

DVOŘÁK CELLO CONCERTO

SUNDAY, MARCH 16, 2025 | 3:00 PM
CENTURY II CONCERT HALL

Daniel Hege
Music Director & Conductor

Alban Gerhardt
Cello

PROGRAM NOTES



DANIEL PERTTU

Born in 1979

To Spring - An Overture (about 9 minutes)

This is the first time the Wichita Symphony has performed music by Daniel Perttu.

Daniel Perttu is a professor of music theory and composition at Westminster College in New Jersey, where he also serves as Chair of the School of Music. His website (danielperttu.com/compositions) lists about twelve works for orchestra, plus others for chamber ensembles, piano, and other solo instruments.

Trained as a bassoonist and pianist, he earned his undergraduate degree from Williams College before his interests in music composition took him to Kent State for a Master's and Ohio State University, where he completed his doctoral degree in 2007. Since August 2008, he has taught at Westminster College.

As a composer, his works have been performed widely. His website lists over two dozen orchestras across America, including the Canton Symphony (OH), the Flagstaff Symphony (AZ), and Orchestra Omaha (NE). Additionally, orchestras in Asia, Europe, and South America have performed his music.

Perttu is one of a younger generation of composers who strives to write "music that invites audiences into other worlds, so they can re-discover their own sense of wonder."

From a faculty profile published in *Westminster Magazine*, Dan Perttu expands on his philosophy further:

"I try to write it with the idea of keeping the music accessible to people. I like my music to have broad appeal. Sometimes, I think 'classical' music has a stigma of snobbishness associated with it, and one of my causes in life is to try to destigmatize it and to help people get to know how wonderful it is without all of the baggage. That's one of the reasons I'm a professor—to expose students to this wonderful world of music."

To Spring, heard at this concert, is a concert opener completed in 2015 on a commission from the Lakeland Civic Orchestra in Cleveland, Ohio. It was recently recorded by the Moravian Philharmonic in the Czech Republic and released as part of an album titled *Tomorrow's Airs* by the Navrona/PARMA Recordings label.

In the preface to his orchestral score, Perttu writes that his inspiration for the overture came from watching his two daughters grow and develop. The overture is dedicated to them. He continues, "Their spirits epitomize the season of Spring and are captured as well by the following poem by William Blake."

To Spring, from *Poetical Sketches* (1783)
William Blake

O thou with dewy locks, who lookest down
Through the clear windows of the morning sun, turn
Thine angel eyes upon our western isle,
Which in full choir hails thy approach, O Spring!

To Spring - An Overture (about 9 minutes)

continued

The hills tell one another, and the listening
Valleys hear; all our longing eyes are turn'd
Up to thy bright pavilions: issue forth
And let thy holy feet visit our clime!

Come o'er the eastern hills, and let our winds
Kiss thy perfumèd garments; let us taste
Thy morn and evening breath; scatter thy pearls
Upon our lovesick land that mourns for thee.

O deck her forth with thy fair fingers; pour
Thy soft kisses on her bosom; and put
Thy golden crown upon her languish'd head,
Whose modest tresses are bound up for thee.

Perttu orchestrated *To Spring* for a piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, three percussionists, and strings. The percussion battery includes chimes, crotales, suspended and crash cymbals, tam-tam, and a triangle.

The music begins with a swirling wind texture, suggesting the arrival of spring and reminiscent of the opening of Ravel's Second Suite to *Daphnis and Chloe*. A central theme emerges from the brass in an uplifting manner, providing an important structural element throughout the overture until reaching a climax with a full brass statement near the conclusion.

Here's a recording of *To Spring* performed by the Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Petr Vronsky.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORmXEkSjJEc>

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born September 8, 1841 in Nelahozeve, Bohemia (then part of the Austrian Empire, now Czech Republic)

Died May 1, 1904 in Prague, Czech Republic

Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104

1. Allegro (16')
2. Adagio ma non troppo (13')
3. Finale: Allegro moderato (13')

The Dvořák Cello Concerto was last performed by the Wichita Symphony with Parry Karp, cello, and Andrew Sewell, conductor, on October 27 and 28, 2001. This most famous cello concerto has been performed six times in the Symphony's 80-year history. Previous cellists who played Dvořák with the WSO reads like a Who's Who list of great cellists of the period: Gregor Piatigorsky (1948), Raya Garbousova (1955), Leonard Rose (1970), Lynn Harrell (1979), and Nathaniel Rosen (1990).

