

MENDELSSOHN

Piano Rarities

Early Sonatas • Songs Without Words

Christopher Williams



Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

Piano Rarities

Piano Sonata in F minor, MWV U23 (1820)	14:29	16 Andante con moto in A major, MWV U75 (1830)	2:02
1 I. Allegro	5:17	17 Con moto in A major, MWV U88 (1831)	0:36
2 II. Adagio	5:28	18 Wie die Zeit läuft! ('How Time Flies!') , MWV U196 (1847)	1:49
3 III. Presto	3:38	19 Übungsbuch bei Zelter ('Zelter Exercise Book'), MWV Z1 – No. 119. Theme and Variations in D major (c. 1820)	3:49
Piano Sonata in E minor, MWV U19 (1820)	14:20	20 Piano Piece in G major, MWV U38 (1822)	2:15
4 I. Introduzione: Adagio – Allegro	8:07	21 Andante in E flat major, MWV U165 (after 21 June 1842)	1:39
5 II. [Andante]	2:15	22 Sostenuto in F major, MWV U167 (after 21 June 1842)	2:14
6 III. Allegro	3:52	23 Canon in F sharp minor, MWV U163 (1842 version)	1:21
Lieder ohne Worte ('Songs without Words')		24 Capriccio in E flat minor, MWV U43 (1824)	10:05
7 E flat major, MWV U68 (1828)	1:52	25 Allegro in F major, MWV U174 'Bärentanz' (‘Bear Dance’) (1842)	0:54
8 Book 7 – No. 41 in A major, Op. 85, No. 5, MWV U191 (1847 version)	1:38		
9 D major, MWV U178 (1843)	2:35		
10 F major, MWV U150 (c. 1841)	2:18		
11 F sharp minor, MWV U124 (1836)	2:08		
12 Allegretto in A major, MWV U138 (1837)	2:24		
13 Andante in A major, MWV U76 (1830)	1:01		
Lieder ohne Worte			
14 Book 1 – No. 2 in A minor, Op. 19b, No. 2, MWV U80 (1830 version)	2:11		
15 E flat major, MWV U82 (after 1830) (completed by R. Larry Todd, b. 1952)	2:46		

Publishers: Friedrich Hofmeister Musikverlag – First Edition **1**–**6**, Bärenreiter Verlag **7**–**15**, Breitkopf & Härtel **16** **18**, composer's manuscript **17**, Cambridge University Press **19** **24**, Op 111 Productions **20**, G. Henle Verlag **21** **22**, Novello **23**, The Musical Times Publications Ltd **25** • 1847 version, pp. 6–7, Vault 4A, Box 61, Frederick R. Koch Collection 331, Beinecke Library for Rare Books and Manuscripts, Yale University **8** • 1830 version, Misc. MS 423, Collection of Vladimir Horowitz, Yale University, School of Music Library **14**

Lauded in his lifetime and venerated for years after his death, recognition of Mendelssohn's works has been more uneven since. During the later 19th century and the first half of the 20th questions were raised about his wealthy upbringing and his Jewish heritage. His music was banned by the Nazis and criticism of the so-called lightweight, fanciful, capricious emotions said to characterise his compositions compared unfavourably with the depth and struggle associated with music of the great masters. Even the sentimental titles given to many of his hugely popular *Lieder ohne Worte* ('Songs without Words') by publishers (not by him) helped confirm them as mere parlour music to some. However, since the 1970s new scholarship has restored much of Mendelssohn's compositional prestige, in the process rediscovering many works never previously published.

Mendelssohn's pioneering achievements in other areas have enjoyed more consistent appreciation. His lengthy and successful association as conductor with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra from 1835 until his death maintained and enhanced the orchestra's reputation as one of the best in Europe and helped establish orchestral playing standards internationally. From this role he became an arbiter of good taste and refinement in German music generally as well as

establishing programming that contained historical perspective and relevance with the importance of Bach, Mozart and Haydn secured as its classical foundation. Finally, he re-established the oratorio as a formidable compositional structure.

Born in Hamburg on 3 February 1809, Mendelssohn died in Leipzig on 4 November 1847. One of music's greatest child prodigies, his *String Octet* of 1825 and his *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* of 1826 are works of genius. As a child, with his equally brilliant older sister Fanny, he featured prominently in the thriving musical, literary and philosophical activities at his parents' Berlin home, frequented by a constant stream of Germany's cultural elite. This was fertile soil indeed for such a talent.

The main elements of Mendelssohn's musical style were quickly established. Initially his studies with Carl Zelter, a conservative by disposition, were rooted in Bach, Mozart and Haydn as founders of the German style. Later, Mendelssohn assimilated the music of middle- and late-period Beethoven and Weber. This resulted in a contained use of chromaticism within a strong key structure and rhythmic drive balanced by thematic interest. Instruments are generally used within their capacity. Classical attributes such as structural refinement and finesse, unfailingly bounded of good taste, go hand in hand with Romantic soaring melodic writing and some chromaticism. Balance in all areas was paramount.

The desire for balance permeated other areas of Mendelssohn's compositional endeavours. His output was consistently wide-ranging, although opera eluded him in his mature years. Instead, the elevated subject matter of oratorios, contained and controlled by the concert stage, attracted him, with *St Paul* and *Elijah* his most successful works. Incidental music for plays, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, concert overtures and concertos were also genres where he excelled. His *Violin Concerto* is a masterpiece. Chamber and church music figure strongly in his output, and five symphonies stand at the very core of his *oeuvre*.

A one-time pupil of Ignaz Moscheles, Mendelssohn was a fine concert pianist and organist, his performances avoiding any suggestion of display and virtuosity for its own sake. 48 *Lieder ohne Worte* for piano were published in six volumes spread throughout his mature years with two further volumes appearing posthumously.

