

Piano Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 25

Felix Mendelssohn

The inspiration for Felix Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No. 1 arrived during a visit to Italy he undertook in 1830–31, the same trip that gave rise to the *Italian* Symphony. The journey began with a two-week visit with Goethe in Weimar — the last time Mendelssohn saw the great poet — before the composer continued south to Munich, Pressburg, and finally Italy, where he arrived in October. Venice, Florence, Rome, Naples, Genoa, and Milan all delighted him, and he returned to Germany in October 1831. That's where he unveiled his G-minor Piano Concerto, on October 17, before an audience that included the King and Queen of Bavaria. Also on the program were his Symphony No. 1, his *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and some solo keyboard improvisation. It seems that Mendelssohn had been contemplating this concerto a year earlier, in November 1830, when he was still in Rome, and began sketching the piece then. But he did not focus on it until October 1831, at which point he wrote it out speedily.

The work was a triumph. Mendelssohn wrote to his father the day after the premiere:

My concert took place yesterday and was much more brilliant and successful than I had expected. The affair went off well, and with much spirit. ... My concerto met with a long and vivid reception. The orchestra accompanied well and the work itself was really quite wild.

He continued with a comment that documents Mendelssohn's self-effacing character:

The King led the applause; after my playing they tried to call me back and applauded, as it is usual here, but I was modest and did not appear again.

Further performances followed. In London, the critic for the *Atheneum* described the concerto as “a dramatic scene for the piano,” adding that “the performance [was] an astonishing exhibition of piano-playing.”

On the whole, the G-minor is a fleet, lightweight, and structurally compressed concerto, somewhat reminiscent of the *Konzertstück* for Piano and Orchestra by Carl Maria von Weber, whose music Mendelssohn very much appreciated. In a classic concerto form, the orchestra would have introduced all of the important themes in an extended introduction before the piano made its entrance, re-introducing the themes and developing them in different ways through what would amount to a double exposition. This form had already started to be adapted in Beethoven's concertos, and Mendelssohn condenses the proceedings still more markedly. Following the briefest quiver of an orchestral introduction, the piano jumps in to present the first theme, which involves

IN SHORT

Born: February 3, 1809, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: November 4, 1847, in Leipzig

Work composed: mostly in October 1831; dedicated to pianist Delphine van Schauroth

World premiere: October 17, 1831, with the composer as soloist (and apparently leading from the keyboard), at the Munich Odeon

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 17, 1846, Ureli Corelli Hill, conductor, Henry C. Timm, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: October 17, 2000, Leonard Slatkin, conductor, Mitsuko Uchida, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 20 minutes

wide leaps of register and a spitting out of minor scales in double octaves. As a result, the orchestra never gets an exposition of its own, and the entire movement is telescoped considerably.

More condensation occurs when, just at the movement's end, trumpet and horn play an insistent tattoo on the note B, not part of the scale of G minor. This leads without a break to a dreamlike movement that unrolls as a formally loose rhapsody. The writing is full of figuration that looks dense on the page but trickles delicately, often *pianissimo*, from the fingers. In an imaginative stroke of instrumentation, Mendelssohn holds the violins in abeyance until nearly the end of the movement, a device that thrusts the spotlight more firmly on the soloist and its surrounding halo of woodwinds and low strings, with the violas

and cellos sometimes split into two parts each to enrich their autumnal timbre.

Just when the dream seems to have run its course, the trumpets and horns again interrupt the proceedings with their familiar fanfare, beneath which the strings build up enough energy to turn a simple motif into a full-fledged theme — a potent reminder of the rumblings at the concerto's opening. The pianist enters with what is for all intents and purposes a keyboard toccata, a virtuosic high-wire act that leaves pianist and audience all but breathless, right through the no-holds-barred coda at the end.

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

Mendelssohn as Pianist

Felix Mendelssohn was universally admired as a pianist, extolled for not only his technique but also the expressive aspects of his playing. The composer and Mendelssohn enthusiast Ferdinand Hiller, himself no mean pianist, wrote:

He played the piano as a lark soars, because it was in his nature. He possessed great adroitness, sureness, strength, fluency, a soft full tone. ... But when he played, one forgot these qualities; one overlooked even the more spiritual gifts which are called ardor, inspiration, soulfulness, intelligence. When he sat at the piano music poured out of him with the richness of an inborn genius.

Clara Schumann, herself one of the supreme pianists of the 19th century, shared Hiller's enthusiasm: "When all is said and done," she wrote, "he remains, for me, the most cherished pianist of all." This is high praise, rendered in an era that included such legendary lions of the keyboard as Chopin, Liszt, Henri Herz, and Friedrich Kalkbrenner.



Mendelssohn, in an 1834 portrait by Friedrich Wilhelm von Schadow