For a composer as prolific as Antonín Dvořák, one would expect his compositional output to include more concertos. And yet, there are single concertos for piano (1876) and violin (1879), and then this magnificent B Minor Cello Concerto of 1895, hands down, the most popular cello concerto ever composed.¹

The 19th century did not produce an abundance of cello concertos. Vivaldi, Boccherini, and Haydn composed cello concertos in the 18th century, some of which are still played. Mozart and Beethoven composed none, although Beethoven wrote a Triple Concerto for piano, violin, and cello. As the 19th century progressed and orchestras became larger, composers tended to concentrate their cello music on chamber works due to the perceived difficulty of projecting the instrument above larger orchestral forces. Before Dvořák, cello concertos by Schumann, Saint-Saëns, Lalo, and shorter works like Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations* were the primary 19th-century ones that gained a place in the repertoire, and even then, we don't hear them as often as many violin and piano concertos. Even Dvořák had reservations about what he called the "nasal" high register and "mumbling" low register. Dvořák changed his mind, and to understand what happened, we turn to his years in New York City.

For the grandiose sum of \$15,000 and a two-year contract, Jeannette Thurber, wife of wholesale grocery magnate Francis Beattie Thurber, lured Dvořák away from his beloved Prague to become the Director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. After Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Johann Strauss, Dvořák was considered by Americans the best-known living composer in Europe.

The New York City to which Dvořák arrived in September 1892 was a bustling, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan city. With skyscrapers rising, the city of the 20th century was beginning to form. Dvořák settled into his five-room apartment at 327 E. 17th St., just down the street from the Thurber's National Conservatory.

By the time of Dvořák's arrival, the conservatory, established in 1885, already had a distinguished faculty, including the composers Horatio Parker and Rubin Goldmark and cellist and composer Victor Herbert. The faculty, urged on by Jeannette Thurber and her agenda, promoted music education and the use of American idioms. Significantly, the school awarded scholarships to women and minorities. Thurber even won a

[1] In 1865, Dvořák wrote a Cello Concerto in A Major but left it in a cello and piano score without orchestrating it. It was about fifty-five minutes long and needed serious pruning, which composer Günter Raphael achieved after rediscovering the work in 1925. Others prepared a second edition in the 1970s. The work gained a few proponents but remains largely unperformed and is not in the general repertoire. You can find a recording of it on YouTube.

Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104

continued

Congressional Charter for the school in 1891 with a concert featuring the music of Dudley Buck and John Knowles Paine.

Upon arriving in America, Dvořák began to immerse himself in American culture. He enjoyed Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and learned the songs of Stephen Foster. Harry T. Burleigh, one of Dvořák's African American students, was a frequent guest at the Dvořák home and spent many hours introducing Dvořák to spirituals. Among the works from Dvořák's first year in America is the famous Symphony "From the New World."

While Dvořák experienced American culture, he remained homesick for his native land. His homesickness was ameliorated during the summer of 1893 with a pleasant vacation in the Czech community of Spillville, Iowa. Following the end of school in the spring of 1894, Dvořák returned home to Prague for the summer and, with some reluctance, returned to New York and the Conservatory in the fall for a third year of residency.

The previous March, Dvořák attended a concert in Brooklyn, where he heard the New York Philharmonic conducted by Anton Seidl and featuring the cellist-composer Victor Herbert (1859–1924) playing his Second Cello Concerto. Herbert was not only a colleague of Dvořák at the Conservatory but also the Principal Cellist for the premiere of Dvořák's *New World Symphony*. After the performance, Dvořák embraced his colleague backstage and enthusiastically complimented Herbert for his "splendid, absolutely splendid" concerto.

