

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Sonatas from Childhood, Adolescence, and Adulthood

KARR-YANG DUO





Photo: Tatiana Daubek Photography

Karr-Yang Duo



Pen and Ink drawing by Felix Mendelssohn. Landscape of the cliffs at Amalfi. Signature on mounting paper. 15x21cm., ink. Used by permission from the Moldenhauer Archives at the Library of Congress.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809–1847)

Sonata Fragment in D (1825)

1 Adagio–Allegro molto 7:20

Sonata No. 1 in F Major (1820)

2 Allegro 6:23

3 Andante 6:02

4 Presto 4:13

Sonata No. 2 in F Minor, Opus 4 (1823)

5 Adagio–Allegro moderato 8:45

6 Poco adagio 6:05

7 Allegro agitato 4:43

Sonata No. 3 in F Major (1838)

8 Allegro vivace 12:11

9 Adagio 5:49

10 Assai vivace 6:05

Total Time: 67:38

Abigail Karr, violin
Yi-heng Yang, fortepiano

“Still more beautiful”

FELIX MENDELSSOHN’S stunning E minor violin concerto, written towards the end of his life, is familiar fare to all frequent concert-goers. This masterpiece, along with his well-known quartets and symphonies, reflects a lifelong engagement with the violin and with several personally important and widely influential violinists. Perhaps the closest and most fruitful of these relationships was with his dear friend and close collaborator Ferdinand David, who was born a year later than Felix in the same house, and was one of the few loved ones surrounding him when he passed away at a tragically early age. They even shared similar cultural backgrounds: both were born Jewish and converted to Christianity.

Despite such close ties to the violin and its exponents, Mendelssohn’s sonatas have mostly fallen out of favor, likely because they present singular challenges for performers. Far from rendering these sonatas without appeal for performance and study, however, we feel these challenges enhance their value as musical works while contributing to an understanding of Mendelssohn as composer and artist.

The first, composed when Felix was a mere 11 years old, appears in an early notebook intermingled with counterpoint, figured bass, and chorale exercises. These elements—along with study of the works of Bach, Mozart, and Haydn—comprised a substantial portion of the rigorous classical training he received from his tutor Carl Friedrich Zelter. Felix’s diligence and, by some standards, the conservatism

of his style is reflected in the Mozartean sparseness and clever intermingling of the voices in the first movement; a somber theme and variations in the second; and the Haydn-esque scampering in the third, reminiscent of works such as the “Lark” quartet. The sonata also reveals the seeds of an inspired composer, and is a delightful little gem in its own right.

It must have been a treat to hear the young Felix perform these classically influenced works. Of his rendition at age 12 of Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro* on the piano, one astonished spectator reports, “Felix began with a lightness of the hand, an assurance, roundness, and clarity of the passagework as I have never again heard. At the same time, he reproduced the orchestral effects so splendidly, made evident so many of the nuances of the orchestration, by adding or bringing out voices, that the effect was thrilling, and I might almost maintain that I experienced greater pleasure with his version for piano than with any orchestral performance.”

At this point in his training, Felix was a serious and, as the above testimonial indicates, accomplished pianist, but he also dabbled, by his standards, in the study of violin. He and his family had traveled to Paris in 1816, where he met and took lessons with Pierre Baillot, a violin student of Giovanni Battista Viotti, who was one of the most famous exponents of the French school of string playing. Back in Berlin, Mendelssohn studied violin with Eduard Rietz, who had

studied with Pierre Rode (another Viotti student), further absorbing the characteristic warm sound, liberal use of the lower strings, fluid legato, and mixed bowings and articulations of the French school. A hint at Rietz's aesthetic, and thus Felix's early violin aesthetic as well, may be found in a review of his performance of Mendelssohn's second violin sonata in 1823: "He performed in the good old style with a full, broad bowstroke and a fat, juicy tone...."

By this time, Felix, according to Zelter, was "growing beneath my eyes." Indeed, in the second sonata, Felix appears to have broadened his style, incorporating the influence of J.S. Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach—whose works Zelter introduced in Felix's training as early as 1820—and perhaps Beethoven as well. The most striking feature of this sonata is the opening minute-long solo violin recitative, which appears to be completely unprecedented by any other composer. Amazingly, Felix had actually already been down this road before with one of his first compositions: a "Recitativo in D minor" for piano and strings. It was his first attempt at the dramatic *Sturm und Drang* style exhibited in the jagged melodic lines of C.P.E.'s fantasies, which Zelter was familiar with and performed on occasion.

