

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

Felix Mendelssohn

As a youngster, Felix 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. Zelter spoke highly of Mendelssohn's ability with the fiddle. In an 1823 letter to Goethe (whom Zelter served as musical adviser), he 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.

Many of the composer's early works were unveiled at Sunday musicales at his family's mansion in Berlin: among them were a number 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 he produced from 1822 to 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 self-criticism and penchant for editing to which Mendelssohn would later subject his work.

The composer first met violinist Ferdinand David, who would premiere the concerto

heard in this program, in 1825. The two became fast friends. David (1810–73), just a year younger than Mendelssohn, was also the son of a wealthy businessman, was a musical prodigy, and had a precocious piano-playing sister, just as Mendelssohn did. He and Mendelssohn were frequent partners in chamber music and, in 1835, when Mendelssohn settled in Leipzig to become conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra, he appointed David concertmaster of that ensemble — a position the violinist would retain for the rest of his life. When Mendelssohn founded the Leipzig Conservatory, in 1843, David was one of the first musicians appointed to the faculty. Greatly respected as a teacher, he counted such eminent violinists as Joseph Joachim and August Wilhelmj among his pupils.

In March 1845 David played the premiere of Mendelssohn's enduringly popular E-minor

In Short

Born: February 3, 1809, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: November 4, 1847, in Leipzig

Work composed: July–September 16, 1844, with alterations continuing for several months thereafter

World premiere: March 13, 1845, at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Niels Gade, conductor, Ferdinand David, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 24, 1849, Theodore Eisfeld, conductor, Joseph Burke, soloist; this marked the work's US Premiere

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 15, 2018, in Nagoya, Japan, Jaap van Zweden, conductor, Ryu Goto, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 27 minutes

Violin Concerto, which the composer had contemplated writing as early as 1838. “I’d like to do a violin concerto for you for next winter,” he wrote to David on July 30 of that year. “One in E minor is running through my head, and the opening of it will not leave me in peace.” Curiously, ensuing sketches reveal that it was a piano concerto, rather than a violin concerto, that started taking form, one that matched the eventual violin concerto in both key and structure. By the time Mendelssohn focused definitively on the composition in 1844 it had evolved with certainty into a violin concerto. He consulted closely with his soloist as he composed it, mostly about technical issues but in some cases concerning more general matters of structure and balance — and he took David’s suggestions to heart.

Mendelssohn grew 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 and in some of his symphonies. He maintained that preference in this last of his orchestral works, connecting the three movements into a single 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.

About the Cadenza

Most concertos include cadenzas, unaccompanied sections in which the soloist demonstrates his or her technical prowess while manipulating themes from the body of the piece. In the 18th and early 19th centuries these sections were usually improvised (at least ostensibly) by the soloist, but in the course of the 1800s it became normal for composers to write out their suggestions for cadenzas, allowing soloists to decide whether to follow those ideas or invent their own. As it is hard to resist a composer’s suggestions, this typically resulted in a diminishing of the “surprise factor” in repeat hearings of a piece. Although Mendelssohn wrote out the first-movement



Mendelssohn, in an 1839 portrait, and the concerto’s dedicatee, Ferdinand David, in an 1847 lithograph

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. When the score was published, it included not Mendelssohn’s original cadenza (which some consider too “brainy” in its contrapuntal complexity) but rather a slightly streamlined version adjusted by David — and it is that violinist’s adaptation that remains standard today.