Back in New York for the fall of 1894 and inspired by Herbert's success, Dvořák began to fulfill a request for a cello concerto from his Czech friend and cellist Hanuš Wihan.² While working on the new concerto, Dvořák received a letter during the winter conveying the news that his sister-in-law Josefina Kaunitzová was seriously ill. Dvořák had been in love with Josefina many years before when she was one of his students. The attraction was not reciprocated, and Dvořák eventually married Josefina's younger sister. Still, he remained close and was devastated by the news of her illness. She left her mark on the Cello Concerto, as we'll see and hear.

In April 1895, at the end of his contract with the Conservatory, Dvořák left America for home. He finished the definitive version of the Cello Concerto in June after significantly changing the ending to include a 60-bar coda after Josefina's passing. Dvořák's cellist friend Wihan provided a few suggestions to improve the technical aspects of the cello part and wanted to insert a big cadenza into the finale. Dvořák refused that suggestion, insisting that the Coda be unchanged and instructing his publisher Simrock to ignore Wihan's entreaties.

The Concerto premiered in London on March 19, 1896. Wihan had other commitments; thus, the first performance fell to Leo Stern. Dvořák conducted the London Philharmonic at Queen's Hall. Johannes Brahms, who proofed the publisher's copy of the concerto, remarked that had he known a cello concerto could be that good, he would have tried writing one! The Double Concerto (1887) for violin and cello was as close as he got.

The Music

The first thing to note about Dvořák's Concerto is the orchestra and how he strikes a balance with the solo cello. The mid-1890s is a decade after Richard Wagner's death and the era of young Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler. Music is already in the age of large, colorful orchestras that were growing in size, especially in the use of winds and brass, which expanded string sections to balance the increased volume.

[2] Wihan (1855-1920) had performed on a farewell concert tour with Dvořák before Dvořák left for New York and was regarded as one of Europe's leading cellists of the day.

Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104

continued

Dvořák takes a conservative mid-19th-century stance towards his orchestration. His forces call for double woodwinds, with the second flute doubling on the piccolo. He uses three horns instead of the more common four, two trumpets, three trombones, and a tuba. In addition to the timpani, Dvořák utilizes a triangle for the tutti orchestra passages at the beginning of the third movement, calling to mind Brahms' use of the instrument in the third movement of his Fourth Symphony, one of his more rambunctious symphonic moments.

Compared to earlier cello concertos by Schumann, Saint-Saëns, and Lalo, Dvořák takes a little more risk by adding low brass. Only Lalo used trombones; none of the three used tubas or colored their orchestral timbre with percussion instruments. Dvořák uses his low brass judiciously so they don't cover the soloist. The tuba mostly reinforces the harmonic bass by doubling the bass trombone in the orchestral tutti.

Listen to how Dvořák pares back his orchestra when the solo cello plays. Often, the orchestration is reduced to a few woodwinds and low strings. The violins rarely compete with their upper range. Instead, the violins often stay below the upper range of the cello. There's an outstanding transparency to the orchestral sound, and yet, when the full orchestra plays out between solo passages, it cuts loose with a bright, even brassy color.

The second thing to listen for in the orchestra is the beautiful solos Dvořák writes for instruments in solo or conversational duets with the solo cello. Note the solo horn for the second theme in the orchestral exposition of the first movement, several solos for the flute, and a significant violin solo for the concertmaster in the third movement.

The **first movement** begins with a traditional lengthy orchestral exposition of the themes. The dark colors of two clarinets and bassoons accompanied by low strings introduce the first theme. While we start initially in the home key of B minor, Dvořák's melody offers opportunities to subtly vary between major, minor, and even mixed modal scales derived from folk music. The melody's harmonic flexibility and its motivic construction will create much of the tension for this first movement. Quickly and almost organically, the music builds momentum, gaining instruments and rising in range until the entire orchestra blasts forth the first theme.

After quieting, the solo horn introduces the second theme. It's one of the most beautiful themes in the repertoire and an example of Dvořák's gift for melody, which drew the envy of even a master like Johannes Brahms. The orchestral introduction concludes with a brisk, dance-like theme played by the entire orchestra. After that, Dvořák clears the orchestral texture to prepare for the entrance of the solo cello.

