



MENDELSSOHN

Piano Works Vol. 2

Three Preludes

Sonata, Op. 6

Christmas Pieces

Variations sérieuses

Scherzo • Gondellied

Benjamin Frith, Piano

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809 - 1847)

Piano Music Vol. 2

Variations sérieuses in D Minor, Op. 54

Kinderstücke, Op. 72 ('Christmas Pieces')

Gondellied in A Major ('Barcarole')

Scherzo in B Minor

Sonata in E Major, Op. 6

Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg in 1809, son of the banker Abraham Mendelssohn and grandson of the great Jewish thinker Moses Mendelssohn, the model for Lessing's Nathan the Wise, the epitome of tolerance in a generally intolerant world. In 1812 the family moved to Berlin after the French occupation of Hamburg and it was there that Mendelssohn received his education, in music as a pupil of Carl Zelter, for whom the boy seemed a second Mozart. As a child he was charming and precocious, profiting from the wide cultural interests of his parents and relations, excelling as a pianist and busy with composition after composition. In 1816 he was baptized a Christian, a step that his father took six years later, accepting what Heine described as a ticket of admission into European culture, although it was one not always regarded as valid by prejudiced contemporaries.

Abraham Mendelssohn sought the best advice when it came to his son's choice of career. Cherubini, director of the Paris Conservatoire, was consulted, and, while complimenting Abraham Mendelssohn on his wealth, agreed that his son should become a professional musician, advice given during the course of a visit to Paris in 1825, when Mendelssohn met many of the most distinguished composers and performers of the day. In Berlin his career took shape, with prolific composition and activity as a pianist and as a conductor. His education was to include a period of travel throughout Europe, a Grand Tour that took him as far north as Scotland and as far south as Naples, his journeys serving as sources of inspiration.

In 1833 Mendelssohn was invited to conduct the Lower Rhine Festival in Düsseldorf, where he was appointed city musical director for two years, and in 1835 he was appointed conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. There were, at the same time, other commitments to be fulfilled in a short career of intense activity, with a series of visits to England, where he was always welcome. In Leipzig he established a series of historical concerts, continuing the revival of earlier music on which he had embarked under Zelter with the Berlin performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* in 1829. At the same time he gave every encouragement to contemporary composers, even to those for whom he felt little sympathy. At the insistence of the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV he accepted an official position in Berlin, but this failed to give him the satisfaction he had found in Leipzig, where he established the Conservatory in 1843 and where he spent his final years until his death at the age of thirty-eight on 4th November 1847, six months after the death of his beloved sister Fanny.

The *Three Preludes, Opus 104a*, were written in the later months of 1836, the year of the first performance of Mendelssohn's oratorio *St Paul* in Düsseldorf. His work there had involved an attempt to broaden repertoire, notably in church music, with a return to the music of Palestrina and Lassus, while in the theatre he had tried to make reforms, evidenced by a staging of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* that brought protests over ticket-prices and a subsequent apology to Mendelssohn, demanded and received. The *Prelude in B flat major* opens vigorously and is built principally on the opening figure. The *Prelude in B minor* is marked by a running accompaniment figure in the left hand, later taken up by the right, when the melody moves to the lower register. The group of *Preludes* ends with a lively piece in which descending scale patterns have a considerable part to play.

Mendelssohn wrote his *Etudes, Opus 104b* between 1834 and 1838. The first, in B flat minor and marked *Presto sempre pianissimo*, was completed on 9th June 1836. It is an arpeggio study, with the melody in the middle part and, therefore, shared between right and left hand. Rapid tarantella-like motion marks the second study, in F major, completed on 21st April, 1834, and the set ends with an A minor *Allegro vivace*, conjecturally dated to 1838 and vigorous in its unusual harmonies, with its melody emerging in syncopation in the upper register.

