

Beethoven: Overture *Coriolan* Op62

Overture to the play by Heinrich Joseph von Collin, first performed in two concerts given in March 1807 at the palace of Prince Lobkowitz in Vienna. These concerts also included the premières of the fourth Symphony and the fourth Piano Concerto.

This overture was not apparently conceived for theatrical use, to introduce an actual production of the play, but may always have been meant as a concert work reflecting on the play's subject, which concerns the same historical character as Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*.

A successful and highly principled Roman general during the Republican period, he sought election to high office on the basis of his popularity, and promising to clean up the endemic corruption in public life. But his opponents persuaded the rabble that his ambition was to become their absolute ruler, and had him exiled. Determined to undo the injustice and overthrow those who had plotted against him, he headed an army of Etruscan enemies against Rome itself. But the Romans successfully negotiated a trade-based settlement with the Etruscan king and Coriolanus was ruined.

For Shakespeare the point is that the tragic hero destroys himself through blindness to his fatal flaw of ambitious pride. But for the Romantics, including Beethoven, the tragic hero is crushed by heaven in his glorious struggle to rise above the tawdry and corrupt.

Brahms: Variations on a Theme of J. Haydn 'St. Anthony Chorale' Op56a

First performed 2nd November 1873 in Vienna.

Theme - Andante (medium fast, major key, 2/4 time)

Variation I - Poco più animato (slightly livelier)

Variation II - Più vivace (faster again)

Variation III - Con moto (gently moving)

Variation IV - Andante con moto (minor key, 3/8 time)

Variation V - Vivace (lively, major key, 6/8 time)

Variation VI - Vivace (lively, major key, 2/4 time)

Variation VII - Grazioso (graceful, major, 6/8 time)

Variation VII - Presto non troppo (hurried but not too much, minor key, 3/4 time)

Finale - Andante (medium fast, major key, 2/2 time)

Brahms wrote for orchestra less than twenty times in total, but his reputation as a fine orchestrator is secure. For many people these Variations, composed during a summer break near Starnberg among the lakes south-west of Munich, are the most complete textbook of his orchestral craft. The theme is a hymn-like tune which Haydn had used in a divertimento.

Brahms like many composers, then and now, chose to write orchestral works by first producing a short score, i.e. a sketch laid out as if it were for one or two pianos. Before publication of the symphonies, for example, he would have a two-piano version played over to a private audience of friends and publishers to gauge reactions before making the works public. Uniquely in this case he also produced the two-piano version to publication standard and issued it as Op56b at the same time as the orchestral version. Neither version is derived from the other: they are both the original, worked up from the composition sketches.

Mendelssohn: Symphony no.4 in A major op.90 "Italian"

First performed May 1833 in London.

Allegro vivace
Andante con moto
Con moto moderato
Saltarello (Presto)

The old canard that Mendelssohn is shallow - a hangover from a general 19th century slur on Jewish artists which lives on through repetition by the ignorant - is fully answered by this brilliant work, which bristles with power of command and originality. If any of its originality is now lost on us it is only because it inspired so much imitation.

He sketched most of the symphony in the winter of 1830/31 while in Rome as part of an extended tour of Italy via Austria and Switzerland. In February he wrote in a letter "rapid progress: it will be the jolliest piece I have so far written, especially the last movement. I have not yet decided on the Adagio ..." In the event when he did add a slow second movement he opted for a processional Andante con moto rather than a true Adagio. What prompted him to finish and polish up the piece was a November 1832 commission for a symphony from the (later Royal) Philharmonic Society in London. The RPS has recently resumed its rôle in commissioning new works, so tradition lives again.

The sun shines out of the first movement from beginning to end. This is what we think of when we think 'Italy.' But this piece had a part in re-defining the positive reputation of Italy as a bright land of happy people, scented air and health with style. Italy in the late 18th Century - half Austrian, half Bourbon - was generally seen negatively as the downtrodden land of incurable poverty, tarts and scoundrels, where down-at-heel aristocrats and parasitic clergy sucked all vigour into their crumbling palaces, basilicas and opera houses. Goethe may have started the re-invention of Italy - *Knowest thou the land where the lemon blooms* - and Mendelssohn was alert to it, whereas only a few years earlier Byron's *Childe Harold* for example had only seen it the old way. This symphony helped to recolour how the English perceive Italy. Its legacy lives on in holiday brochures and adverts for olive oil.

Solemn, icon-bearing religious processions were an established cliché of Italy in French opera scenes and in picture books. Integrating this intermezzo scene as a movement of a 'proper' symphony, Mendelssohn has been subtle in combining the needs of expression with the needs of structure.

The third movement is a Minuet made of the scents of blossoms, interspersed with a Trio section of fairy horns that call evocatively through landscape and history. The finale presents another vivid scene, featuring two tunes for the Roman folkdance called Saltarello (literally 'little hop') which "...was generally danced alone or by one couple, and consisted of increasingly rapid hopping steps around an imaginary semicircle, accompanied by 'violent' arm movements." Mendelssohn makes a grand statement from these humble materials, asserting the immensity of life.