

Jörg Widmann conducts Mendelssohn and his own Second Violin Concerto

Thursday, March 4, 2027 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Jörg Widmann, conductor · Carolin Widmann, violin · Jörg Widmann, clarinet

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	MENDELSSOHN 1809–1847 <i>The Hebrides, Overture in B minor, Op. 26 ("Fingal's Cave")</i>	10'
2	WIDMANN b. 1973 <i>Violin Concerto No. 2</i>	35'
3	WIDMANN b. 1973 <i>Fantasie for solo clarinet</i>	7'
4	MENDELSSOHN 1809–1847 <i>Symphony No. 5 in D major, Op. 107 ('Reformation')</i>	30'
TOTAL MUSIC		82'

Felix Mendelssohn

10 minutes

1809–1847

The Hebrides, Overture in B minor, Op. 26 ("Fingal's Cave")

THE COMPOSER

Felix Mendelssohn was born into one of the most cultivated families in Europe. His grandfather Moses was a celebrated philosopher of the Enlightenment; his father Abraham was a prosperous banker; his sister Fanny was a gifted composer in her own right. Baptized a Protestant in 1816, the young Felix received an extraordinary education in languages, art, philosophy, and music, studying piano with Ludwig Berger and composition with Carl Friedrich Zelter.

A child prodigy who gave his first public performance at age nine, Mendelssohn composed his miraculous overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at seventeen. But he was equally important as a conductor and cultural advocate: his 1829 Berlin performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, a landmark event, was instrumental in reviving interest in Bach's music. As music director in Leipzig from 1835, he built the Gewandhaus Orchestra into one of Europe's finest ensembles and founded the Leipzig Conservatory in 1843.

Mendelssohn's music combines Classical clarity with Romantic expressiveness. His essentially conservative tastes set him apart from more radical contemporaries like Liszt, Wagner, and Berlioz, yet his orchestral writing, particularly his handling of color and atmosphere, was highly influential.

ABOUT THE WORK

In the spring of 1829 Felix Mendelssohn, twenty years old and already the composer of the Octet and the Midsummer Night's Dream overture, went to London. When the concert season ended he set off north with his friend Karl Klingemann for a tour of Scotland. In early August they reached the west coast, within sight of the Hebrides. Mendelssohn wrote home at once: 'In order to make you understand how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me, the following came into my head there.' Beneath the sentence he wrote out twenty-one bars of music, with notes on the orchestration. They are the opening of this overture, almost exactly as we know it.

The boat trip to the island of Staffa and its basalt sea cave, Fingal's Cave, came only after that letter was begun. The cave gave the piece its nickname, but the music was already under way before he saw it.

Finishing it was harder. A first version was complete by the end of 1830, and Mendelssohn kept revising it. The overture was first played in London in May 1832, by the Philharmonic Society. He could not settle on a title either: The Lonely Island, The Isles of Fingal, The Hebrides and Fingal's Cave were all used at one time or another, and the last two have both stuck.

It is a concert overture, which means that it introduces no play or opera. It stands alone, about ten minutes long, and it does not tell a story. It paints a place and the feeling of being there.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first bar is the idea Mendelssohn sent home: a short falling figure in the violas, cellos and bassoons, repeated higher, then higher again, while the violins and woodwinds hold long notes above. It sounds like water moving under still air, and nearly everything that follows grows out of it.

The second theme rises out of the cellos and bassoons, in the major: a long, warm melody that the violins then take over. The middle of the piece is stormier, with fanfares in the brass and the wave figure driven hard through the strings. Near the end, listen for the second theme coming back quietly on the clarinets, like a memory, before a last squall and a close that fades to almost nothing.