The second movement of the sonata, a sentimental Adagio in A-flat, prompted one contemptuous reviewer to avow that he was "probably not young and modern enough" to appreciate it. He chastised the composer for floating through "an up-to-date mist of feeling, he knows not how, to B major." And indeed, there is an unapologetic Schubertian sentimentality at this point in the sonata, introducing some contentment between the unremitting darkness of the first movement and the intensity of the explosive third movement. Towards the end of the finale, the recitative style from the beginning of the first movement recurs, followed by a powerful coda with a truly surprising closing gesture.

Not all reviews of this sonata were harsh. The *Allgemeine*

Musikalische Zeitung opined that the work offers "a picture of the state of a soul, deserving of sympathy, that moves in a definite direction," and deemed it worthy to "be recommended just as heartily to the connoisseur as to the amateur. [Mendelssohn] has something to say for head and heart that deserves to be publicly said and really listened to; he is able to express it in a worthy, beautiful, perfectly proportioned manner." Despite such contemporaneous praise, however, it is possible that the sonata's gloomy, meditative tenor, and its sense of weariness—uncanny in such a young person—might explain the relative infrequency with which it is performed, even though the F minor was the only one of the three sonatas to be published during Mendelssohn's lifetime.

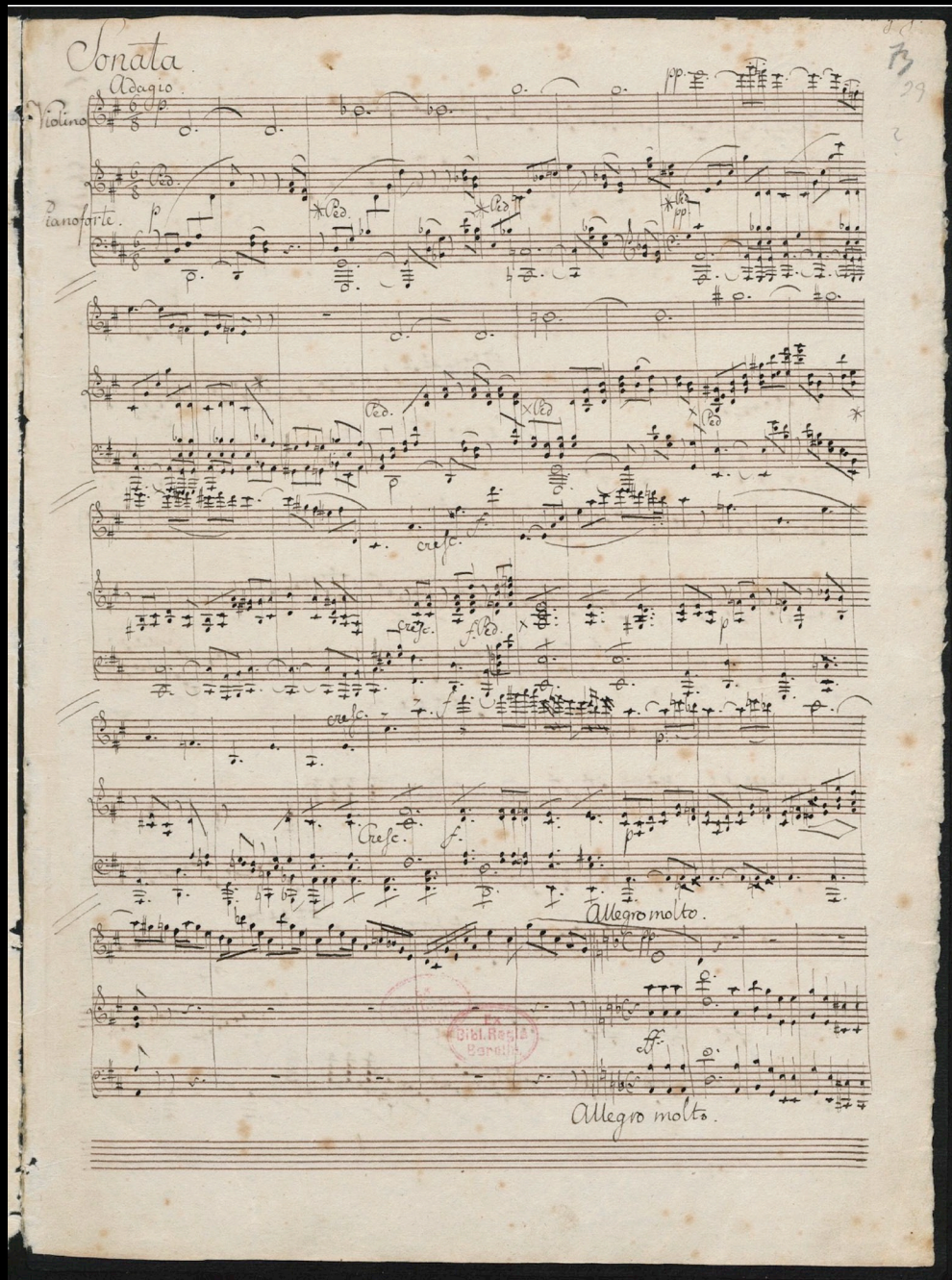
Almost nothing is known about the sonata fragment of 1825—not for whom or what it was written, or why it was left unfinished. But 1825, the year Felix turned 16, was an eventful one: he made another trip to Paris and, though he never performed publicly there, he participated in many salons and hungrily partook in the Parisian musical scene, reacquainting himself with many well-known pianists and violinists. This is the year scholars mark as the beginning of Felix's "mature style"; among many treasures, he produced the renowned Octet, one of the greatest chamber works of all time. The fragment is thus clearly the product of an inspired period in his life. It begins with a lavish, slow introduction in D major, followed by a fast, Beethovenian section in D minor, and ending on a question mark in the unresolved dominant key of A major.