Mendelssohn's busy lifestyle and almost overzealous self-criticism led to many of his works never reaching publication. Recent scholarship has brought these compositions into print and the work of German music scholar Ralf Wehner in producing an index of Mendelssohn's music (MWV numbers) has ensured more accurate dates can be ascertained for them all.

The title *Songs without Words* initially mystified contemporaries, but Mendelssohn insisted each remained 'just as it stands' with no words or voice added. A number of hitherto unpublished *Lieder ohne Worte* as well as numerous other works for piano are now in print (with only MWV numbers).

There is no doubt that Mendelssohn's style matured during his lifetime although not in a radical way. There is an added elegance, sophistication and sure-handedness in his later works.

The sonatas *MWV U19* in E minor and *MWV U23* in F minor [1]–[6] were written in 1820 when Mendelssohn was eleven and studying, among others, the sonatas of Beethoven. The sonata in F minor is the more developed and original of the two, with its first and last movements containing similarly dramatic material in sonata form, bookending the work with cleverly shifting key changes and development of the material. The middle movement *Adagio*, in binary form, has been likened to one of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*. The sonata in E minor seems more derivative and less developmental, and allusions to Beethoven's *Sonatas Opp. 10, 13 and 14* can be heard throughout. Nevertheless, the writing remains astonishingly assured. Its second movement looks further back to Haydn's keyboard style.

Lied ohne Worte in E flat major, MWV U68 [7] from 1828 is a delightfully spirited and straightforward binary form work. *Lied in A minor* [14] from 1830 is well known as *Lied ohne Worte, Op. 19b, No. 2* but this earlier version ends with a joyful section in A major. *Lied ohne Worte in E flat minor, MWV U82* [15] is a completion from an 1830 fragment by the eminent Mendelssohn scholar R. Larry Todd that brims with good humour.

Lied in A major [8] from 1845 is here performed in an 1847 version, differentiated mainly by the wholesale shift of bar lines two beats back that clarifies the phrase shaping for performers. The quietly virtuosic *Lied in D major* [9] is a cousin

of the famous *Spinnerlied in C major, Op. 67, No. 4*. Both date from 1843. The sublimely lyrical *Lied in F major* ¹⁰ and the fiery *Lied in F sharp minor* ¹¹ date from c. 1841 and 1836 respectively, and between them epitomise the wide emotional range of these pieces.

Two early works, the sprightly *Theme and Variations in D major* ¹⁹ from c. 1820 is in Haydn's style, while the *Klavierstück in G major* ²⁰ from c. 1822 comprises a waltz with three variations moving to D major at the end. The altogether more substantial *Capriccio in E flat minor* ²⁴ from 1824, with Mendelssohn on the cusp of great things, references Beethoven in its opening E flat major *andante* section and then adds a flamboyant *allegro molto* in E flat minor, cleverly integrating the two into its sonata form. Both in A major and both very brief single verses, the *Andante* ¹³ from 1830 is disarmingly straightforward with a gentle question mark ending, while the *Con moto* ¹⁷ from 1831 is delightfully humorous and quirky. *Andante con moto in A major* ¹⁶ from 1830 is lengthier, involving three seamless sections with the theme confidently returning to A major in the third section.

Contented and cheerful, *Allegretto in A major* ¹² from 1837 uses 9/8 time to sweep smoothly along into E major, then through various other keys before returning to A major for its final section. Written only two years before his death, *Wie die Zeit läuft!* ('How Time Flies!') in G minor ¹⁸ from 1847 seems to illustrate, as do few others, Mendelssohn's hugely driven personality. The *Andante in E flat major* ²¹ and *Sostenuto in F major* ²² are both mature works written after June 1842, and constructed with effortless poise, minimal complexity and deeply felt emotion. The *Canon in F sharp minor* ²³ and *Allegro in F major 'Bärentanz'* ²⁵ are both character pieces from 1842, the *Canon* an essay in contrapuntal brilliance and the grotesque *Bear Dance* representing a drum and pipe accompaniment; Schumann and Bartók also wrote similar pieces.

Rodney Smith



Christopher Williams

Born in Wales, Christopher Williams leads a busy and varied professional life as a pianist, composer, conductor, teacher and arranger. He is currently a staff pianist at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama, piano tutor at Cardiff University, and pianist for both the BBC National Chorus of Wales and BBC National Orchestra of Wales. Influenced by his teacher and mentor Walter Ryan, Williams developed a keen interest in the performance and recording of works by undeservedly neglected composers, culminating in the release of three albums of world premiere recordings by the composer Semyon Barmotin. In addition to his work as a soloist, Williams is in great demand as an accompanist and chamber musician, and has partnered many of the prominent instrumentalists of his generation including Philippe Scharz, Tim Thorpe, David Childs, David Pyatt, Tine Thing Helseth and Anneke Scott. Williams' longest musical partnership is with his wife, oboist Catherine Tanner-Williams, and has resulted in world premiere performances and recordings. His recording of Brahms transcriptions for Grand Piano (GP749) was featured as album of the week on *NDR Kultur*.

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Recent scholarship has brought numerous compositions by the excessively self-critical Mendelssohn into print and has ensured more accurate compositional dates for them. Many of these rare and little-known examples are encountered on this album. The title *Lieder ohne Worte* ('Songs without Words') may have mystified some contemporaries but their refinement and beauty are obvious as is their wide emotional range. The two youthful sonatas are astonishingly mature, even in the allusions to Beethoven. Mendelssohn's humour and quirkiness can also be heard in this vibrant selection of seldom encountered piano pieces.

Felix MENDELSSOHN (1809–1847)

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A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet

Christopher Williams, Piano

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