The *Variations sérieuses, Opus 54*, were written in 1841 and published in Vienna the following year. The variations had a serious intention as a contribution to the album published by Pietro Mechetti for the proposed Beethoven monument in Bonn. The volume also included contributions from Chopin, Czerny, Döhler, Henselt, Kalkbrenner, Liszt, Moscheles, Taubert and Thalberg, and bore the title *Dix morceaux brillants*, perhaps leading Mendelssohn to disclaim, in his own title, a suggestion of ostentation. The seventeen variations, one of the original eighteen having been deleted by the composer, do, of course, have their moments of brilliance. The theme, however, is gentle enough. The eighth variation, an *Allegro vivace*, introduces an element of technical brilliance, but this is contrasted with a contrapuntally imitative variation, in the manner of a chorale variation, and a gently syncopated treatment of the theme. There is immediate contrast in what follows, after which the fourteenth variation, in D major, serves as a slow movement. The original key is restored in a variation that leads imperceptibly to a brilliant *Allegro vivace* and a final *Presto*.

Mendelssohn wrote his *Kinderstücke*, *Opus 72*, six short pieces, in 1842 for the Benecke children, relatives of his wife in London, with whom he stayed on various visits to England. The relationship was continued by the marriage of his daughter Maria to Victor Benecke. The six pieces, unlike Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, have no titles and are, therefore, not overtly character-pieces. They are unpretentious and make modest demands on a performer. The *Gondellied* is dated 3rd February 1837, while the syncopated *Scherzo in B minor* bears the date 12th June 1829 and was published in that year in the *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*.

The *Sonata in E major*, *Opus 6*, is also an early work, dating from 1826, the year of the *Overture, A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the *String Quintet in A major*. The influence of Beethoven is apparent in what is, nevertheless, a work of considerable originality. The first movement, in the now traditional tripartite form, duly presents two contrasting subjects, with gentle dying chords to mark the end of the exposition. There is a brief development, before the return of the subjects in recapitulation. The F sharp minor second movement, which is to follow after a short pause, is marked *Tempo di Menuetto* and has a syncopated trio section at its heart. With barely a pause there follows a movement of interrupted recitative, with a passage that recalls the first movement and with intervening sections of greater animation, the last of which leads directly to the final movement, *Molto allegro e vivace*, with its closing references to the principal theme of the first movement.

Benjamin Frith

The young British pianist Benjamin Frith has had a distinguished career. A pupil of Fanny Waterman, he won, at the age of fourteen, the British National Concerto Competition, followed by the award of the Mozart Memorial Prize and joint top prize in 1986 in the Italian Busoni International Piano Competition and in 1989 a Gold Medal and First prize in the Arthur Rubinstein Piano Master Competition. Benjamin Frith enjoys a busy international career, with engagements in the United States and throughout Europe as a soloist and recitalist, with festival appearances at Sheffield, Aldeburgh, Harrogate, Kuhmo, Bolzano, Savannah, Pasadena and Hong Kong and an Edinburgh Festival *début* in 1992. His recordings include a highly praised performance of Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* on the ASV label and for Naxos a release of piano music by Schumann and the two Mendelssohn *Piano Concertos*.



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STEREO

Felix MENDELSSOHN

(1809 – 1847)

Piano Works Vol. 2

Benjamin Frith, Piano

DDD

 Playing
Time:
65'30"

Three Preludes, Op. 104a

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|---|-------------------------|--------|
| 1 | Prelude in B Flat Major | (3:25) |
| 2 | Prelude in B Minor | (1:43) |
| 3 | Prelude in D Major | (2:27) |

Three Etudes, Op. 104b

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| 4 | Etude in B Flat Minor | (2:15) |
| 5 | Etude in F Major | (3:42) |
| 6 | Etude in A Minor | (1:37) |

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| 7 | Variations sérieuses
in D Minor, Op. 54 | (12:31) |
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Kinderstücke, Op. 72 (‘Christmas Pieces’)

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|---|--------------------|--------|
| 8 | Allegro non troppo | (1:04) |
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| 9 | Andante sostenuto | (1:47) |
| 10 | Allegretto | (1:00) |
| 11 | Andante con moto | (1:23) |
| 12 | Allegro assai | (1:40) |
| 13 | Vivace | (1:35) |

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| 14 | Gondellied in A Major
(‘Barcarole’) | (2:07) |
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| 15 | Scherzo in B Minor | (1:10) |
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Sonata in E Major, Op. 6

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|----|---------------------------------------|--------|
| 16 | Allegretto con espressione – | (6:15) |
| 17 | Tempo di Menuetto – | (6:02) |
| 18 | Recitativo:
Adagio e senza tempo – | (7:07) |
| 19 | Molto allegro e vivace | (6:39) |

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