

Mendelssohn's Overture to 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'

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tastes lie, as is well known, in the direction of orchestral music, notably that of Beethoven and Wagner. The rendering of the 'Messiah' was formal and cold, and from various uncertain moments we conclude that little time had been devoted to its rehearsal. In the evening the eminent conductor was quite in his element with Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner. First came the 'Harold in Italy' Symphony. The first and last movements may not be very convincing, but the 'Marche des Pèlerins' and the 'Sérénade' are full of character and charm, and the scoring is delightfully picturesque; they were rendered with rare delicacy. The Liszt setting of Psalm xiii.—introduced into England by Walter Bache at his concert given in St. James's Hall on February 28, 1873—is an interesting work. Some of the music may be rather secular in character, but it is fresh and spontaneous. Choral Societies in search of an unhackneyed work ought to welcome it. The tenor solo was well sung by Mr. William Green. Sir Hubert Parry's 'Blest Pair of Sirens' was splendidly rendered, the composer conducting. For Strauss's symphonic poem 'Don Juan,' the 'Vorspiel and Liebestod' from 'Tristan' was substituted. A magnificent performance of the 'Meistersinger' Overture concluded the concert.

Friday was a red-letter day for choir and orchestra. In the morning Bach's Mass in B minor was performed. At the opening the choir seemed to be feeling the effects of the hard work of the week, but the singers recovered, and the colossal choruses were superbly rendered. The 'Et incarnatus' and the 'Crucifixus' were sung most impressively, and of the other choruses, the 'Cum sancto spiritu,' the 'Et resurrexit' and the 'Sanctus' with magnificent and at times overwhelming power. The evening concert commenced with Bruckner's Te Deum, performed on this occasion for the first time in England. The work was discussed by the present writer in his account of the Duisburg Festival which appeared in THE MUSICAL TIMES of July last. This was followed by Dvorák's 'Symphonic Variations,' and then we listened to that soul-stirring work, Brahms's Rhapsody (Op. 53) for alto solo, male chorus and orchestra, which was rendered with true nobility, Miss Muriel Foster singing the solo portion with artistic skill and genuine feeling. The performance of the Choral Symphony was one of the finest ever given in this country: the instrumental movements were splendidly played; the quartet of solo singers—Miss Agnes Nicholls, Miss Muriel Foster, Mr. William Green and Mr. Andrew Black—irreproachable; while the chorus covered itself with glory, and in so doing bore testimony to the skill of the Festival chorus-master, Mr. R. H. Wilson. This was the last work in the programme; anything after it would have proved an anti-climax.

The complete list of solo-vocalists is as follows:—Madame Albani, Miss Agnes Nicholls, Madame Clara Butt, Miss Muriel Foster, Madame Kirkby Lunn, Mr. Ben Davies, Mr. William Green, Mr. John Coates, Mr. Andrew Black, Mr. Kennerley Rumford, and Mr. Ffrangcon-Davies. A word of praise is due to Mr. C. W. Perkins, organist of Birmingham Town Hall, for the good service he rendered as organist throughout the Festival.

THEODOR KIRCHNER, the composer of many well-known pianoforte pieces, died at Hamburg on September 19 at the ripe age of eighty. In 1843 he became a pupil of the Leipzig Conservatorium, and, in a letter of that year written to his friend Verhulst, Schumann mentions that fact, adding 'his creative talent is the strongest of all,' *i.e.*, of all the pupils. Schumann subsequently referred to Kirchner as 'the most gifted of the young composers.'

## MENDELSSOHN'S OVERTURE TO 'A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM.'

BY SIR GEORGE GROVE, C.B.

Mendelssohn's Overture to the 'Midsummer Night's Dream' (Op. 21) must not be confounded with his incidental music to that play (Op. 61). The latter, including the Wedding March, was composed in 1842 or 1843, after 'St. Paul,' the 'Hymn of Praise,' the 'Italian' and 'Scotch' Symphonies; and its first performance took place four years only before its author's death. But the Overture was written while he was yet a lad, and still under the wing of Zelter. 'It was composed and put to paper,' wrote his friend Klingemann, 'in 1826: part of the score was written in the beautiful summer of that year, in the open air in the Mendelssohn garden at Berlin, as I can witness from having been present.' Mendelssohn was then mid-way in his eighteenth year.

To this we may add the testimony of the Autograph, which bears the date 'Berlin, 6 Aug., 1826,' and the recorded fact that on November 19 of the same year his friends first heard the Overture played as a pianoforte duet by his sister and himself.\* The price which he received for it from the publisher was three louis d'or.

