

Total performance time: approximately 100 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

Southbank Sinfonia: Mendelssohn

[Southbank Sinfonia](#)

[Xinyue Wang](#) violin

[Simon Over](#) conductor

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

Overture: The Hebrides, 'Fingal's Cave', Op.26 (1830, rev. 1832) 10'

Violin Concerto in E minor, Op.64 (1838–44) 30'

i. Allegro molto appassionato

ii. Andante

iii. Allegretto non troppo – Allegro molto vivace

INTERVAL

Symphony No.4 in A, Op.90 'Italian' (1833, rev. 1834) 35'

i. Allegro vivace

ii. Andante con moto

iii. Con moto moderato

iv. Presto and Finale: Saltarello

Overture, The Hebrides

In 1829, Felix Mendelssohn, in common with many cultured young men of the time, set out on a four-year 'Grand Tour' across Europe. Mendelssohn arrived in Edinburgh on 26 July, where he embarked on a walking holiday with his friend, Carl Klingemann, sketching Highland scenes and, on 7 August, arriving at Oban on the western coast of Scotland. It was here, while looking out at the Hebrides, that Mendelssohn first conceived his *Hebrides Overture*. The next day, the friends visited the remote island of Iona, founded by St Columba in the 6th century, and Fingal's Cave on the island of Staffa, which made a deep impression on the composer.

The first draft was entitled 'Overtüre zur einsamen Insel' ('To the lonely island'). Mendelssohn announced the work on 11 December as a birthday present for his father, and the first version was finished in 1830, with revisions finally completed in London in 1832, where it was premiered by the Philharmonic Society on 14 May as *The Isles of Fingal*. The overture's undulating texture is evocative of the inexorable swell of the sea and the rugged drama of the Scottish coast.

Violin Concerto in E minor

Mendelssohn's final concerto, his Violin Concerto in E minor, is among his greatest achievements, as well as being one of the finest of all Romantic violin concertos – hailed by the virtuoso Joseph Joachim as one of the four great German violin concertos, alongside those of Beethoven, Brahms and Bruch.

In 1835 Mendelssohn was appointed principal conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, and he lost no time in appointing his childhood friend, the violinist Ferdinand David, to the position of leader. Inspired by this collaboration, Mendelssohn wrote to David in 1838: 'I should like to write a violin concerto for you next winter. One in E minor runs through my head, the beginning of which gives me no peace'. 'Next winter' turned into six years (seven if one includes the revisions Mendelssohn continued to make after the premiere and before the work's publication). As a proportion of the tragically brief span of Mendelssohn's life, this was a long time, but the effort undeniably paid off.

The Violin Concerto is in three, seamlessly connected movements. The first is remarkable for the immediate entry of the soloist without any orchestral preamble, enunciating the rather mournful theme that had given Mendelssohn 'no peace'. The clouds lift and the music softens into the delicious second theme. After the initial ideas are developed, Mendelssohn places the written-out cadenza in an unusual position, after the central section and before the reprise of the main material – traditionally it would come towards the end of the movement.

A sustained bassoon note carries us from the first movement to the second, its semitone shift ushering in the key-change between the two via the most economical of means. The violin unfurls what amounts to one of

Mendelssohn's 'Songs Without Words' – a melody of great tenderness, contrasted with a dramatic central interlude that serves to reinforce the gentleness of the main material when it returns.

Soloist and string section take us into the sparkling finale, the violin line effervescing like bubbles in champagne. This is a movement of almost uninterrupted sunshine, the virtuoso violin writing and spacious orchestration combining to create an irresistibly joyful atmosphere.

'Italian' Symphony, No. 4 in A major

Goethe romanticised Italy as 'the land where the lemon-trees grow', and it became a hugely desirable destination for German travellers. It was inevitable, then, that it would form an integral part of Mendelssohn's 'Grand Tour'. He set out for Italy in October 1830, visiting Venice, where the famous waterways were less fascinating to him than the paintings of Titian. He wrote to his father on 10 October: 'This is Italy! ... the supreme joy in life Today was so rich that now, in the evening, I must collect myself a little, and so I am writing to you to thank you, dear parents, for having given me all this happiness.'

In Florence, Mendelssohn also spent much of his time in galleries, absorbing Renaissance masterpieces. He then stopped in Rome for several months, experiencing the splendour – both visual and musical – of Holy Week and of Pope Gregory XVI's coronation. He met Berlioz, and explored the library of Fortunato Santini, home to a wealth of Italian sacred choral works. In April 1831 Mendelssohn visited Naples (where he met Donizetti), the Isle of Capri, Pompeii and Vesuvius, sketching Italian scenery. He returned to Rome in June before setting off for Florence and Milan, where his company included Beethoven's friend, pianist Dorothea von Ertmann, and Mozart's son, Franz.

It was during this enviable trip that Mendelssohn began his 'Italian' Symphony, No.4, alongside his 'Scottish' Symphony, No.3. While in Rome, Mendelssohn had written to his sister, composer Fanny Hensel: 'The Italian symphony is making great progress. It will be the jolliest piece I have ever done, especially the last movement. I have not found anything for the slow movement yet, and I think that I will save that for Naples.'

Despite the contrasting landscapes and cultures of the two countries, Mendelssohn's 'Italian' and 'Scottish' symphonies share certain characteristics, such as their use of key (mixing A major and A minor) and skipping rhythms. The 'Italian' Symphony was the first to be completed, and was premiered in London in May 1833. Yet Mendelssohn did not allow the work to be published, intending to return to it and make modifications, especially to the finale.

The work opens with an exhilarating, sweeping Allegro, followed by a solemn Andante suggestive of Rome's stately ceremonies. There is a pastoral minuet and trio, replete with bucolic horn-calls, and the work is rounded off with a breathless 'Saltarello' – a lively Italian dance.