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RECORDING**

by BERT VAN DER WOLF

**FELIX MENDELSSOHN**  
Symphonies nos. 4 & 5

Complete symphonies vol. 3

**THE NETHERLANDS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**  
Jan Willem de Vriend



SUPER AUDIO CD

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**FELIX MENDELSSOHN** (1809-1847)

**Symphony no. 4 in A major, opus 90 'Italian'** (1833)

[1] Allegro vivace	<b>11:01</b>
[2] Andante con moto	<b>6:35</b>
[3] Con moto moderato	<b>6:16</b>
[4] Saltarello: Presto	<b>5:38</b>

**Symphony no. 5 in D major, opus 107 'Reformation'** (1830)

[5] Andante - Allegro con fuoco	<b>11:03</b>
[6] Allegro vivace	<b>5:03</b>
[7] Andante	<b>3:23</b>
[8] Andante con moto - Allegro maestoso	<b>7:31</b>

total time 56:30

*Les extrêmes se touchent...* : there could barely be a greater contrast between Mendelssohn's *Italian* and *Reformation* symphonies. The *Italian*: a fiery, vivacious Mendelssohn, a perfect illustration of his nervous and enthusiastic nature and a rousing romp through Italy. The *Reformation*: often solemn, with a clearly religious bias; a work that might even be referred to as a monument.

But there is also a similarity. Mendelssohn never wanted either of these works to be published. Oddly enough, he was not satisfied with them. They were hidden away in a drawer after their premieres and only came to be printed after the composer's death; the *Italian* four years later and the *Reformation* after a gap of no less than 21 years. The composer's symphonies are numbered according to their publication dates rather than their dates of composition. 'No. 4', the *Italian* (written in 1833), was actually the third and 'No. 5', the *Reformation* (1830), the second.

Italy can prove to be an intoxicating experience. And not just because of Italian wine, but equally because of its beauty: the paintings, the architecture, the palaces and castles in all their glory, or indeed in the glory of their decay. And then there's the landscape, the olive trees, the sun that enthusiastically greets all that is wonderful and the eternally blue sky that caps all of this beauty... Composers have also frequently become intoxicated by what Italy has to offer, particularly those of the Romantic period. This is where Berlioz was when he wrote such incandescent works as *Le Carnaval Romain* and *Harold in Italy*. Richard Strauss wrote his brilliant tone poem *Aus Italien* here and Mendelssohn's response was his high-spirited *Italian Symphony*.

8 May 1830 was the fateful date. It was, according to the composer's father, time for Felix Mendelssohn, then 21, to discover the world and all its treasures. It would be useful to make contacts in far-flung places. And the perfect way of

doing this, for a civilised man of means – such as Mendelssohn undoubtedly was, coming as he did from a highly cultured banking family – was to take a Grand Tour: a journey along the great cultural pathways of Europe. He had already travelled to the North (England and Scotland) and now it was time for Italy.

His first port of call was Venice. 'Italy at last! And what I have all my life considered as the greatest possible felicity is now begun, and I am basking in it!' he wrote home, in high agitation. 'The entire country is in such festive spirits that I feel like a young prince making his grand entrance. I shall however become quite confused, if things are to go on as they have done on this first day, when every hour brought with it so much never to be forgotten, that I do not know where to find sufficient grasp of intellect to comprehend it all properly.'

Clearly, however, he was not impressed by the musical standards he found. 'The orchestras are worse than any one could believe; both musicians, and a right feeling for music, are wanting. The two or three violin performers play just as they choose, and join in when they please; the wind instruments are tuned either too high or too low; and they execute flourishes like those we are accustomed to hear in farm-yards, but hardly so good...'

In Florence, he wandered enraptured through the old central city, visited the major galleries and was never to forget his first impression of Rafael's *Madonna del cardellino*. He stayed in Rome for no less than five months in an apartment on the Piazza d'Espagna, with a superb view of the Spanish Steps (and even 'a good Viennese grand piano'). The young man witnessed the festive coronation of the new Pope, was caught up in the carnival, but never escaped from his self-imposed duties: 'After breakfast I begin my work, and play, and sing, and compose till near noon...' Remarkably enough it was the relics from his previous trip on which he was working, the *Scotch Symphony* and the *Hebrides* overture.