The apparent mystery of the fragment is substantially *less* mystifying in the light of Mendelssohn's notorious perfectionism and relentless dissatisfaction with his own work. The Ossianic *Hebrides* Overture spanned three years of revision, up to one week before the premiere; other works were revised after their premieres and even, as in the case of the oratorio *Paulus*, after publication!

Ferdinand Hiller, the *Kapellmeister* in Cologne, described Felix as possessing an “almost morbid conscientiousness with regard to the possible perfection of his compositions.” Similarly, recalling a conversation with Felix following a wildly successful premiere of the sublime *Elijah*, Mendelssohn’s lifelong friend Ignaz Moscheles asked if the oratorio was really “to become still more beautiful.” Felix replied simply, “Yes.”

Apparently he didn’t feel the same way about his third violin sonata, which was abandoned completely as a futile endeavor. Conceived in 1838, around the same time Felix began to be “haunted” by the theme of the violin concerto, it was never completed. Unlike in the case of the fragment, however, he did churn out three fairly well-developed movements. After attempting to rewrite the first movement only to give up halfway through, and tinkering extensively with the other two, he left us with an utter disarray of scribbles, incomplete bars, cross-outs, and inserts. We have done our best to assemble this unpolished material into a cohesive piece of music.

By the late 1830’s, Felix’s friendship and artistic bond with the violinist Ferdinand David had reached a depth beyond that shared with anyone else in his musical life besides his sister Fanny. They had collaborated on dozens of concerts, and as concertmaster of the *Gewandhaus*, David led the orchestra on Mendelssohn’s works. From the triumphant, expansive first movement, through the breathless, virtuosic finale, Mendelssohn clearly expected brilliant violin technique, though, as always, he eschewed gratuitous pyrotechnics. The “springing bow” stroke which he warmed to towards the end of his career, after it had been out of favor for most of the previous century, would have been put to good use here; so would Mendelssohn’s own staccato on the piano, which a contemporary described as “the



most extraordinary thing possible for life and crispness.” The second movement incorporates his acclaimed “song without words” style, intermingled with the C.P.E.-inspired recitatives of his boyhood.

The sonata brings to a grand scale the joy of the first sonata, the passion and wisdom of the second, and the heart-tugging harmonic wizardry of the fragment. We hope you find more merit in it than Mendelssohn himself did!

–*Abigail Karr*

MENDELSSOHN ON PERIOD INSTRUMENTS

FELIX MENDELSSOHN’S CHECKERED IMAGE within the musical canon is mitigated, in part, by the clarifying effects of historical instruments. The use of period piano and violin revitalizes his music, elevating it from effeminate caricature or mindless virtuosity to the “more poignant, more intense, more glowing” experience his audiences cherished in his playing.

Thanks to expert historical piano restorer and technician Ed Swenson, this recording features a beautiful example of a Mendelssohn-era piano by Conrad Graf, preserved in perfect playing condition. In several letters, Mendelssohn himself describes his high regard for Graf’s pianos. Choosing between many options, he wrote in 1830 to his friend Julius Schubring, for whom he was selecting a piano:

Eventually I found a Graf piano that in sound and playability [Spielart] immensely appeals to me; that responds to the softest pianissimo as well as when I attack with full strength. It is also extremely attractive, so I wrote my name in it that it is for you. You will be pleased. It seems to me to be the best instrument I have played since England. Moreover, Graf is generally regarded here to be the best and is considered by all musicians as the first.

The same is true in Leipzig and Berlin...

