

Programme Notes

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847): *Symphony No. 4 in A major, Op. 90 (Italian)*

Between 1829 and 1831, Mendelssohn embarked on a tour of Europe. His travels inspired three of his great orchestral works: his *Scottish Symphony*, the overture, *Fingal's Cave* and the 4th symphony, which we are hearing performed this evening.

Mendelssohn fell in love with the colour and atmosphere of Italy where he made sketches of the work but didn't complete it. In February 1831 he wrote to his sister Fanny, with enthusiasm, '*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.*'

The symphony was eventually finished in Berlin in 1833, in response to an invitation from the London (now Royal) Philharmonic Society, and he conducted the first performance in London on 13th May 1833. Although it is one of Mendelssohn's most perfect works, he was dissatisfied with it. He revised it in 1837, spoke of it with resentment and withheld it from publication. It only appeared in print in 1851 after his death. There is no explanation for this, but it has been suggested that he had begun to realise that his greater maturity as a composer would only come with time – time that did not fit his natural exuberance and restlessness.

The work is in four movements following the form and orchestration of the late 18th century symphonies of Mozart and Beethoven.

The brilliantly scored and joyful first movement is in sonata form with subtle rhythms and fugato in the development, building through a huge crescendo to the return of the opening section. The subsequent Andante descends into a dark D minor, with the sound of footsteps and a wailing melody inspired by Mendelssohn seeing a religious procession winding through the streets of Naples. Serenity returns with the minuet and trio, while the finale in the tonic minor incorporates dance figurations from the Roman Saltarello and Neapolitan Tarantella.

The '*Italian symphony*' is the work of a brilliant young man with great technical facility and boundless energy. The excitement of composing such energetic and beautifully orchestrated music must have been tremendous and still enchants the audience every time it is performed.

Gioachino Antonio Rossini Rossini (1792-1868): *Stabat Mater*

During his lifetime, Rossini was hailed as the idol of the Italian operatic world by many but criticised by a few. *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and *La Cenerentola* (based on Beaumarchais' comedy, *The Barber of Seville* and the folk tale, *Cinderella*) are still regularly performed and his overtures: *William Tell*, *The Thieving Magpie*, and *The Silken Ladder* remain highly popular.

Rossini turned to choral writing after a long gap in composing, with the *Stabat Mater* in 1842 and, over twenty years later, the *Petite Messe Solennelle*. His setting of the *Stabat Mater* has a curious history. He started to compose it in Spain at the request of the Spanish prelate Varela, but was taken ill after completing the first six numbers, so entrusted the completion to Tadolini, the conductor of the Théâtre Italien in Paris. Valera died in 1837 and his heirs decided to sell the publication rights to the French publisher, Aulagnier. Rossini declared that he possessed the rights, so promptly sold them to his own publisher, Troupenas. He took this opportunity to revise and complete the work, which was eventually published in its present form in 1842.

Rossini modelled his *Stabat Mater* on Pergolesi's (performed by RCS in spring 2010), but it is as unashamedly theatrical and secular in spirit as Verdi's *Requiem*! It is scored for a large

orchestra, including trumpets and trombones, four soloists and choir. The poem, describing the Virgin Mary's vigil by the Cross, is in twenty verses, for which Rossini used the available forces in many combinations across ten movements.

Of the six original numbers, the opening *Stabat Mater*, an expressive quartet for soli and chorus is perhaps the best. The music of the following tenor aria, *Cuius animus* and duet, *Quis est homo*, are florid and sentimental, forming a contrast with the dark bass aria, *Pro peccatis suae gentis*. *Eia Mater* is an expressive chorus and there is much harmonic variety in the ensuing *Sancta Mater*.

The last four numbers, however, are the finest. The delicate and graceful cavatina, *Fac ut portem*, is followed by, *Inflammatum et ascensum*, the dramatic soprano solo reaching the heights of top C, set against a vivid chorus with thrilling accompaniment. As for the unaccompanied chorus, *Quando corpus morietur*, Rossini recognized it as some of his most inspired writing.

After so much variety, the final double fugue, *In sempiterna saecula, Amen*, with the two subjects in complimentary rhythms races to an exciting climax, then a brief return to the first number and chordal coda bring the fugue and the whole work to an impressive close.

The first public performance took place in Paris in January 1842. An article on the concert reported: "*Rossini's name was shouted out amid the applause. The entire work transported the audience; the triumph was complete. Three numbers had to be repeated... and the audience left the theatre moved and seized by an admiration that quickly won all Paris.*"

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