

PROGRAM NOTES

Josef Gabriel Rheinberger: Mass for Double Choir in E-flat, Op. 109 (1878)

Movements calling for reform of church music recur fairly regularly. Typically retrogressive, they seek an elemental simplicity purged of distracting elaborations. Concerns about artistic quality are seldom on the agenda. Consider that oft-told tale of Palestrina's "saving" Western art music from the zealotry of the Counter Reformation by demonstrating, with his *Pope Marcellus* Mass, that polyphony need not muffle the text with musical intricacies. Even if that popular story is mostly moonshine, the call for reform was real enough. The garden of our sacred text has become choked with weeds, cried the reformers, and it's high time we got out the pruning shears.

Similar concerns provided the impetus for the Cecilian Movement, which got going in the early nineteenth century and reached its full strength by the 1870s. The Cecilian goal was to strip away any and all evidence of liberal Enlightenment gestures and return church music to its proper role in the service of clearly-declamed text. In a time when the modernism of the Liszt–Wagner "New German School" was insinuating itself into churches throughout Europe and America, the Cecilians provided a strong basis for relatively conservative church composers who sought rapport with the masters of the past.

Munich-based organist, composer, and teacher Josef Gabriel Rheinberger was initially attracted to Cecilian ideals, but ultimately he was too red-blooded an artist to settle for reformist blandness. His *Mass for Double Choir in E-flat* of 1878 stands as his declaration of independence, most emphatically in the Credo with its firm rejection of Cecilian dictats against word-painting via unmistakably pictorial settings of phrases such as *et incarnatus est*, *descendit*, and *ascendit*. The *crucifixus* juxtaposes stark unisons against hymn-like chords for the contrasting *etiam pro nobis; et sepultus est* is set with measured decelerating rhythms.

None of that is meant to imply that the Rheinberger Mass seethes with late-Romantic colorist bling: far from it. It is at heart a finely-crafted polyphonic mass for antiphonally-placed double choir in the late-Renaissance Flemish and Venetian spirit, albeit channeled through Mendelssohn. The very opening summons the past with the double chorus intoning the *Kyrie eleison* in paired statements before launching into passages of textbook-perfect imitative counterpoint. To be sure, all that fine polyphony is interspersed with relatively modern chordal phrases, but overall the *Kyrie* invokes the style of Palestrina in all its suave dignity.

Chordal homophony prevails for the opening of the *Gloria* with its affirmation of spiritual joy. Gently falling melodic lines characterize the supplications of the *Qui tollis peccata mundi*, but a return to solid chordal style marks the *Quoniam tu solus sanctus* and the concluding series of melismas on the "amen." The *Credo* begins with a nod to Gregorian chant but quickly evolves into highly effective left-right antiphonal statements in chordal style. From the *Et incarnatus est* onwards word-painting and Romantic pictorialism dominate, ending with solid sustained chords for the "amen." Imitative polyphony returns in force with both the *Sanctus* and the *Benedictus*, while the *Agnus Dei* moves comfortably between both polyphony and homophony, ending the Mass with exquisitely falling melodic lines throughout the supplications of the *Dona nobis pacem*.

Felix Mendelssohn: *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*

Felix Mendelssohn was a tireless reviser, testing and discarding notes and phrases until he was satisfied, dogged in his pursuit of expressiveness, economy, and that ineffable Mendelssohnian *panache*. When his colleague Johann Christian Lobe brought up the subject of his rigorous self-criticism, Mendelssohn replied: "In everything I have written down there is at least as much deleted as there is allowed to stand."

Mendelssohn extended his own stratospherically high standards to the orchestral players under his supervision, enforcing his will with gentle inspiration or hysterical tantrums as the situation warranted. As the ranking conductor of the 1830s and '40s he created in Leipzig one of Europe's finest orchestras, in the process establishing the formal relationship of conductor to orchestra that has persisted to our own time. Throughout his spectacular career, Mendelssohn was and remains an exemplar of the modern professional musician. He even shouldered the staggering workload characteristic of so many of today's international virtuosos. But he wasn't up to it physically, and the outcome was tragic: having developed severe hypertension while still in his mid-thirties, he died at the age of thirty-eight after a series of strokes. The man literally worked himself to death.

True to form, Mendelssohn took his time with *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*. His first encounter with the 1799 dramatic poem by Goethe came about in 1830, but it wasn't until February 1843 that the completed work was finally performed. The poem tells of a tribe of Druids in the Harz mountains who, in the face of religious oppression from *arriviste* Christians, concoct a clever masquerade featuring the devil plus assorted demonic minions. Their ruse quickly frightens off the (apparently gullible) Christians, thereby leaving the Druids free to practice their time-honored

rituals. This story became the legend of the first Walpurgis Night, celebrated on May Day and named after Saint Walpurga, tireless evangelizer of the 8th-century Germans.

Mendelssohn was not the first composer to have a go at Goethe's poem. That honor went to Karl Friedrich Zelter, an esteemed composer of the day who is now mostly remembered—if at all—as having the young Felix Mendelssohn as his star pupil. Unable to fashion a workable musical setting even after three separate attempts, Zelter seems to have brought up the topic of Mendelssohn as a potential composer, and thus it was that the project landed in the hands of the 21-year-old composer, then travelling in Italy as part of his Grand Tour. In a letter of February 22, 1831 Felix informed his sister Fanny that he was working on the score, which he marked as completed in Milan on July 15.

Ever the perfectionist, he finished it all over again and changed the completion date to February 13, 1832 in Paris. That second version just might have been given a tryout in Berlin that winter, but hard evidence is lacking. All that is known for sure is that the score sat in limbo for the next decade. In 1842 Mendelssohn, now music director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra, took up the score again and gave it a top-to-bottom reworking, turning what had been a cantata into a symphonic oratorio. That (more or less) final version was premiered on February 2, 1843 to a fine success and excellent reviews. It was published later that year, but only after Mendelssohn had subjected the score to yet another flurry of nips and tucks.

Die erste Walpurgisnacht provides a splendid example of Mendelssohn's skilled fusion of Classical restraint with Romantic colorism. He applies thoroughgoing thematic unity to the score via a central motive that, first stated in the Overture, reappears in various guises throughout. (That motive might remind listeners of a similar figure that threads through his "Scottish" Symphony No. 3.) Yet the depiction of the winter in the Overture, and the blazing vitality of the demonic masquerade in No. 7 *Kommt mit Zacken und mit Gabeln* could satisfy even the most ardent connoisseur of Romantic pictorialism.

Mendelssohn, a Christianized Jew living in the midst of a distressingly anti-Semitic society, suffered from bigoted attacks throughout his life and indeed well into posterity. Goethe's poem about oppressed peoples striving to maintain their cultural identity must have resonated strongly with him, producing in *Die erste Walpurgisnacht* a superbly structured message of hope and optimism. No matter what the glib purveyors of sound-bites, one-liners, and put-downs might claim, Mendelssohn was no lightweight conservative. This workaholic, Olympian musician—master composer, incomparable pianist and conductor, founder of the Leipzig Conservatory, student of Goethe, Mozartean child prodigy, confidant of British royalty, etc., etc.—was immeasurably more than a high-class salon composer. *Die erste Walpurgisnacht* might yet remain off most music lovers' radar, but its imaginative virility makes abundantly clear that we have yet to take the full measure of Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn.

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