

## FELIX MENDELSSOHN

### Symphony No. 4 in A major, Op. 90, "Italian"

**WORK COMPOSED:** 1830–33; revised 1834

**WORLD PREMIERE:** May 13, 1833, in London. The composer conducted the London Philharmonic Society orchestra.

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Mendelssohn opens with a theme of exceptional verve given out by the violins over a rapid and rhythmically constant accompaniment in the woodwinds. Late in the first movement, Mendelssohn approaches the reprise of his opening paragraph by sounding part of that initial theme in slow motion.

Near the symphony's close, too, the composer offers a brief reference to the melody that opened the work, now heard in subdued and mournful tones.

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In the spring of 1830, the year he turned 21, Felix Mendelssohn set out from his home in Berlin for Italy. He traveled the peninsula for the next year and more. A man of broad culture and education, Mendelssohn took an interest in everything Italy had to offer. He visited Roman monuments and Renaissance churches, lingered before the canvases of Titian and other old masters, and observed with fascination the street scenes in Venice, Rome and Naples. He also drank in the Italian countryside, which, as he reported in his letters, delighted him.

And he found time to compose. In February 1831 Mendelssohn wrote to his family from Naples that "[my] Italian Symphony is making rapid progress." He had begun sketching this work in Rome the preceding autumn, and he worked at it over the next two years. An initial version of the symphony reached completion in the spring of 1833, just in time to fulfill a commission from the London Philharmonic Society. But the composer remained dissatisfied with his work, withheld it from publication, revised it substantially in 1834, and evidently planned to do so again during the years that followed.

Mendelssohn's doubts about the "Italian" Symphony seem ironic in light of its subsequent success. The genial character and generous endowment of melody that mark this composition have made it a favorite with audiences — not only among Mendelssohn's works but within the symphonic literature as a whole. And although the composer does not resort to programmatic tone-painting in any specific way, it is not difficult to hear in this piece a reflection of the sun-drenched Italian landscape he found so pleasing.

The work's four-movement format corresponds to that of the Classical-period symphony established by Haydn, Mozart and the young Beethoven, beginning with an *Allegro* of exceptional verve. The hymn-like subject of the ensuing *Andante con moto* has been compared by some commentators to an ancient pilgrims' song (as has a theme in Beethoven's Seventh Symphony), though this seems to be due more to its solemn character and steadily marching accompaniment than to a demonstrated resemblance to any known melody.

The third movement is a minuet in all but name, its flowing principal idea framing a central section featuring the horns, which reappear briefly in the last measures. In the finale, vigorous rhythms combined with minor-key harmonies suggest the *saltarello*, a Neapolitan folk-dance.

*Scored for pairs of winds, horns and trumpets; timpani; strings.*