The cello enters with the first theme in a mixed B Major/Dorian mode coloration. The accompanying texture is almost chamber music with woodwinds delivering elfin-like interjections. The solo cello luxuriates in the second theme's complete, warm statement. The exposition concludes with an orchestral tutti that restates the first theme with fanfares from the trumpets and dramatic timpani rolls.

The development section is brief and concentrates on the material of the first theme. It includes a noteworthy introspective duet between the flute and solo cello. When the recapitulation enters, it's not with the first theme but a reprise of the second. The thematic order is reversed as Dvořák saves the first theme for a grandiose conclusion of the first movement marked by difficult double stops in the solo cello.

Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104

continued

The **second movement** begins with the woodwinds playing a longing theme that you would not be amiss in hearing it related to the first movement's opening. The soloist enters after the 8-bar introduction. Some arpeggios are introduced along with a melodic element that suggests sighing. One writer describes this as "dark and troubling eloquence," and the pain will become more apparent with an orchestral outburst. This moment suggests Dvořák's reaction to the news of his sister-in-law Josefina's life-threatening illness. To further draw the connection, the solo cello enters, quoting one of Dvořák's songs, "Leave Me Alone" (Opus 82, no. 1), which was one of Josefina's favorites. The music conveys Dvořák's despair and homesickness.

The **third movement** begins with a march-like trod by horns and winds over an F-sharp pedal tone in the bass. Because the F-sharp represents B minor's dominant harmony, avoiding the home key (tonic) in this opening heightens anticipation. The introductory passage climaxes with the orchestral tutti and the clangorous trilling of the triangle. The solo cello enters with the resolute theme and harmony resolved to B minor.

The movement becomes more boisterous as Dvořák seems to anticipate his homecoming. Dvořák pores his heart into beautiful melodies and chamber-like textures that feature duets between the cellist and winds and especially an extended passage with the cellist accompanying a soaring violin solo by the Concertmaster.

Dvořák completed the Cello Concerto in February 1895. But then, tragedy struck. One month after arriving home in Prague, Josefina Kaunitzová died on May 27, 1895. At this point, Dvořák rewrote the ending of his Concerto to include a 60-bar coda as a tribute and memory of his friend. You'll recognize this moment, for just when you think the music will reach a rousing conclusion, it quiets and slows to a gentle rocking motion in the woodwinds and solo cello while the trumpet echoes the opening theme of the third movement. The clarinets hint at the Concerto's opening theme, and the solo violin suggests a final quote from Josefina's favorite song. The cello melody sinks over a funereal timpani beat and muted strings as the Coda dies away. A majestic passage by the orchestra concludes with a final burst of energy.

Familiarize yourself with the Dvořák Concerto with this video recording of a 2017 concert with Yo-Yo Ma performing with the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, Rune Bergmann conducting. (And hang on at the end for Yo-Yo's encore of Mark O'Connor's *Appalachia Waltz*.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=190faUQ7xJg>

Don is the retired CEO (2012 - 2024) of the Wichita Symphony. He holds piano and music history degrees from Bucknell University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He also studied piano at the Salzburg Mozarteum and the University of Maryland College Park, where he founded the National Orchestral Institute, an advanced training program for aspiring orchestral musicians, in 1988.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY

Born February 3, 1809 in Hamburg, Germany

Died November 4, 1847 in Leipzig, Germany

Symphony No. 5, Op. 107 "Reformation"

1. Andante – Allegro con fuoco – Andante – meno Allegro (11'30")

2. Allegro vivace (5')

3. Andante (3')

4. Chorale: A Mighty Fortress Is Our God: Andante con moto – Allegro vivace – Allegro maestoso (9'30")

The Wichita Symphony has performed Mendelssohn's Reformation Symphony on three concert sets in its 80-year history. The last time was with Andrew Sewell, who conducted on October 14 and 15, 2001. Previously, Jay Decker conducted it in November 1977, and James Robertson in November 1969.