The Graf possesses all the advantages of a Romantic era piano: shallower key dip, lighter touch, lightness of frame, and variations of color between registers. There are also four pedals, which add further to the palette of tonal possibilities. While it is known that he played on pianos by many famed makers, including Broadwood and Erard, Mendelssohn’s sophisticated music is perhaps ideally served on a Viennese Graf. Descriptions of his playing attested to briskness, fleetness of passagework, suppleness of touch, and lyricism. No matter the pianist, the Graf inspires this kind of Mendelssohnian pianism.

Besides changing tonal quality, playing Mendelssohn on period instruments fundamentally transforms the overall texture and contours of the music. The sharpness of dynamic and expressive contrasts renders a symphonic orchestration. What might sound heavy and sentimental on an industrial-era modern piano becomes vocal and ethereal, and instead of laboring the hands, intricate passagework reveals a colorful tapestry, achieved with minimal strain.

Furthermore, when fortepiano is paired with an appropriately fitted violin, the two collaborate more effectively in volume and sound color, becoming equal partners in conversation, as the warm, resonant sonority created by gut strings and the positioning of the bridge and soundpost weaves delightfully in and out of the fortepiano line. Achieving this level of clarity in ensemble playing is one reason why 19th century violin icons such as Louis Spohr, Pierre Baillot, and Ferdinand David (all of whom Mendelssohn worked with) caution against the use of continuous *vibrato*. Indeed, Baillot was so concerned with maintaining purity of sound and intonation that he recommended starting and ending even vibrated notes *senza vibrato*. All of these violinists do agree, however, that *vibrato* can be a beautiful and expressive device: among other uses, it is indispensable as a means of developing and intensifying the sound on long notes, or

of emphasizing notes marked with *sforzando*.

The increased vocabulary of sound on period instruments enables the exploration of other documented historical practices. Nineteenth century concertgoers report ubiquitous tempo flexibility and arpeggiation in piano playing, effects we can hear for ourselves in early 20th century recordings of pianists trained by such standard-bearers of the previous generation as Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms.

On string instruments, fingering and bowing suggestions of contemporaneous violinists can shed light on accepted performance practice of the period. Editions of Mendelssohn's works by his good friend and colleague Ferdinand David are a wonderful source, particularly illuminating regarding the use of *portamenti* (slides between notes which create a natural vocal gesture), and harmonics (the effect available on certain notes of the overtone series which produces an especially pure and ringing sound).

Playing on the remarkable instruments featured in this album immediately transports us to the vibrant 19th century sound world of Felix Mendelssohn. Our mission here is to discover a fresh approach to this relatively unknown music, one that we hope reflects its genuine, living nature.

-Yi-heng Yang and Abigail Karr



Graf nameplate. Photo courtesy of Ed Swenson.



Abby and Yi-heng recording at Drew University. Conrad Graf concert piano opus 1389, Vienna circa 1827. Four pedals: shift, bassoon, moderator and damper lift.

A native of Boston, Massachusetts, violinist **ABIGAIL KARR** received Bachelor and Master of Music degrees at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music, studying violin with the late Sergiu Luca. She appears with many ensembles on modern and historical violin, including the Handel & Haydn Society of Boston (as occasional principal player and soloist) and the Trinity Baroque Orchestra of Manhattan. An active chamber musician, noted for the "focused direction" she brings to performances, she is the founder and director of Gretchen's Muse, a chamber ensemble dedicated to bringing the music of the 18th century to life through exciting, historically-informed performances; the group was recently praised for its "near-telepathic synchronicity" and the "palpable collective chemistry between such individually accomplished bow-wielders." Abigail holds a degree in historical performance from The Juilliard School, and currently lives in New York.

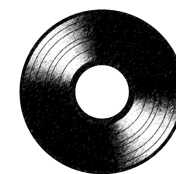
Noted for "astonishing skill and vividness" and "absolute mastery," **YI-HENG YANG** is a dynamic and versatile collaborator and soloist on modern and historical keyboards. She has appeared in recital at The Boston Early Music Festival, The Frederick Collection, The Geelvinck Museum, La Grua Series, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Serenata of Santa Fe, Albuquerque Chatter, The Apple Hill Center for Chamber Music and The Friends of Mozart. Ms. Yang holds a doctorate in piano performance from The Juilliard School, where she is on the faculty of the Evening Division. She also studied the fortepiano with Stanley Hoogland at the Amsterdam Conservatory, where she graduated *summa cum laude*.

Special thanks to those who contributed to the “Mendelssohn Mission,” and caught the excitement and passion we found in playing music of this most refined and brilliant of Romantic composers.

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Conrad Graf concert piano circa 1827, opus 1389, courtesy of Ed Swenson

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