Jörg Widmann

b. 1973

Violin Concerto No. 2

THE COMPOSER

Jörg Widmann was born in Munich in 1973 and is active as a composer, clarinetist and conductor. He studied the clarinet in Munich and with Charles Neidich at the Juilliard School in New York, and composition with teachers who included Hans Werner Henze, Heiner Goebbels and Wolfgang Rihm. His catalogue includes orchestral works, concertos, string quartets, the opera *Babylon* and the oratorio *Arche*; the concert overture *Con brio*, written in homage to Beethoven, is among his most often played pieces. Much of his music is in conversation with the Classical and Romantic composers he plays as a clarinetist. He taught the clarinet and later composition at the Freiburg University of Music from 2001 to 2015, and since 2017 has held a chair in composition at the Barenboim-Said Akademie in Berlin.

ABOUT THE WORK

Jörg Widmann and his younger sister Carolin made music together as children, he on the clarinet and she on the violin. His First Violin Concerto, of 2007, was first played by Christian Tetzlaff. The Second, composed in 2018, was written for his sister and is dedicated to her.

It was commissioned by Suntory Hall in Tokyo together with the Orchestre de Paris and the Frankfurt Radio Symphony. Carolin Widmann gave the first performance at Suntory Hall on 31 August 2018, with the Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra conducted by the composer, and then played it in Paris, Frankfurt and Stockholm. These concerts are its first performances in the Netherlands.

Widmann has called the violin concerto a ‘sacred’ genre, and one to which a composer entrusts the most personal things, all the more so in a piece for his sister. He hears the violin as an instrument close to the human voice. He has also described the concerto as an exercise in holding back. Across its three movements he keeps to a strictly limited stock of notes and gestures and varies them constantly; invention and colour had always come easily to him, he wrote, but the concentration on reduction and form was new.

The concerto lasts about thirty-five minutes.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement is called ‘Una ricerca’, a search. In the composer’s words it is the violin’s search for itself, for its own voice: sounds, gestures and shapes are tried out one after another, and the orchestra answers only now and then. It lasts about five minutes.

The second movement, 'Romanze', is by far the longest and is the centre of the piece. Widmann calls it a journey inward. Tender, song-like passages stand next to loud and brutal ones, and the mood changes many times, but the violin remains the narrator throughout: listen for how rarely it stops playing.

The finale, 'Mobile', is as short as the first movement. Patterns from the earlier movements are thrown into constant high speed and pushed to extremes, yet the composer asks for the touch to stay light almost to the end.

Jörg Widmann

b. 1973

7 minutes

Fantasie for solo clarinet

THE COMPOSER

Jörg Widmann was born in Munich in 1973 and is active as a composer, clarinetist and conductor. He studied the clarinet in Munich and with Charles Neidich at the Juilliard School in New York, and composition with teachers who included Hans Werner Henze, Heiner Goebbels and Wolfgang Rihm. His catalogue includes orchestral works, concertos, string quartets, the opera *Babylon* and the oratorio *Arche*; the concert overture *Con brio*, written in homage to Beethoven, is among his most often played pieces. Much of his music is in conversation with the Classical and Romantic composers he plays as a clarinetist. He taught the clarinet and later composition at the Freiburg University of Music from 2001 to 2015, and since 2017 has held a chair in composition at the Barenboim-Said Akademie in Berlin.

ABOUT THE WORK

Jörg Widmann wrote the *Fantasie* in 1993, when he was about twenty and still a clarinet student. He has called it his first real piece for his own instrument. He played the first performance himself, in March 1994 at the Bavarian Radio in Munich.

The model was Stravinsky's *Three Pieces for solo clarinet* of 1919, which Widmann knew as a player. He described his own piece as eccentric in its virtuosity and cheerful and ironic in character, and as 'a little imaginary scene' in the spirit of the *commedia dell'arte*, in which several characters talk at close quarters. All of them are played by one clarinetist.

For the most part the *Fantasie* uses the warm, singing clarinet sound that the Romantic composers loved. Against that it sets what Widmann's publisher calls ironic side trips into dance music, klezmer and jazz. It lasts about seven minutes.