Regarded by history as one of the most precocious of all musical prodigies, even more than Mozart, Mendelssohn established a distinguished list of credentials by 1829 at the age of twenty. He had already composed the Octet for Strings in 1825 at age 16 and the *Overture to a Midsummer Night's Dream* the following year, both of which have become acknowledged masterpieces. He composed his first full-length symphony when he was 15, after writing thirteen shorter sinfonias for just strings between 1821 and 1823. In 1829, at age 20, he revived Bach's *St. Mathew Passion* for a Berlin concert, almost single-handedly launching a public revival of Bach's music.

Mendelssohn grew up in a family of privilege. Felix, his equally talented sister Fanny, and two other siblings were the grandchildren of Moses Mendelssohn, a famous Jewish philosopher and a follower of The Enlightenment. Their father, Abraham, was a prosperous banker, as were some uncles. Despite their Jewish heritage, the Mendelssohn children were baptized in 1816 to assimilate them into German society. Bartholdy, the name Felix's mother's brother took, was affixed to their family name. Their parents followed suit in 1822.

While traveling in England during the fall of 1829, Mendelssohn began to think about writing a symphony to commemorate the tricentenary of the Augsburg Confession, an essential document of Protestant faith submitted to Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg in June 1530 by Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560), a collaborator of Martin Luther and an important early Lutheran theologian. A festival was planned around the 300th anniversary of June 25, 1830. Needing to extend his London sojourn due to an injury from a carriage mishap, Mendelssohn began working on the symphony.

Mendelssohn referred to his new symphony as his "Church Symphony." This was an age when composers, publishers, and even the public began to give music descriptive titles. Mendelssohn, who believed that music communicated what words could not, remained skeptical about the necessity of a title, even though he had used some in previous works. Mendelssohn considered and rejected other suggestions. When the completed symphony was finally performed, Mendelssohn listed it in the program as a "Symphony for a Church Festivity." Happily, the title that his sister Fanny suggested, "Reformation," stuck and is what we use today.

For listeners today, the challenge becomes identifying elements within the music that help us understand what Mendelssohn may have wanted to convey. Since we have no vocal text as we have with Beethoven's Ninth and no further descriptive indications from Mendelssohn, we must look deeper into the music.

Symphony No. 5, Op. 107 "Reformation"

continued

The Music

The symphony begins with a slow, reverent introduction (*andante*) in D major. Low strings begin an ascending passage written in an "old" contrapuntal style with harmonic suspensions answered by a hymn-like chordal response by the winds and brass. Repetitive and urgent fanfares by wind and brass instruments culminate in *fortissimo*. In response, and almost imperceptibly with *pianissimo*, the violins enter for the first time with a simple ascending five-note scale over the harmonization of the low strings. This brief passage, intended to draw our ears and eyes heavenly, is known as the *Dresden Amen*, attributed to Johann Gottlieb Naumann (1741–1801) and a popular liturgical cadence in the German State of Saxony during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Richard Wagner used the Amen in his opera *Tannhäuser* and, more famously, as the leitmotif for the Holy Grail in *Parsifal*. Bruckner, Mahler, and others used it in music during the 19th and early 20th centuries. For Mendelssohn, its use is to evoke liturgical associations with the Reformation.

Following the repeat of the cadence, the main part of the **first movement** proceeds with an *allegro con fuoco* (fast with passion and energy). Mendelssohn shifts the music into D minor to capture the mood of passion and fury. The mood is stern. The chords and dotted rhythms evoke a dogmatic rigorousness. Rapid eight-note scales and arpeggios in the strings compete with the fanfare declarations that seem to be a call to faith. A lyrical but pleading second theme provides momentary contrast.

These elements continue to compete throughout the development section reaching a climax with the gavel-like pounding of a unison A in the entire orchestra, alternating between winds and brass and the strings. It's like a tug-of-war until, once again, the quiet *Dresden Amen* intercedes to stop the commotion.

