

## FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born 3 February 1809 in Hamburg; died 4 November 1847 in Leipzig.

### *The Hebrides Overture (Fingal's Cave)*, Opus 26 (1829-1830)

PREMIERE OF WORK: London, 14 May 1832; Covent Garden; Philharmonic Society Orchestra; Thomas Atwood, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 26 November 1896; Carnegie Music Hall; Frederic Archer, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 10 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, timpani and strings.

Felix Mendelssohn was in England in the summer of 1829 for the first of the nine visits he made to that country during his brief life, and was receiving great acclaim as composer, conductor and pianist. He had just turned twenty. Between engagements, Mendelssohn, an avid traveler, undertook a walking tour of Scotland with a friend, the poet Carl Klingemann. Mendelssohn, who once wrote that "it is in pictures, ruins and natural surroundings that I find the most music," was fruitfully inspired by his trip — Mary Queen of Scots' Holyrood Castle gave rise to the "Scottish" Symphony (No. 3) and the wild Hebrides Islands off the rugged west coast of the country sparked the atmospheric *Hebrides Overture*.

The most famous spot in the Hebrides is the awesome, sea-level Fingal's Cave, named for a legendary Scottish hero, on the tiny island of Staffa. Klingemann described the site: "A greener roar of waves surely never rushed into a stranger cavern — its many pillars made it look like the inside of an immense organ, black and resounding, and absolutely without purpose, and quite alone, the wide grey sea within and without." Mendelssohn was rowed to the mouth of the cave in a small skiff, and sat spellbound before the natural wonder. As soon as he got back to land, still inspired by the experience, he rushed to his inn and wrote down the opening theme for a new piece. He included a copy of the melody in a letter to his sister, Fanny, in Berlin so that she would know, as he told her, "how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me."

The *Hebrides Overture* does not tell a story. Rather it sets a scene and describes a mood that Charles O'Connell noted "evokes the mysterious spirit that seems to pervade the place, the feeling of restlessness and contrary motion, a strange and wild and beautiful atmosphere." Despite the enthusiasm that accompanied the conception of the *Hebrides Overture*, it took Mendelssohn almost three years to finish the piece to his liking. He completed the first version of the score in Rome at the end of 1830, but he was dissatisfied with it when it was performed by the London Philharmonic Orchestra on May 14, 1832. He complained particularly about the middle section, which he felt "smells more of counterpoint than of train-oil, seagulls and salt fish, and must be altered." He revised the work during the following year, and published it in its finished version late in 1833.

The *Hebrides* was one of the first of a new genre of composition that arose early in the 19th century — the "concert overture" that was not associated with a stage production, but intended specifically for the concert hall. The work opens with the well-known theme inspired from Mendelssohn as he bobbed about in the small dinghy at the mouth of Fingal's Cave. Not really a complete melody at all, it is simply a one-measure motive that recurs over colorful, changing harmonies. The broad complementary theme, "the greatest melody Mendelssohn ever wrote," according to English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey, is presented in the dark hues of bassoons and cellos. A martial closing theme ends the exposition. The development section, built largely upon the main theme, rises to a ringing climax before a brilliant flash of lightning from the flutes ushers in the recapitulation. The second theme provides a brief emotional respite before the agitated mood of the opening returns in the extended coda. The storminess subsides, and the Overture concludes with a soft, eerie whisper from the flute.