

Album Leaf - Piano Works by Felix Mendelssohn

~ *Liner Notes* ~

Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (February 3, 1809 – November 4, 1847), born and commonly referred to as **Felix Mendelssohn**, was a prominent composer, pianist, organist, conductor and teacher in the early Romantic era. Mendelssohn's grandfather was the renowned Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, the model for Lessing's Nathan the Wise – embodiment of tolerance in the intolerant world. The son of a Jewish family who had converted to Christianity, Felix turned out to be a musical prodigy at a very young age, and could also paint and write poetry. He made his piano debut at the age of 9, and by age 13 he was already an accomplished composer. Schumann wrote of Mendelssohn that he was "the Mozart of the nineteenth century, the most brilliant musician, the one who most clearly sees through the contradictions of the age and for the first time reconciles them." Both Mozart and Mendelssohn were prodigies, both had gifted sisters, and both died young. His works include symphonies, concertos, piano music, organ music and chamber music. Mendelssohn's Romantic compositional style had roots in the music of Classical masters. At the age of 17, he had composed one of the absolute masterpieces of orchestral music of all time - overture *A midsummer night's dream op.21*, based on Shakespeare's play. His *Violin Concerto in E minor op.64* is one of the most beautiful and popular concerti of the 19th century. During his extensive travels in Europe he wrote many masterpieces, including the *Italian symphony*, the *Scottish symphony* and the Overture *Die Hebrides*. An avid educator, he founded the Leipzig Conservatory of Music in 1843 where he served as a director and, together with Schumann, taught composition. He built up the Gewandhaus Orchestra, making Leipzig the musical capital of Germany. It was Mendelssohn who brought Johann Sebastian Bach back from oblivion in 1829, when he revived and conducted Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" in Leipzig. This was the first performance of this piece since Bach's death in 1750.

Mendelssohn's beloved sister Fanny was a talented pianist and composer in her own right. Her early death was a fatal blow to his health, already compromised by a strenuous career. Mendelssohn died 6 months later in the same year, aged 38. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, his music became less popular due to changing tastes, but his creative output had gained deep appreciation again. Mendelssohn is one the most admired composers of the Romantic epoch.

The final manuscript of **Fantasia in f-sharp minor, Op. 28, "Sonate écossaise" (Scottish Sonata)** was completed in 1833, The conception of the work was actually prior to his 1829 visit to Scotland, as seen from the letters to his sister about a "Sonate ecossaise" in 1828. When the piece was published in 1834, Mendelssohn replaced its original title with "Phantasie." Consisting of three movements, the Fantasia belongs in the category of the fantasy-sonata. Like Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata, each movement is in a faster tempo than the preceding one. Fantasia's elegantly simple and expressive themes are harmonically and rhythmically transformed in each movement, creating diverse textures and moods.

The first movement, *Con moto agitato*, begins with sweeping arpeggios of foreboding introduction, followed by a melancholy *Andante*. Intensely dramatic chords and octaves in different tonalities add improvisatory character to the middle section. The recapitulation echoes the main theme, now with passionate anguish, above broken octaves of a rising chromatic scale. This intensity subsides into the melancholy spirit of the opening. A part of the agitated middle section briefly returns, and the single voice of the main melody over mysterious bass octaves closes the 1st movement.

The second movement, *Allegro con moto*, is a charming dance-like scherzo in A major, with an inventive thematic transformation. The *Presto* finale is fiery and virtuosic *moto perpetuo* in the sonata form. The thrilling coda concludes the piece with feverish ardor.

Albumblatt (Album Leaf) in E minor, Op. 117, "Lied ohne Worte"

Published in 1872, it was probably written in 1837, when Mendelssohn was married to a daughter of Hugenot pastor, Cécile Charlotte Sophie Jeanrenaud (October 10, 1817 – September 25, 1853). A mesmerizing lyrical melody is soaring over gently flowing left-hand arpeggios. The middle section reminds of angelic chorale, full of love and warmth.

Variations sérieuses, **Op. 54** is a set of 17 variations on a theme in D minor. Mendelssohn had written three sets of piano variations, but only this one was published during his lifetime. It was completed on June 4, 1841. This monumental work was composed as part of a campaign to raise funds for the erection of a bronze statue of Ludwig van Beethoven in his home town of Bonn. The Viennese publisher Pietro Mechetti asked Mendelssohn and other most renowned composers of that time to contribute to a 'Beethoven Album', of which the proceeds would go to the statue. It was published in January 1842, which also included pieces by Liszt, Chopin, Moscheles, Czerny, Döhler, Henselt, Kalkbrenner, Taubert and Thalberg, as well as Schumann's *Fantasie* in C major. Mendelssohn's close friend Ignaz Moscheles stated "I play the *Variations sérieuses* again and again, each time I enjoy the beauty again." Ferruccio Busoni also admired the *Variations*. Interestingly, the sketches at Deutsche Staatsbibliothek in Berlin show that this work was conceived backward from the Finale.

