

Felix Mendelssohn: Symphony No. 4
Why Italy?

Perusal script

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VO1

ACTOR 1 *writing to his parents in excitement*

At dawn...

we crossed the bridge and dropped down into a wide plain,

leaving the Alps behind us...

The sun gleamed bright and warm through the thick foliage of the vines...

and the dusty road wound through orchards,

in which all the trees were connected to one another by trailing boughs...

[with splendour]

We were in another country!...

ME 1 **Mvt 1 - bar 1 to downbeat of bar 26**

VO2

ACTOR 2 *an older traveller, delighted by this encounter*

Somewhere along the road...

our coach stopped...

and a young man got in and sat beside me...

From his pocket... he took a pencil...

and a note-book...

across which... from time to time...

his hand passed with the rapidity of lightning...

He was making drawings...

of everything that we were passing on the way...

ME 2 Mvt 1 - bar 102 to halfway beat of bar 123 VO 3

ACTOR 1 *to his parents*

I had imagined that my first impressions would be like an explosion...

But they haven't been...

Instead, I've found warmth and cheerfulness...

and an indescribable sensation of contentment...

Today is Sunday... and there are carriages on the road...

and people in bright costumes, carrying flowers...

women with roses in their hair...

and old men with donkeys...

And everyone... is going to church...

ME 3 Mvt 2 - Bar 1 to halfway point of bar 11

VO 4

ACTOR 1 *to his parents, with delight and light laughter*

Everywhere you look, there are groups of people being idle...

simply standing around...

but looking... so picturesque!

I saw one man slip his arm around his wife's waist

and whirl her in the air!

And then they... just walked on!

I know it's trivial... but it was... so attractive...

ME 4 **Mvt 3 - Bar 1 to repeat in bar 20**

VO5

ACTOR 1 *to his parents*

It's a holiday here...

and the whole country has such an air,

that I feel like a Prince making a ceremonial entry...

[keeping up the sense of magnificence]

Vines, thick with grapes,

hang in festoons from every tree...

in wreaths and arches...

and in the distance there are scattered cypress trees...

ME 5 **Mvt 3 - Start of trio, from double bar repeat in bar 76 to
downbeat of bar 86**

VO 6

ACTOR 1 *to his parents*

It's January...

and here in Rome the loveliest spring weather...

Last night, I went up the hill

to a party at the Villa Medici...

Outside, everything was dark and peaceful...
Light came only from a single window...
and the faintest fragments of music floated in the air
mingling with the murmur of the fountains...

Inside, I found my friends standing round a piano...
singing, but so badly!

And then the dancing started...
and I wished you could have seen Louisa...

[grand announcement!]

dance the Saltarello!

ME 6 **Saltarello (scored for strings)**

VO 7

ACTOR 2 *knowledgeably, and enjoying the Italian word*

The *saltarello*...

an old Italian country dance...

from '*saltare*'... to leap or jump...

ME 7 **Mvt 4 - from bar 1 to halfway point of bar 14**

VO 8

ACTOR 1 *to his parents*

These last few days we've had incessant storms...

and icy cold... and streams of water from the sky...

Like this, Rome is odious, ugly and uncomfortable...

ME 8 **Mvt 4 - from second quarter note of bar 34 to end of bar 68**

VO 9

ACTOR 2 *continuing the thought*

Another country dance... a *tarantella*...

It's mostly popular with girls of the lower classes...

You never see the boys doing it...

ME 9 **Tarantella (scored for strings)**

VO 10

ACTOR 1 *delighted*

It's true!

The girls here amuse themselves for hours in this way!

ME 10 **Mvt 4 - from bar 122 to downbeat of bar 133**

VO 11

ACTOR 1 *tenderly*

Dearest mother...

It's your birthday,

and I so much wanted to finish

the light-hearted symphony I'm writing ...

so you could receive it on this day...

It's all about the Italian countryside...

[sudden darkening of the tone]

and it's made for you...

because I know how little you care...

for music of mists and melancholy...

ME 11 **Mvt 4 - from pickup to bar 239 to end (264)**

VO 12

NARRATOR

Felix Mendelssohn...

beloved child

of one of the greatest and most distinguished

Jewish families... in Berlin...

His grandfather Moses was a famous philosopher...

His father Abraham a wealthy banker...

And he and his older sister Fanny...

sensational child prodigies...

Their music teacher was the finest that could be found...

Professor Zelter...

ACTOR 2 *elderly professor*

I cannot get over my astonishment with the boy...

Novelty, beauty, originality...

fluency, repose, dramatic power...

all are found in him...

I can hardly wait for him to go to Italy...

There the very stones have ears,

while here in Germany they eat lentils and pigs' ears...