It was only when he reached Naples in April 1831 – after almost a year of his journey – that Italy began to seep its way into Mendelssohn's music. Naples also called a halt to the pleasures of travelling. The weather was dreadful, with continual rain, so it was better to remain indoors. Mendelssohn used his 'free time' for a new symphony in the vibrant key of A major, the *Italian*. It seems to have flowed from his pen with consummate ease, although he was only to complete the work some two years later, in Berlin, when his journey to Paestum on the Gulf of Salerno was far in his past.

The *Italian* is a real party piece. This was certainly the view following the work's premiere in London on 13 May 1833, given by the Philharmonic Society. (Mendelssohn was highly acclaimed in London, where he had been commissioned to produce a new symphony). This makes it all the more remarkable that Mendelssohn himself described this masterpiece as having been 'one of the most bitter moments of my entire career', fretting, for years to come, about whether he ought to rewrite the second, third and fourth movements. The opening *Allegro vivace* abounds with Mediterranean exuberance. The slow movement probably depicts a religious procession, witnessed by the composer in Naples. The third movement – *Con moto moderato* – seems to have little in the way of Italian influence. Rather one might imagine oneself in the shade of Germanic limes, beech and pine trees, Biedermeier-style. But the finale is drawn directly from Italian folk life: an irresistible, whirling dance to the rhythmic beat of the *saltarello*.

The *Reformation Symphony* had its roots in quite different soil. Stated succinctly, an artist has two duties: to create 'from within himself', bearing witness to 'the most individual expression of the most individual emotion', but also to observe an 'obligation' to society at large. People want art for special occasions, to add lustre or provide some deeper meaning. The *Italian* symphony is a work

of this sort 'from himself', while the *Reformation* is more 'societal', even though Mendelssohn has still imbued the work with something quite personal.

In 1830, Germany was celebrating the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Confession of Augsburg. The Confession was a key document for Lutheranism, and its submission to Emperor Charles V in 1530 marked an enormous event for the Reformation, as Lutheranism became the official state religion. Mendelssohn wanted to make a contribution towards this national obeisance with a large-scale symphony. He incorporated two well-known Protestant melodies into the work. The strings play the 'Dresden Amen' at the close of the slow introduction, while Luther's chorale 'Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott' resounds towards the end of the symphony, radiant in the colours of the full orchestra. The personal element of the work lies in the fact that Mendelssohn had been born into a Jewish family, who subsequently converted to the Protestant faith. Truly this was a significant gesture and the composer's desire to show himself to be a convinced Protestant is not confined to this symphony.

In the meantime, the *Reformation* was suffering an ill-starred fate. Delayed by a bout of measles, Mendelssohn was unable to complete the work in time for the festivities. Two years later, he unexpectedly received a chance to have the work performed in Paris. Unfortunately, the pampered orchestra there started grumbling during the rehearsals: 'too scholarly', 'too full of fugatos', 'not enough tunes'... Too *Protestant*, one might have thought... The symphony was taken out of the programme, much to the shame of the young but already well-known composer. He was given a further opportunity in 1833, back at home in Berlin. This time, however, it was Mendelssohn *himself* who was thoroughly disappointed at the premiere. A few years later, he had this to say of the work: 'I can no longer tolerate the *Reformation Symphony*. I feel that this should perish in flames, more so than any other of my works.'

This was ruthless. Mendelssohn could say some strange, and even contrary, things about his own oeuvre, for instance commenting that his stilted *Second Piano Concerto* was so much better than the delightful *First* concerto. And it is also remarkable that he never found any reconciliation with such a sparkling score as the *Italian* – now, quite rightly, an unprecedented favourite with audiences. Sometimes the audience really ought to decide, rather than the composer.

Stephen Westra

*Translation: Bruce Gordon/Muse Translations*

## Jan Willem de Vriend

Jan Willem de Vriend was appointed chief conductor and artistic director of The Netherlands Symphony Orchestra in 2006. Since then, The Netherlands Symphony Orchestra has become a notable phenomenon on the Netherlands' musical scene. It has presented semi-scenic performances of works by Mozart, Beethoven, Strauss and Mendelssohn. There were premieres of works by Offenbach, Say and Mahler. And by substituting period instruments in the brass section, it has developed its own distinctive sound in the 18th and 19th century repertoire. It has recorded Beethoven's complete symphonies conducted by de Vriend.