It is now known that the present work is a second attempt. The former one, of which the first half was completed, begun with the four chords and the fairy figure. On these followed a regular prologue to the play, in which the theme quoted below as No. 5 represented the loves of Lysander and Hermia. Nothing else has survived. The many other beautiful and characteristic features of the present work are new, and appear to be mainly the result of the representations of A. B. Marx, then extremely intimate with Mendelssohn, who urged that an Overture should not only be based on the subject of the play, but should adopt it as a programme.†

But whatever the details of the history of the Overture it is doubtless the greatest marvel of early maturity that the world has ever seen in music—probably in any art. 'It must be remembered,' said Wagner, 'that it was written at seventeen; but how finished the form already is!' The Octet (Op. 20) had been composed in the preceding year, and the String Quintet in A (Op. 18) was completed in June, 1826. But astonishing as these two works are in form and ideas for one so young, yet as compositions for stringed instruments they are only like crayon or monochrome—if the comparison may be allowed—when contrasted with the bright, living, moving picture which is presented by the Overture, radiant with every colour of the orchestra.

Beethoven was still alive when the Overture to the 'Midsummer Night's Dream' was completed; alive and at work. The F major Quartet (Op. 135), his last composition, in which after his own fashion he had tried to solve the 'difficult question,' ‡ 'To be, or not to be?'—a question soon to be solved for him in quite another manner§—had occupied him all the summer and autumn of 1826, till October 30, when he wrote his name upon it as complete.¶

(Continued on page 737.)

\* See the 'Life of Moscheles,' vol. i., p. 136.

† See A. B. Marx's 'Erinnerungen.' Berlin, 1865, vol. ii., p. 230.

‡ 'Der schwergelassene Entschluss'; such is Beethoven's own title to the last movement of the Quartet in F, Op. 135, to two of the subjects of which he has affixed the question and answer, 'Muss es sein?'—'Must it be?' 'Es muss sein!'—'It must be!'

§ By his death on the 26th of the following March.

¶ The autograph copy of the separate parts of this Quartet contains the date in the composer's own hand: 'Gneixendorf, am 30 Oktober, 1826.' Elsewhere he says, with his own humour: 'Gneixendorf, what a name! It sounds like the breaking of an axle-tree.'

## A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM—Continued.

While the happy and handsome boy was putting the finishing touches to his score in his father's sunny garden at Berlin, undisturbed by the jokes and laughter of sisters and friends around him, the solitary, deaf, weird-looking Beethoven was wandering through the fields and woods at Gneixendorf, notebook in hand, humming or howling the scale backwards and forwards from top to bottom, as was his wont while composing—or muttering the mystic words which form the motto of his Quartet, 'Muss es sein? Es muss sein.' Thus his latest work coincided with Mendelssohn's earliest: the setting of the great fiery splendour sun of Vienna, with the rising of the bright morning star of Berlin. Strange coincidence! It is thus that the torch is handed on—the succession of great artists kept up! Can we doubt that had he read this genial score, Beethoven would have said, as he did of Schubert, after perusing his 'Allmacht' and his 'Junge Nonne': 'Truly Mendelssohn has the divine fire in him—he will some day make a noise in the world.'

In England the Overture was quickly known. Mendelssohn brought it and the 'Meeresstille' Overture with him on his first visit to London in 1829, and left the MS. score of it with Sir George Smart. It was not played by the Philharmonic till March 1, 1830, at the first concert of the season; but it had been heard twice before in the preceding year, first at a concert of Drouet the flute-player, on June 24, Midsummer night! and again on July 13, at a concert organized by Mdlle. Sontag for the relief of the sufferers in Silesia—two performances which Mendelssohn himself spoke of as 'a rehearsal for next year.' On returning from Drouet's concert in a hackney coach with Mendelssohn, Sir George Smart left the score in the coach. It was never recovered.

The beginning of the Overture stamps the fairy character of the work. The four opening chords represent moonlight as well as sound can represent an object of sight, while the quaver figure (beginning at bar 8,) is obviously the 'revels' of the fairies:—

No. 1. *Allegro di molto.*

This forms the prevailing element of the Overture. It lasts for more than fifty bars, and then bursts into a melody, which has a strong resemblance to one of the airs in Weber's 'Oberon,' though there is no reasonable doubt that the two tunes are quite independent:—



This melody, after some development, ends in a descending passage for the wind:—



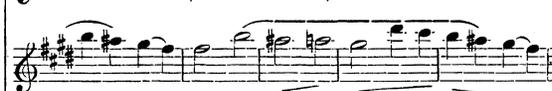
which becomes of great importance later on.

Then the fairy element intervenes again; and then, through a lovely passage in the clarinet:—

## No. 4. Clar.

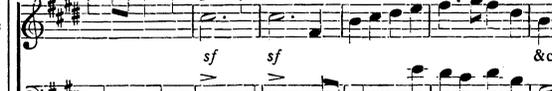
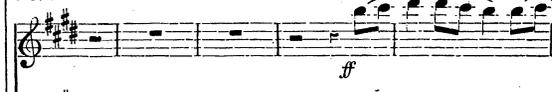


we arrive at the second subject proper of the movement, which loses nothing by the contrast of the strings to the preceding wind:—



This second subject—which as already mentioned, Marx distinctly says represented in the original Overture the wanderings of the lovers—is much longer than our quotation. It has a second part equally beautiful with that given above. And this leads directly into a perfect contrast—the 'Bergomask dance' of the Clowns:—

## No. 6.



which Mendelssohn retained for the dance when he wrote the full music for the play in 1843. Shortly after this the first section of the Overture ends with a repetition of the 'Oberon' melody (No. 2).