With the following recapitulation section, Mendelssohn reverses the thrust of what we heard previously. Now, everything is soft. The strings play pizzicato. The music is tentative and somewhat slower as if the argument has gained reflective consideration. Skipping the fast and furious passage, the second theme directly follows. After this, the momentum builds again but remains hushed with interruptions of distant fanfares. Finally, the *fuoco* mood reestablishes and drives the movement to a dramatic conclusion.

The **second movement** is a scherzo, here in the somewhat untraditional spot of the second movement instead of the third. The music is an example of the genteel Mendelssohn. Like the first movement, the second shares a proclivity towards dotted rhythms but lacks the profundity of the previous movement. Some writers speculate that the movement depicts a festive religious occasion with flags and banners flying, but Mendelssohn left no indication that was on his mind. The music is light, airy, and cheerful, perhaps of a pastoral and dance-like nature. The **trio section** is an exquisite duet of two oboes playing in parallel thirds and doubled by the violins. The flutes and violas trade birdlike trills. The violas and cellos answer with contrasting melodic phrases. After the trio, the scherzo returns, giving this movement its customary ABA architecture but ending with a delicate final cadence.

The **third movement** is a slow, almost melancholic, and prayerful arioso. It is a song without words, predominantly for strings, except for a couple of brief insertions by the flutes and bassoons. The first violins play the melody accompanied by the lower strings. Only at the final cadence, when the music shifts from G minor to a glowing G major, do the other orchestral instruments join in. The oboes, however, sit this movement out entirely.

Symphony No. 5, Op. 107 "Reformation"

continued

At this point, as we blend into the **fourth movement** without pause, Mendelssohn creates his programmatic magic. He titles the movement "Chorale," signaling that he will draw upon the legacy of German Protestant congregational singing and the influence of Johann Sebastian Bach. As a child, Mendelssohn had a thorough education in Bach's contrapuntal and chorale styles, and that upbringing shines forth in this symphony.

Above the soft G ending the third movement and held by the low strings in unison, a solo flute emerges on a G. It begins a melody, which many will recognize as "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*), one of the most famous and best-known hymns of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther wrote the hymn between 1527 and 1529. Its presence in Mendelssohn's Symphony affirms the title of "Reformation." Luther was a flutist, which is why Mendelssohn assigns this first appearance of the melody to the flute.

The winds, brass, violas, and cellos harmonize the chorale tune. The tempo remains the *andante* of the third movement but with a little more movement, and we stay in G major, instilling warmth and brightness to the chorale. With a burst, Mendelssohn quickens the tempo to *allegro vivace*. Over the rhythmic propulsion of the strings, he begins to introduce the opening phrase of the chorale in a fragmented form as it's tossed about the winds and brass like how Bach often treated his chorales in fantasies.

This fantasy lasts briefly before cadencing with a resolution in the home key of D major and a new "rocket" theme that ascends to great heights joyfully. Listen for the brass fanfares. Eventually, the strings strike up a profound and vigorous contrapuntal, or fugato, passage, developing the opening repeated notes of the chorale.

The winds and brass interject a march-like theme, driving the music to a climax.¹ The chorale fragments appear in the orchestral texture in the quieter development that follows. The contrapuntal theme returns as forces appear to battle for supremacy. The low brass creates the effect of church bells. Finally, the chorale wins the day as the entire orchestra bursts forth one last time with a majestic statement of the theme, concluding the symphony.

With his ending, there is no doubt where Mendelssohn's religious sympathies lie and his hopes of having the work performed for the festival celebrating the tricentenary of the Augsburg Confession. The conclusion is also a young Mendelssohn's response to the influence of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (1824), only without a chorus to celebrate the unifying gestures of humanity and community created by a chorale or hymn-like theme. Yet, the unsung text of the hymn clearly makes a point.

The pianist and writer Charles Rosen (1927–2012) accuses Mendelssohn of being the "inventor of religious kitsch" in music and points to the *Reformation Symphony* as an example of "creating awe through bombast." Certainly, Mendelssohn had no objections to bringing religion into the concert hall and would do so again with his two great oratorios, *St. Paul* and *Elijah*.