Opera conducting has come to play a significant role in de Vriend's career. He has led the Combattimento Consort Amsterdam (being artistic director from 1982 – 2013) in unknown operas by Gassmann, Rameau, Heintzen and Haydn, among others, as well as familiar operas by such composers as Monteverdi, Handel, Rossini and Mozart. For the opera houses of Lucerne, Strasbourg, Barcelona, Moscow and Enschede, he has conducted operas by Handel, Mozart, Verdi, Strauss and others. De Vriend is music director of Opera St. Moritz.

De Vriend has conducted many distinguished Dutch orchestras, including the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra and The Hague Philharmonic Orchestra. De Vriend is also a welcome guest internationally and has conducted orchestras in China, Germany, Austria, Italy and France.



## **The Netherlands Symphony Orchestra**

The Netherlands Symphony Orchestra is based in Enschede, in the province of Overijssel. Performing at an international level, as evidenced by its highly acclaimed CDs and invitations for international tours, the orchestra is firmly rooted in society.

Jan Willem de Vriend has been its artistic director and chief conductor since 2006. Under De Vriend's leadership, the orchestra has expanded its repertoire to cover music from four centuries. Its use of period instruments in the Classical repertoire gives the orchestra a distinctive and highly individual character.

The Netherlands Symphony Orchestra performs amongst others in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, Enschede, Zwolle and Deventer. In addition, it often works with the Dutch National Touring Opera Company. In its home town Enschede, the orchestra builds on a symphonic tradition of more than 80 years, and it is known as one of the most modern and entrepreneurial orchestras in the Netherlands. Its international partners include the BBC Philharmonic and the Liszt School of Music Weimar.

The Netherlands Symphony Orchestra created a number of ensembles, such as a chamber orchestra, the Baroque Academy of the Netherlands Symphony Orchestra (BANSO) and various chamber music ensembles. The orchestra's commitment to expanding its social relevance is also reflected in the large number of projects in which education is a key element.

The Netherlands Symphony Orchestra has made successful tours of the United States, Spain, China and England, and it has performed in such famous venues as Carnegie Hall in New York and Birmingham Symphony Hall. Its CDs of the

complete Beethoven symphonies (for Challenge Classics) and music by Dutch composers such as Julius Röntgen and Jan van Gilse (for the CPO label) were very well received by the international music press.

The orchestra has worked with distinguished conductors, such as its former chief conductor Jaap van Zweden, Vasily Petrenko, Edo de Waart, Hans Vonk, Gerd Albrecht, Marc Soustrot, Eri Klas, Ed Spanjaard, Claus Peter Flor and Tan Dun.

It also has accompanied many celebrated soloists, including Gidon Kremer, Ronald Brautigam, Natalia Gutman, Charlotte Margiono, Antje Weithaas, Marie-Luise Neunecker, Hélène Grimaud, Robert Holl, Fazil Say, Jean-Yves Thibaudet and Thomas Zehetmair.

The Netherlands Symphony Orchestra is financially supported by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Province of Overijssel and the Municipality of Enschede, as well as annual contributions from sponsors.

[www.hetsymfonieorkest.nl](http://www.hetsymfonieorkest.nl)

This High Definition Surround Recording was Produced, Engineered and Edited by Bert van der Wolf of NorthStar Recording Services, using the 'High Quality Musical Surround Mastering' principle. The basis of this recording principle is a realistic and holographic 3 dimensional representation of the musical instruments, voices and recording venue, according to traditional concert practice. For most older music this means a frontal representation of the musical performance, but such that width and depth of the ensemble and acoustic characteristics of the hall do resemble 'real life' as much as possible. Some older compositions, and many contemporary works do specifically ask for placement of musical instruments and voices over the full 360 degrees sound scape, and in these cases the recording is as realistic as possible, within the limits of the 5.1 Surround Sound standard. This requires a very innovative use of all 6 loudspeakers and the use of completely matched, full frequency range loudspeakers for all 5 discrete channels. A complementary sub-woofer, for the ultra low frequencies under 40Hz, is highly recommended to maximally benefit from the sound quality of this recording.

This recording was produced with the use of Sonodore microphones, Avalon Acoustic monitoring, Siltech Mono-Crystal cabling and dCS - & Merging Technologies converters.



[www.northstarconsult.nl](http://www.northstarconsult.nl)

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