The working-out, or middle section, begins with the fairy quaver figure (No. 1), in conjunction with another *motif*, which has a curious personal history. 'I once rode with him,' says Schubring in his 'Reminiscences,'\* 'to Pankow and the Schönhauser Garden, at the time he was busy with the 'Midsummer Night's Dream' Overture. The weather was lovely,

\* 'Erinnerungen,' in *Daheim* for 1866, No. 26. Translated in the 'Musical World,' May 12 and 19, 1866.

and we were talking away, lying on the grass in the shade, when all of a sudden he seized my arm, and said "Hush!" A great fly had just buzzed past us, and he wanted to hear the sound as it died away. When the Overture was finished, he showed me the passage where the violoncello modulates from B minor to F sharp minor, and said, "There, that's the Schönhauser fly!" And here we have the immortal insect:—

No. 7. Cellos.



as it first appears. It is used twice shortly afterwards, with a fine accompanying note in the horns.

The descending passage already quoted as No. 3 is employed in the strings with admirable effect in a *staccato* form:—

No. 8.



—and so on. In the *reprise* some modifications take place, the most remarkable of which are the low notes of the horn and ophicleide (popularly known as 'Bottom's braying'), and there is considerable omission and compression. Thus the 'Oberon' melody does not appear in its former place, but is reserved for the end of the Coda, where it returns with increasing effect. The descending passage quoted as No. 3 is kept for the beginning of the Coda, in which it forms a prominent feature; and there are various beautiful differences and changes of treatment.

But anatomical details like these are intolerable in regard to a work of such extraordinary beauty and poetry as this Overture. They may perhaps be justified by the desire to impress on the non-musician the fact that music is as much under the dominion of fixed laws and principles as any other art or science is. We call these rules of music *forms*, but really they are *laws*, and such laws can only be elucidated by dry analysis, of the nature of that above attempted. When anyone speaks (as used to be the fashion) of the C minor Symphony of Beethoven and the 'Midsummer Night's Dream' Overture of Mendelssohn as works struck off *à l'improviste* by a gifted composer—don't believe them, it is all nonsense! The C minor Symphony slowly attained its present magical power by an astonishing process of correction and rewriting, and with this Overture it was very much the same. 'I did hardly anything else for a whole year,' said Mendelssohn to Hiller. Even in the *mechanics* of the composition, these two great works have a relation to each other. We have elsewhere shown that the four sections of the first movement of the C minor are almost, if not exactly, the same length; and in this Overture the regularity of the division into sections of eight bars is hardly credible. But enough!

## Reviews.

*Youth. Concert Overture.* By Arthur Hervey.

[Novello and Company, Limited.]

Considerable interest is attached to Mr. Hervey's overture, originally produced at the Norwich Festival last year. Its success was instant, the composer, who conducted with conspicuous skill, being twice recalled to the platform. Since then its genial strains have been heard at several concerts and received with unqualified favour. The general acceptance of the piece is not surprising, for the themes are so instinct with the joyousness of early life that their significance appears on the surface, and the subject representative of the girl at her spinning wheel is most fascinatingly dainty, and captivating to a degree. The pianoforte version requires a crisp touch and vivacious treatment, but the transcription—which, by the way, is admirably done—will repay any practice devoted to its interpretation on the household instrument.

*British Songs for British Boys. A collection of 100 National Songs for the use of Boys in schools and choirs.* Selected, arranged, and edited, with explanatory notes, by Sydney H. Nicholson, M.A., Mus.Bac. Oxon.

[Macmillan and Company.]

The book is born of the idea now widely prevalent that the proper musical study of the school-pupil is national song. It will certainly not be for lack of literature that the propaganda will languish. Book after book comes from the press with its hundred or so songs. We are rather dubious as to the advent of the millennium of interest that these songs are to create, although we are not at all disposed to question their general value as music. But it is easy to over-do enthusiasm for a ditty whose only claim to recognition is that it was composed anonymously at least a century or so ago. Mr. Nicholson's collection is undoubtedly a valuable one, and deserves to be received with favour. The accompaniments are intentionally simple, but sometimes the editor goes a little astray from his principles as announced in the introduction, and indulges his fancy with chromatic harmony—as, for instance, in his treatment of 'The last rose of summer.' The compass determined by the choice of key is generally so considerate that we wonder why some of the songs are set so high. 'Let Erin remember,' in the key of G, is out of the question for average boys.