In this concert the composer plays it himself, between conducting his Second Violin Concerto and Mendelssohn's 'Reformation' Symphony.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The piece begins with a multiphonic, a way of fingering and blowing that makes the clarinet sound several notes at once. It is a knowing nod to the avant-garde, and the piece then heads somewhere else entirely.

After that, follow the characters. Widmann thought of the piece as a scene in which several people talk at once, so listen for the changes of voice: a singing line is cut off by a burst of fast notes, a dance rhythm appears and is dropped, and turns of phrase borrowed from klezmer and jazz slip in and out. Much of the comedy lies in the speed of these changes, as if the players in the scene kept interrupting one another.

It is also a display piece, full of virtuoso flourishes and of the unusual playing techniques that Widmann, as a clarinetist, knew at first hand.

Felix Mendelssohn

30 minutes

1809–1847

Symphony No. 5 in D major, Op. 107 ('Reformation')

THE COMPOSER

Felix Mendelssohn was born into one of the most cultivated families in Europe. His grandfather Moses was a celebrated philosopher of the Enlightenment; his father Abraham was a prosperous banker; his sister Fanny was a gifted composer in her own right. Baptized a Protestant in 1816, the young Felix received an extraordinary education in languages, art, philosophy, and music, studying piano with Ludwig Berger and composition with Carl Friedrich Zelter.

A child prodigy who gave his first public performance at age nine, Mendelssohn composed his miraculous overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at seventeen. But he was equally important as a conductor and cultural advocate: his 1829 Berlin performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, a landmark event, was instrumental in reviving interest in Bach's music. As music director in Leipzig from 1835, he built the Gewandhaus Orchestra into one of Europe's finest ensembles and founded the Leipzig Conservatory in 1843.

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ABOUT THE WORK

Mendelssohn began this symphony on the same journey to Britain that produced *The Hebrides*. In September 1829 he wrote to his family from England that he had a new work in mind, and he decided to start on it in London. The occasion he was aiming at lay the following summer: 25 June 1830 was the three-hundredth anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, the statement of faith that Luther's followers presented to Emperor Charles V in 1530, and celebrations were planned in Protestant Germany. Mendelssohn, born into a Jewish family and baptised a Lutheran as a child, wanted to contribute a symphony built on Luther's hymn 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott' (A mighty fortress is our God).

He finished the score in Berlin in the spring of 1830, too late for it to be taken up, and the anniversary passed without it. Two years later, in Paris, François-Antoine Habeneck put it into rehearsal with the Conservatoire orchestra and then dropped it; the players are said to have found it too learned, with too much counterpoint and too little melody. Mendelssohn conducted the first performance himself in Berlin in November 1832. He never performed it again, came to dislike it and would not let it be printed.

The score was finally published in 1868, twenty-one years after his death. That is why it is called No. 5, although it was the second of his five symphonies for full orchestra to be written. It lasts about half an hour.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The slow introduction starts with a rising four-note figure in the violas that passes up through the strings, as in old church counterpoint. Fanfares in the winds grow more insistent, and then the strings, very quietly, play a rising cadence known as the Dresden Amen, a formula from the church music of Dresden. Wagner later used the same phrase for the Grail in *Parsifal*. The fast main section is in D minor and has a fierce, dotted theme; the Amen returns, just as quietly, before the reprise.

The second movement is a scherzo in B-flat, light on its feet, with a relaxed trio in G major. The third is short: a sad song in G minor for the first violins, more like an aria than a symphonic slow movement.

Then comes the finale. A single flute plays the first line of 'Ein feste Burg', alone and unharmonised. Other instruments join in, a few at a time, and fill out the harmony. The Allegro that fol-

lows treats the tune in several ways, including passages of fugue, and the weight of the bass is increased by a contrabassoon (Mendelssohn also asked for a serpent, an obsolete bass wind instrument, in this movement). At the very end the full orchestra plays Luther's hymn in broad, plain chords.

