with the clarity and intellectuality of Mozart and Haydn's classicism. This exquisite balance found expression in a wide variety of musical genres; Mendelssohn was as at home writing Protestant oratorios such as *Elijah* and *St. Paul* as he was composing chamber music and symphonies. He created a significant body of work in his relatively short life, including major works for orchestra that constitute an important part of today's repertoire. These works include five symphonies, six concert overtures, and six concertos.

His musical style reflects, to a large degree, his upbringing and his personality—it speaks of discipline, balance, and an overall cheerful, largely untroubled mien. While his compositions reflect solicitude for clear, balanced musical structures, and an obvious avoidance of excess romantic emotion and empty virtuosity, there is nevertheless a sentimental and emotive quality to them. And this is certainly true of that genre most likely to fall victim to romantic excess—the piano concerto. Mendelssohn wrote his first mature piano concerto in 1831—there were several quite good student works, earlier—and in it he advanced some felicitous changes in the form of the first movement. He did away with the time-honored practice of separately giving both soloist and orchestra a shot at the main themes, and simply telescoped that section into a tighter form. Both the soloist and the orchestra thereby “share” the single statement of themes. He also—in a move that reflected a general tendency in the romantic period—joined all three movements for continuity.

Mendelssohn enjoyed an enviable reputation in Britain, and his many trips to that country were among his greatest successes. Newly married to Cécile, on his honeymoon he composed his Piano Concerto No. 2 in the summer of 1837, and gave its première in Birmingham that fall. The second concerto shares many of the characteristics of the first, given above. The first and last movements—listen carefully, as all three are blended together—are perfect examples of Mendelssohn's characteristically brilliant, but somewhat delicate piano figurations. This certainly is not the bellowing virtuosity of Franz Liszt that we hear here. The slow movement, to my mind, alludes to the gentle atmosphere in the composer's famous *Songs without Words* for solo piano. It must also be admitted, that Mendelssohn's performance of Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto* in England in 1829, only two years after Beethoven's death, seems reborn in the delicious slow movement.

Mendelssohn's piano concertos are not heard in our concert halls nearly as much as his violin concerto, or many of his other works, for that matter. Their graceful beauty and flawless craftsmanship are a refreshing delight.

Symphony No. 3 in E^b Major (“Eroica”), opus 55—Ludvig van Beethoven

Beethoven's first symphony has been called “a fitting farewell to the eighteenth century” and dates to 1800, eight years after his arrival in Vienna as a young composer. His second symphony was completed in 1802, the momentous year of his “Heiligenstadt Testament.” The latter document marked the turning point in Beethoven's life. It was an anguished letter (never sent, however) to his brothers in which he acknowledged the tragedy and despair of his increasing deafness, but it also revealed his resolution to not end it all, but to live for his art. Both symphonies contain few, if any hints, of not only this personal crisis, but for that matter, of the enormous musical changes in the nature of musical composition that he was about to impose upon the world.

His third symphony was simply unprecedented; it was a watershed composition whose import to those who followed was similar to that of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. It changed forever what one expected of a symphony—in length, in complexity, in dramatic expression, in creativity, and in thematic treatment. It marks the beginning of the symphony's place as the highest aspiration of serious instrumental music throughout the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth. Written during the years 1803-04, it was given its première (private) in 1804 at the palace of his patron, Prince Lobkowitz. Initial critical reaction was favorable, but did acknowledge that the work challenged listeners to abandon simple expectations of entertainment, and to enter the world of critical appreciation. The "Eroica," following its name, is truly heroic in many dimensions. In terms of the music, itself, it simply essayed more, achieved more, and marked out a bold new path for symphonic composition. It is also a work—although elements of a personal heroic intensity had appeared earlier in his piano sonatas—that became the norm for the spiritual tone of the composer's mature works--the Beethoven that we know so well. Finally, the "Eroica" is completely the child of its times. The French Revolution only a decade before had changed European history in a cataclysmic upheaval that was both political and philosophic. Change and the expectancy of change had been wrought by heroic action and thought, and Beethoven was keenly reactive to it. In a well-known anecdote, he furiously ripped Napoleon's name from the dedication page after the latter betrayed his republican ideals and named himself emperor.

The first movement begins simply with two hammer strokes in the tonic key, and the familiar—and simple--main theme ensues in the cello, pausing famously and enigmatically on the strange C# in the fifth measure. This note is a harbinger of marvelous things to come, as the composer sets up an adroit manipulation of themes, fragments of themes, and motives. There are not just two main themes in the conventional fashion, but a literal embarrassment of riches. Beethoven cunningly hints at their significance and works them in and out of each other in a fashion that is redolent of a murder mystery in which only at the end are the logical relationships really clear. Powerful climaxes are contrasted with lyrical moments; driving rhythms are punctuated with displaced accents; and the whole is carried by a tight structure that evokes a sense of inevitability to everything that happens. It's a long movement—longer than most complete, four-movement symphonies up until that time.

The second movement is unique—it's not the usual slow movement that often is a placid retreat from the storm of the faster movements. Rather, Beethoven borrows a bit of the heroic spirit of the French composers of the time, and casts this movement as a funeral march. French composers such as Gossec, Mehül, and Cherubini had often served up these dark marches as requisite patriotic music for the large civic ceremonies of the time, and these works of apotheosis served admirably as models for Beethoven's creation of tragedy in this movement. The main theme is long, and its generally despairing mood is broken by moments of optimism and hope. Beethoven, being Beethoven, cannot resist a later fugal development of the theme. But the despair is clear at the end, as the movement literally concludes with a halting, fragmentary disintegration of the theme into nothingness. This movement publicly has marked the demise of notables from Toscanini and FDR to that of Adolf Hitler.

The scherzo of the third movement is a rollicking, good-natured affair. Especially ingratiating are the little overlapping fanfare-like figures played by the horns in the middle section. Most composers before Beethoven had contented themselves with only two French horns, but Beethoven's ideas needed three of them, so the symphony orchestra's growth in instrumental forces begins.

The last movement, as you may imagine, brings on more innovations. For most symphonies up until that time, final movements had served as a merry cap to the proceedings, with little import of the earlier movements. Beethoven writes as a *finale* for this powerful symphony a series of variations on a simple little tune and its bass line that is a *tour-de-force* of creativity. We hear the bass line first, probably thinking: “That’s the theme!” The composer gives us a couple of variations on it, and then over the third variation, the “real” theme appears as a melody over the bass line that appeared to be the first theme. More variations ensue, each with its own character, followed by a marvelous fugal development of the bass theme in the eighth variation—Beethoven pulls out every trick as the little bass line is almost “developed out of existence.” Next comes a gentle statement of the melody by the winds in a beautiful, slow iteration that is incomparable. The full orchestra then triumphantly takes the last variation, uniting bass and melody. Beethoven, of course, is not finished, and a coda with more development—it’s Beethoven, remember—takes us to the smashing climax.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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