As things turned out, Mendelssohn completed his score on May 12, 1830, but not in time to be included at the Augsburg Tricentenary celebrations a month later. Mendelssohn carried the score with him and continued to make revisions. He offered the symphony to a Parisian orchestra in early 1832. After a single rehearsal, the orchestra rejected the music because it was too learned, old-fashioned with its contrapuntal writing, and lacking

[1] Experienced listeners may detect the influence of Carl Maria von Weber with the theme and orchestration, and elements that anticipate some of Wagner's early operas and even *Meistersinger*.

Symphony No. 5, Op. 107 “Reformation”

continued

in melody! Musical tastes were changing rapidly, and music inspired by Bach and Mozart did not have as strong a following in France as in Berlin. Mendelssohn’s biographer Larry Todd suggests that the French found the symphony “too Protestant!”

The *Reformation Symphony* finally received its premiere on November 15, 1832, at a benefit concert for the Widows of the Singakademie Orchestra in Berlin. Mendelssohn conducted the program that included music by Bach, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn’s *Hebrides Overture* and *Midsummer Night’s Dream Overture*. It must have been an exceptionally long evening, as Mendelssohn also soloed in his G minor Piano Concerto, Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto, and even offered a couple of additional Beethoven Piano Sonatas for good measure.

Strategically, Mendelssohn may have intended this program as an unofficial audition for the open Directorship of the Berlin Singakademie. Perhaps he wanted to prove his Protestant authenticity by programming the Symphony to enhance his eligible credentials. Much to his surprise and chagrin, he was unsuccessful in achieving the post. Nonetheless, in 1835, Mendelssohn was appointed Music Director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus, the most important and prestigious music directorship in the Protestant German States, holding the position until he died in 1847. During his twelve years in the post, he established the concert format much as we know it today by extending the concert season, raising musician pay, inviting distinguished soloists, improving performance standards, and creating the “classical canon” of familiar masterpieces, including the premieres of major works like Schubert’s “Great” C Major Symphony.

On December 12, 1837, Mendelssohn’s friend Julius Reitz conducted the second performance of the *Reformation Symphony* in Düsseldorf. Still skeptical about the merits of programmatic music, Mendelssohn requested that no title or non-musical descriptive notes be printed, instead letting the music stand alone on its own merits.

Mendelssohn subsequently tried to disown the symphony as a work of juvenilia and suggested to Reitz that the score be burned! Fortunately, that did not occur, and the symphony was published posthumously in 1868 as Mendelssohn’s Opus 107 and Fifth Symphony.² While the *Reformation* is not as popular as Mendelssohn’s *Scottish* (#3) and the *Italian* (#4), the *Reformation* remains a significant work in the repertoire of orchestras worldwide.

Mendelssohn orchestrated his *Reformation Symphony* for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, a contrabassoon,³ two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.

[2] The numbering of Mendelssohn’s symphonies reflects the order in which they were published, not the order in which they were composed. The *Reformation* was the second composed and the last to be published posthumously. Hence, it became the Fifth in the published sequence.

[3] Curiously, the Breitkopf and Härtel edition (Leipzig) of the *Reformation Symphony* published in the 1870s, calls for a serpent instrument to double and reinforce the contrabassoon part. A serpent was a wooden Renaissance-era instrument, shaped like an undulating snake but with a brass mouthpiece like the trombone. It was often used in liturgical music and occasionally in orchestras and military bands. By the 1840s it had mostly disappeared. Mendelssohn may have used it in this symphony because of the liturgical connections of the music.

Symphony No. 5, Op. 107 "Reformation"

continued

Before attending the Wichita Symphony concert on March 16, you may familiarize yourself with Mendelssohn's *Reformation Symphony* with this video recording on YouTube by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Jérémie Rhorer.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otcrnrQAwD8>

You can also listen to and follow along with the score in this recording by the Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by Christoph von Dohnányi.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6aV5UAlmyQ>

Don is the retired CEO (2012 - 2024) of the Wichita Symphony. He holds piano and music history degrees from Bucknell University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He also studied piano at the Salzburg Mozarteum and the University of Maryland College Park, where he founded the National Orchestral Institute, an advanced training program for aspiring orchestral musicians, in 1988.