NARRATOR

In 1830... the 21-year-old composer...

set out over the mountains...

to Venice...

Florence...

five winter months in Rome...

ACTOR 2 *with relish*

Naples and the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum....

back up again to Rome...

and then northwards... on to Genoa and Milan...

ACTOR 1 *to his parents in excitement*

Every morning brings fresh anticipations...

and every day fulfills them...

I have been studying

how to make sketches of the landscape in a different way...

And I am composing with such freshness and such vigour...

that my new... Italian Symphony...

will be the most joyful thing I've ever written...

NARRATOR

But when eventually... he came home...

after a whole year of travelling...

he brought his drawings with him...

but no symphony...

All the music was in his head...

Another twelve months passed...

and then...

an unexpected letter...

ACTOR 2 *an elderly admirer in England, bursting with excitement*

November 5th, 1832... London... England...

My dear friend,

I have this moment come

from the Philharmonic Society...

and although the clock has just struck midnight,

I cannot go to bed without communicating to you

the first motion of the evening...

"Resolved,

That Mr Mendelssohn be requested to compose a symphony...

and two other pieces...

for the sum of One Hundred Guineas..."

ACTOR 1 *formal reply, but delighted*

My sincerest and warmest thanks to the Philharmonic Society...

I am deeply honoured...

And when the symphony is finished,

I will bring it to London myself...

NARRATOR

1832...

Only five years after the death of Beethoven...

But almost no one was writing symphonies now...

It seemed that Beethoven had said it all...

ME 12 Beethoven 7th symphony - opening 4 bars

VO 13A

ACTOR 2 *an old professor giving sage advice*

To compose symphonies after Beethoven,

one must step far from the shadow of his genius...

One must... break new ground...

ME 13a Build up chord of wind (score provided)

VO 13B

NARRATOR

A chord...

simple, old-fashioned, but distinctive...

And... an effervescent rhythm...

ME 13b Mendelssohn, Mvt 1, bars 1-6 (wind only, incl horns)

VO 14

ACTOR 1 *arguing with a critic, sophomoric*

'Break new ground'?

What does this phrase actually mean?!

Did Beethoven 'break new ground' after Mozart?

No!

Was one better than the other?

No!

I love Mozart... and... I love Beethoven...

ME 14 Beethoven 5th symphony - Mvt 1, opening 5 bars

VO 15A

NARRATOR

Evidently... Mendelssohn did indeed... love Beethoven...

The interval of a third...

ME 15a Clarinets - G E flat, F D (scored for clarinets in A)

VO 15B

NARRATOR

In Beethoven's hands, it quickly sprouts and develops...

ME 15b Beethoven 5th symphony - Mvt 1, bars 6-10

VO 15C

NARRATOR

...and... turns itself... into a second theme...

ME 15c Beethoven 5th symphony - horn, Mvt 1, bars 59-63

VO 16

NARRATOR

Mendelssohn... also... begins with a third...

ME 16a Clarinets A C sharp (score provided)

followed *attacca* by

ME 16b Mendelssohn, Mvt 1, bars 2-6 (violins only)

VO 17

NARRATOR

And Mendelssohn's third... like Beethoven's...
quickly sprouts... and develops branches...

ME 17a Oboe 1 does skeleton of process (score provided)

followed *attacca* by

ME 17b Mvt 1, pickup to 11 through to 18 (violins only)

VO 18

NARRATOR

And the musical branches make an arch...
curving back to where it started...

ME 18 Mvt 1, pickup of bar 24 to 26, wind and horns only

VO 19

NARRATOR

And again... like Beethoven...

a second theme grows directly from the first...

ME 19a Oboe 1 does E G sharp third etc (score provided)

followed *attacca* by

ME 19b **Mvt 1, bars 110-116**

VO 20

ACTOR 2 *an intense admirer*

Your music seems to flow so easily...

But I am told that you make many changes,
often right up to the last moment
when you hand the manuscript over to the musicians...

ACTOR 1 *quietly, seriously, the beginning of a doubt*

It's true...

In everything I've ever written,
there is at least as much deleted as I let stand...

NARRATOR

After his first two themes,
Mendelssohn originally thought...
that there should be a third one...

ME 20 **Oxford fragment 1 (marked 136 in scans)**
Tutti, from second bar of *recto* [*pp* in 1st violins] continuing
over the page on to the *verso* and stopping on downbeat of **11th**
bar

VO 21

NARRATOR

But almost immediately, the composer changed his mind...

and ripped those pages we just heard... right out of the score...

replacing them with something simpler...

ME 21 Mvt 1, bar 155 to end of 176 tutti

VO 22

NARRATOR

But the composer didn't just throw away
that elegant and catchy... third theme...

