

Concerto in E minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 64

Felix Mendelssohn

Even persons who eschew superlatives might have to agree that Felix Mendelssohn was the most astonishing prodigy in the history of music. By the time he turned 18 he had composed such irreplaceable masterpieces as his delightful Octet and *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Half his life earlier, when he was nine, he both gave his debut piano recital and heard one of his psalm settings performed by the highly regarded Berlin Singakademie. By the time he was 21 he had been offered — and had turned down — the music professorship of the University of Berlin.

He was born into a family that was both cultured and wealthy; his grandfather was the noted philosopher Moses Mendelssohn and his father was a supremely successful banker, one remembered for the astute observation that he was destined to go down in history as his father's son and his son's father. The young Mendelssohn benefited from an exemplary education and myriad other advantages reserved for the privileged. He mastered Classical and modern languages, wrote poetry, and polished his considerable skills as a landscape painter and an artist in pen and ink. His musical education included private lessons in piano and violin, as well as composition lessons from Carl Friedrich Zelter, whose other students included Otto Nicolai, Carl Loewe, and Giacomo Meyerbeer. In fact, Zelter spoke quite highly of Mendelssohn's ability with the fiddle. In an 1823 letter to the literary lion Goethe (another of Mendelssohn's intimates, although old enough to be his grandfather), Zelter reported:

My Felix has entered upon his fifteenth year; He grows under my very eyes. His wonderful pianoforte playing I may consider as quite exceptional. He might also become a great violin player.

One of the pleasant perks young Mendelssohn enjoyed was having a private orchestra at his disposal to try out his new compositions at Sunday musicales that were instituted in 1822 at the family home in Berlin, the Mendelssohns having moved there from Hamburg in 1811. A freshet of the composer's early works were unveiled at these gatherings, among them several of his 12 "string symphonies," some light operas, and a quantity of piano pieces and chamber music. Concertos were played, too, including the five (!) that Mendelssohn produced between 1822 and 1824: one for piano, one for violin (in D minor, written expressly for his violin teacher, Eduard Rietz), two for two pianos, and one for violin and piano. These works exhibit abundant inspiration, limitless enthusiasm, and genuinely remarkable technique; what they do not yet display is the stringent editing to which Mendelssohn would later subject his work.

IN SHORT

Born: February 3, 1809, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: November 4, 1847, in Leipzig

Work composed: July–September 16, 1844

World premiere: March 13, 1845, at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, with Niels Gade conducting and Ferdinand David (its dedicatee) as soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 24, 1849, Theodore Eisfeld, conductor, Joseph Burke, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 29, 2015, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Midori, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 27 minutes

Mendelssohn first met the violinist Ferdinand David, who would premiere the concerto heard here, in 1825, and the two became fast friends. In 1835 Mendelssohn settled in Leipzig to become conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra and he promptly named David concertmaster of that ensemble. When Mendelssohn founded the Leipzig Conservatory in 1843, David was one of the first musicians appointed to the faculty. Not long thereafter, in March 1845, David played the premiere of Mendelssohn's enduringly popular E-minor Violin Concerto, which the composer had contemplated writing as early as 1838 but did not focus on until 1844. In the course of composition he consulted closely with his soloist, mostly about technical issues but in some cases about more general concerns of structure and balance, and he took David's suggestions to heart. They remained close friends until Mendelssohn's death in 1847.

In the course of his career Mendelssohn had grown fond of dovetailing the separate movements of his large-scale pieces, a device he had used to great effect in the two piano concertos of his maturity. He maintains that preference in this last of his orchestral works, such that the three movements connect into a single overarching span. Subtle mirroring of tonal architecture and fleeting reminiscences of earlier themes at key moments of transition help invest a sense of the organic and inevitable in this most Classical of the great Romantic violin concertos.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.

Cadenza: Joshua Bell performs his own original cadenza in this performance.

The Cadenza

Most concertos include cadenzas, unaccompanied sections in which the soloist demonstrates his or her technical prowess through the challenging manipulation of themes from the body of the piece. In the 18th and very early 19th centuries, these spans were usually improvised (at least ostensibly) by the soloist. However, over the course of the 19th century it became normal for composers to write out their suggestions for cadenzas, with soloists deciding whether to follow those ideas or invent their own. As it's hard to resist a composer's suggestions, this typically resulted in a diminishing of the "surprise factor" in repeated hearings of a piece. Although Mendelssohn wrote out the first-movement cadenza in his E-minor Violin Concerto, he maintained an element of surprise by inserting it considerably earlier in the movement than one would expect – most first-movement cadenzas fall just before the end – and by dovetailing its beginning and end with the ongoing flow of the movement. Yet when the score was published, it included not Mendelssohn's original cadenza (which some might consider too "brainy" in its contrapuntal complexity), but rather a slightly streamlined version by the work's dedicatee, Ferdinand David. That adaptation remains the most often played today, but in this performance Joshua Bell will play his own original cadenza.



Mendelssohn, in 1845