

Bizet & Mendelssohn
November 20, 2026

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Notes on the Program
By Aaron Grad

Symphony No. 1 in C Major [1855]

GEORGES BIZET

Born October 25, 1838 in Paris, France

Died June 3, 1875 in Bougival, France

Georges Bizet was a star student at the Paris Conservatory when he composed this self-assured symphony at the age of 17. He spent his short adult life mostly occupied with operas, planning as many as 30 but leaving only six intact. The last was his masterpiece, *Carmen*, and even that was panned at first by the Paris press. He died soon after its premiere at the age of 36.

Bizet showed off just how sharp of a student he was with a symphony that infused elements from Mozart, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn, with no small influence from his own teacher, Charles Gounod. Bizet never tried to have this youthful symphony published or performed, and the forgotten manuscript passed from his widow to another composer and finally back to the Conservatory, where it was finally rediscovered and performed for the first time in 1935.

The opening movement’s Classical balance and breathless exhilaration recall Mozart, another symphonic prodigy who was always an opera composer at heart. The plaintive, song-like slow movement reaches into an even more distant past when it incorporates stately dotted rhythms (i.e. alternating long and short notes) and fugal counterpoint in a Baroque style, while the scurrying finale updates the whimsical frenzy of Mendelssohn.

Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, Op. 56 (“Scottish”) [1842]

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born February 3, 1809 in Hamburg, Germany

Died November 4, 1847 in Leipzig, Germany

Felix Mendelssohn surely inherited the intellectual curiosity of his grandfather, the famous Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, but it was really the fortune his father amassed in the banking business that gave Mendelssohn every possible advantage to capitalize on his extraordinary gifts. Guided by elite tutors, he developed into a prodigy unlike any the world had ever seen—a preternaturally mature composer and pianist who could improvise or sight-read anything, and who could also play violin, paint hyper-realistic watercolors, and speak and read in six languages, among his myriad talents.

When Mendelssohn was 20, he embarked on that great rite of passage for young men of a certain class: the “grand tour” of Europe, starting in the British Isles. After he visited Holyrood Castle in Edinburgh, Scotland, he sent a letter home to say how struck he was by a chapel there; “Now roofless,” he wrote, “grass and ivy grow there, and at the broken altar Mary was crowned Queen of England. Everything around is broken and moldering and the bright sky shines in. I believe I have found today in that old chapel the beginning of my Scottish symphony.”

He soon sketched the mournful, noble theme that would appear in the symphony’s introduction, and he worked on it more while his tour continued through Rome, but he ended up setting the sketches aside for more than a decade. He revived it during a yearlong residency in Berlin and brought it back to his home orchestra in Leipzig for the premiere in 1842. He conducted it again a few months later in London and dedicated the score to Queen Victoria.

The first movement’s slow introduction channels the bygone glory and solemnity of that Scottish castle, leading into a fast body of the movement that reaches peak agitation in a passage that surges like sheets of rain in a violent storm. Music from the introduction returns at the end, leading directly into the symphony’s scherzo that begins with a reeling clarinet melody that might have been inspired by a bagpipe contest Mendelssohn witnessed.

In the slow third movement, the violins are instructed to play in a *cantabile* (“singing”) style when they introduce the main melody. With the harp-like plucking in the accompaniment and a first phrase that seems to fit perfectly with the words “Ave Maria,” this may have been Mendelssohn’s way of paying tribute to the great Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott (whom he met in Scotland) and his legendary poem *The Lady of the Lake*, in which the heroine recites that prayer in a time of duress. The blustery finale recedes at the end for a hushed transition to a hearty, life-affirming hymn that leaves behind the home key of A-minor for a more optimistic A-major.