He kept it back... to use it later... and in a different way...

ME 22 Mvt 1, bar 187b to 220 (omitting vlins 2 and violas in final 3 bars)

VO 23

NARRATOR

A few moments further on...
Mendelssohn had another enchanting thought...

ACTOR 1 *in excitement at the idea, as though thinking of it*

This wild and energetic music...
could suddenly... dissolve...

and reveal... a melody...

[as though orchestrating it in his head]

for cellos and bassoon...

ME 23 **Oxford fragment 3 (beginning on page 139 of scans)**
From bar 1 of 139 verso (*ff* tutti chord of F sharp major)
through 140 recto and verso to recto of 141, stopping in bar

11

VO 24

NARRATOR

But again he changed his mind...

and ruthlessly cut all that music right out of the score...

ACTOR 1 *shaking his head in frustration*

Imagination plays clever tricks...

It smuggles feebleness

past ones intoxicated judgment and on to paper!

ACTOR 2

Feebleness? That melody was beautiful...

NARRATOR

But it was wrong...

It broke the flow... It held things up...

So he replaced it...

ME 24 **Mvt 1, bar 302 to 323**

VO 25A

ACTOR 2 *the professor, explaining the obvious*

Now... a symphonic movement... must have an ending...

NARRATOR

And this particular ending...

had to be... strong and recognisable...

ME 25a Mvt 1, bars 545-6, then facsimile of 1833 version [marked 44
in top left hand corner]

VO 25B

ACTOR 2 *The professor again, reproving*

Not strong enough...

NARRATOR

So he tried again...

ME 25b Facsimile of 1833 version, next page after the one marked
44 [no page number visible; tear in top left hand corner]

VO 25C

NARRATOR

But now he'd lost something...

that lovely echo of the opening...

So he tried a third time...

and this time... he arrived...

ME 25c Mvt 1, bars 547 to 563 [= end]

VO 26

NARRATOR

Two hundred years ago...
when wealthy and educated northern Europeans...
like Mendelssohn...
travelled such enormous distances to visit Italy...
they came to find another world...

ACTOR 1 *thrilled*

Outside my window people are dancing in the street...
even in the small hours of the night!
And singing duets... more beautifully than at the opera!
Italy at last!

ACTOR 2 *quoting extravagantly*

'Know you the land where lemon trees flower?
And among dark leaves golden oranges glow?
And gentle breezes drift o'er skies of blue?'

NARRATOR

But they also came... to discover history...

ACTOR 1 *excited*

Rome is the very embodiment of history...
and its ancient monuments elevate the soul...
inspiring it with... serene and solemn feelings...

ME 26a Mvt 2, bars 1-2 (no cellos and basses)

VO 27A

NARRATOR

What key is this music in?

Major?

ME 26b Flute 1 plays F major scale (score provided)

VO 27B

NARRATOR

Or minor?

ME 26c Flute 1 plays D minor scale (score provided)

VO 27C

NARRATOR

Or maybe this dark and eerie fragment of a chant...

ME 26d Mvt 2, bar 2

VO 27D

NARRATOR

...suggests... something older....

modal music...

ME 26e **Flute 1 plays A to A with B flat (score provided)**

VO 28

ACTOR 1 *enthusiastic and awe-struck*

Every day, I visit something different...

The paintings in the Borghese gallery...

or the ruins in the Forum...

Or... the Vatican...

Today... in St Peter's...

I watched the opening of a grand and solemn ceremony...

the Absolutions for the Pope...

ACTOR 2 *with pride and fascination*

A Jewish composer...

at the heart of the Roman Catholic world...

NARRATOR

But in his religion...

Mendelssohn was neither a Jew... nor a Roman Catholic...

He was a Lutheran...

like his great hero... Johann Sebastian Bach...

Mendelssohn was a passionate champion of Bach...

It was he who rediscovered the St. Matthew Passion...

and he proudly drew this little picture of himself...

playing Bach's music on the organ...

ME 27 **Bach: 'Nun komm...' arranged for cellos and basses,
bassoon and oboe, in D minor (score provided)**

VO 29

NARRATOR

In his new symphony...

the young composer lovingly imitates

that old-fashioned style...

a walking bass... for pedals...

and a simple melody above...

ME 28 **Mvt 2, from cellos and basses pickup at end of bar 2 to end
of bar 7**

VO 30A

NARRATOR

But where Bach's melody was a chorale...

a Lutheran hymn-tune...

Mendelssohn's melody...

is in the manner of a romantic ballad...

Like this one... by his own beloved teacher...

Professor Zelter...

Embedded audio: Zelter choral ballad