

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

Mendelssohn's Reformation Symphony

Jan 9 & 10, 2021

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)**FUGA (No. 2 "RICERCATA") from the *MUSICAL OFFERING*, BWV 1079**

In one of the more intriguing Masterworks programs of the season, TFO devotes the weekend to a musical offering of rarities, including a symphony based on a theme going back to the early 1500s and a baroque keyboard tune dressed in modern clothing.

The tune – a six-part fugue by Johann Sebastian Bach – comes from a collection of pieces he composed in 1747 known as the *Musical Offering*. This "offering" is based on Bach's improvisation on a theme presented to him by Frederick the Great, an amateur musician whom Bach visited toward the end of his life. He ad-libbed a three-part fugue on the spot, then later set to work on a more complex variation that the musicologist Charles Rosen called "Bach's greatest fugue." Not stopping there, Bach fleshed out a number of other pieces to accompany Frederick's "royal" theme, bound the score in leather and sent it to the Prussian king as a gift.

The fugue is known as a *ricercar*, an ancient musical term that means "to search out." Intricate and serious in mood, it unfolds in six separate but related lines, which together are nearly impossible to play with two hands on a keyboard – whether organ, harpsichord or piano. Historians for two centuries have pondered why Bach composed something so problematic; maybe he just wanted a good brain teaser.

The music features prominently in Douglas Hofstadter's 1979 Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, and made an impression on Anton Webern, who in 1935 arranged it for small orchestra. Webern splits the melody among several instruments – a technique known as *farbenmelodie* – which changes the tone color on every successive note. Webern once explained that he wanted to make Bach's original less enigmatic for the modern listener: "Isn't the point to awaken what is still sleeping in the secrecy of Bach's abstract rendering, which makes it all but nonexistent for almost everyone, or at least completely incomprehensible?"

Webern, one of the early 20th-century's most original composers, was looking forward through the past, said TFO Music Director Michael Francis: "With this piece, Webern was going back to something simpler. It's as if he picks up a pebble and explores its beauty. It's this desire to go back to Bach to find purity."

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)**CONCERTO FOR TWO VIOLINS IN D MINOR, BWV 1043**

Ask a classically trained musician to name a composer they always return to, and the answer will often be Bach. Yes, he's been dead and buried for 270 years, but his creations resonate, in the words of the Bach scholar Christoph Wolff, as "true ideals and imperishable models of art."

Listeners need only peek into the library that makes up the concertos alone to hear vivid evidence of an aesthetic and analytical mind. This is certainly true of his *Concerto for Two Violins*, which exposes us to the workings of an ever-curious thinker. Often called the *Double Concerto*, the work is cut from the Italian mold of Vivaldi – fast-paced opening and closing movements surrounding a slow middle section.

The entire concerto is in ritornello form, meaning a “return” of one group against another, in this case contrasting ideas presented by soloists and orchestra. It opens with both violins attacking a theme head on, the orchestra offering rich textures behind them, with a flurry of intermingling counterpoint – like threads being woven into a quilt. This section is all about momentum, as the cadence is relentless and keeps everyone on their toes up to an ending in the bright key of D major.

The heart of the work is the middle movement, a cantilena with a singing quality that could easily have been snatched from an opera. This sublime section is all about subtle expression, a conversation between a pair of sweetly lyrical instruments. The finale repeats ideas from earlier, tossing them upside down as the two violins – waxing virtuosic – lead the way to an unrelenting close in the dark key in which everything began.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847) **SYMPHONY NO. 5 IN D MAJOR, OP. 107, REFORMATION**

At the tender age of 17, when most of us are struggling through our last year of high school, Mendelssohn was putting the finishing touches on his overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a marvel of creativity that placed him among the most promising composers of the 19th century. Educated, cultured, skilled in the visual and literary arts, Mendelssohn early on was prepped for greatness, and included in his circle of friends such giants as Goethe and Schumann.

His legacy would include a hit list: the Octet, *Hebrides* overture, *Elijah* oratorio, *Violin Concerto*, and six highly personal string quartets. He also penned five orchestral symphonies (as opposed to his string symphonies), with the *Italian* and *Scotch* still holding court in the standard repertoire. His *Symphony No. 5*, however, never enjoyed the accolades of its siblings, even though it shimmers with some of Mendelssohn’s most thrilling music.

“It’s underrated,” said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “And it’s bigger than most people might understand because it’s about religious tolerance. There’s a sense of him letting go of his past, of the anti-Semitism.”

Born in Hamburg into a Protestant family of Jewish heritage, the young composer knew prejudice as a constant. Throughout his short life – he died at age 38 – persecution was never far from his personal beliefs and artistic creations. This makes his *Fifth Symphony* cathartic in its use of religious motifs. In the first movement, we hear the *Dresden Amen* – a sequence of six notes sung by choirs of the time – which represents the Catholic faith. In the finale we hear Martin Luther’s chorale *A Mighty Fortress is our God*, which represents the Protestant faith.

Mendelssohn composed the work in honor of the 300th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, a cornerstone of Lutheranism and the Protestant Reformation. He originally called it his *Symphony to Celebrate the Church Revolution*, but his sister Fanny later gave the work a name that stuck: *Reformation*.

It opens with a slow, dignified introduction in D major – although D minor provides the undercurrent afterward – and ends with the *Dresden Amen* that Wagner would later use as the Grail theme in *Parsifal*. A galloping scherzo follows, full of the elfin spirit for which Mendelssohn is so well known, and leads into a brief lyrical andante that showcases the strings.

Suddenly, a lone flute appears, singing Luther’s famed hymn as it invites other instruments to join in. As more voices unite, the music grows noble and majestic. A shift in rhythm picks up the pace, and Luther’s melody begins to soar on a wave of counterpoint before coming to a triumphant close.

Quarter note: *The Reformation*, by the way, wasn’t the last of Mendelssohn’s five symphonies, and the muddled publication of these pieces only confuses the real chronological order: 1, 5, 4, 2, 3. This means the *Fifth* is actually his *Second*, written by a 21-year-old composer of remarkable maturity and self-confidence.

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