Tonight's artists

Carolyn Widmann *violin*

The concerto was written for Carolyn Widmann and she has played it since its first performance in Tokyo in 2018. Here she brings it to the Netherlands for the first time, with her brother conducting, as he did at the premiere. These concerts are also her first appearances with the Concertgebouw Orchestra.

Carolyn Widmann is a German violinist, the younger sister of the composer and clarinettist Jörg Widmann. Her work ranges from the Classical and Romantic concertos to new pieces written for her, and takes in solo recitals, chamber music and performances in which she directs the orchestra from the violin. She is based in Leipzig, where she has been professor of violin at the University of Music and Theatre since 2006. In 2018 she gave the first performance of her brother's Second Violin Concerto in Tokyo.

Jörg Widmann *clarinet*

After the interval Jörg Widmann puts down the baton and plays his own Fantasie for solo clarinet, a piece he wrote at about twenty and first performed himself. He then conducts the 'Reformation' Symphony. The orchestra has played several of his works before, but this is the first time he has conducted it.

Jörg Widmann, born in Munich in 1973, works as a composer, a clarinettist and a conductor. He studied the clarinet with Gerd Starke in Munich and with Charles Neidich at the Juilliard School, and began composition lessons at the age of eleven; his later teachers included Hans Werner Henze and Wolfgang Rihm. As a clarinettist he plays the Classical and Romantic repertoire as well as new music, and his chamber music partners have included Daniel Barenboim, Tabea Zimmermann and András Schiff. He was principal conductor of the Irish Chamber Orchestra from 2017 to 2021 and holds conducting posts with the Munich Chamber Orchestra and the NDR Radiophilharmonie in Hanover. He teaches composition at the Barenboim-Said Akademie in Berlin.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Mendelssohn Remembered**

Roger Nichols, Faber and Faber 1997

Mendelssohn as the people who knew him saw him, in letters and memoirs, including his travelling companions on the journeys that produced *The Hebrides*.

ACCESSIBLE **A Portrait of Mendelssohn**

Clive Brown, Yale University Press 2003

A portrait built from documents of the time, with good sections on Mendelssohn's religion and family background, which bear directly on the 'Reformation' Symphony.

DEEPER **Mendelssohn: A Life in Music**

R. Larry Todd, Oxford University Press 2003

The standard scholarly biography, with detailed accounts of the British journey of 1829, the long revision of *The Hebrides* and the troubled history of the 'Reformation' Symphony.

SOURCES

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2. Jörg Widmann conducts Mendelssohn (5 March 2027), Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouwconcert.nl/en/calendar/jorg-widmann-conducts-mendelssohn-2027-03-05/>
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4. The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave), Op. 26, Felix Mendelssohn, Hollywood Bowl (Los Angeles Philharmonic). <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/388/hebrides-overture>
5. Program notes: Mendelssohn, Estacio & Donnelly, National Arts Centre. <https://nac-cna.ca/en/event/notes/37587>
6. Violin Concerto No. 2 (Widmann), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_No._2_\(Widmann\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_No._2_(Widmann))
7. Jörg Widmann's Violinkonzert Nr. 2 with Carolin Widmann and the Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra, European American Music Distributors Company (Schott). <https://www.eamdc.com/news/world-premiere-of-jorg-widmanns-violinkonzert-nr-2/>
8. Jörg Widmann Conducts the US Premiere of his Violin Concerto No. 2 at Juilliard, European American Music Distributors Company (Schott). <https://www.eamdc.com/news/jorg-widmann-conducts-the-us-premiere-of-his-violin-concerto-no-2-at-juilliard/>
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13. Mendelssohn: Symphony No. 5, Reformation, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/mendelssohn-symphony-no-5-reformation>
14. Jörg Widmann, conductor, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouwconcert.nl/en/orchestra/conductors/jorg-widmann/>
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Felix Mendelssohn · Symphony No. 5 in D major, Op. 107 ('Reformation')

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CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2027-03-04-widmann>

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