These Variations possess wide diversity of moods, coloration, and pianistic invention, requiring a virtuoso technique. They are not only "serious", they are tragic: a suffering man bares his heart. The sighs and chromaticism of the theme remind of Bach's *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* Cantata, BWV 12. Of the special interest are the 3rd "Brahmsian" variation, the 5th and 11th remind of Schumann, the 8th and 11th are in Schubert's "spinning song" style, the 10th is a perfect fugato, 13th is a premonition of 20th century style of Prokofiev and Bartók, 14th evokes the consoling atmosphere of a prayer and precursors César Franck. In the measures 290-293, the passionate and brilliant final *Presto* of the Coda quotes a motif *Blute nur, du liebes Herz* from the Saint Matthew Passion which Mendelssohn had resurrected from its obscurity.

Caprice, Op 33 No. 1 (1836), is the first in the set of three. All have a similar form and are dedicated to Mendelssohn's friend, Karl Klingemann, with whom he travelled in England, Scotland and Wales. In the review in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, Schumann described its mood as 'gentle grief'. It starts with an introduction *Adagio quasi fantasia* with romantic rising arpeggios. It is followed by an impassionate sonata-form movement, *Presto agitato* that is full of conflicting emotions, expressed by unique sound textures and changing rhythmical figures.

The **Etude in F minor, WoO1**, was originally composed in 1836 as a prelude, probably to be followed by the fugue in F minor for the set of Preludes and Fugues, Op 35. This Etude appeared as a standalone piece in the *Méthode des méthodes*, released in 1840 by Ignaz Moscheles and the Belgian music critic F-J Fétis. The piece has a gripping eloquent theme and consists of three sound layers: a bass line in the left hand, arpeggios shared between the left and right hands, and a

melody in the right hand. This style was utilized also in compositions by Thalberg, Liszt, Fanny Hensel (Mendelssohn's sister), and other virtuoso pianists-composers of 1830s.

The **Three Etudes, Op. 104b**, are believed to be written from 1834 to 1838 (however, the third etude has no specific date). They are considered to be among Mendelssohn's finest piano works—perfectly balanced between technical virtuosity and pure musical beauty. **Etude No. 1 in B flat minor, Presto** was written in June, 1836. Tumultuous waves of arpeggios and deep bass notes create dramatic canvas for the lamenting melody, shared between right and left hands. **Etude No. 2 in F major, Allegro con moto** (April, 1834) projects pure happiness in its light triplets running through various tonalities, reminding of a rondo sonata movement. **Etude No. 3 in A minor, Allegro vivace** is a playfully syncopated scherzo with staccato chords and vivid contrasts.

Rondo Capriccioso in E major, Op. 14 is one of Mendelssohn's most beautiful piano works, in which he exploits the full dynamic range of the piano, expressive contrasts and interesting sound fabrics. It was originally written in 1824 when he was just 15 years old.

Mendelssohn's biographer, R. Larry Todd, writes:

"The origins of the Rondo capriccioso in E major, Op 14, date to 1824, when Mendelssohn composed an Étude in E minor in his trademark elfin style, with delicate points of imitation and scurrying passagework, but also powerful martellato passages. Then, in 1830, he found a special occasion to revive the work. While visiting Munich en route to Italy and the beginning of his Grand Tour that led him as far south as Paestum, he encountered the talented pianist Delphine von Schauroth (1814–1887), whom he described as 'slim, blond, blue-eyed, with white hands, and somewhat aristocratic'... In Munich the two made a musical exchange: Schauroth penned a lyrical—and Mendelssohnian—Lied ohne Worte in E major, and Mendelssohn reciprocated by adding to his Étude a lyrical and Lied ohne Worte-like Andante, also in E major, with a brief transition to the former Étude. Covering up all traces of the recomposition, he described the process as adding 'sauce and mushrooms'. The finished product appeared later in 1830 in England and 1831 in a German edition as the Rondo capriccioso, and became a favorite virtuoso concert piece of the nineteenth century." It continues to be one of the best-loved piano gems.

~Sophia Agranovich