NAXOS

MENDELSSOHN

Songs without Words

(selection)

Arranged for Violin and Piano by Friedrich Hermann (1828–1907)

Axel Strauss, Violin

Cord Garben, Piano

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)
Songs without Words (selection), arranged for violin and piano

Born in Hamburg in 1809, eldest son of the banker Abraham Mendelssohn and grandson of the great Jewish thinker Moses Mendelssohn, Felix Mendelssohn, who took the additional name Bartholdy on his baptism as a Christian, Heine's ticket of admission to European culture, was brought up in Berlin, where his family settled in 1812. Here he enjoyed the wide cultural opportunities that his family offered, through their own interests and connections. His early gifts, manifested in a number of directions, included marked musical precocity, both as a player and as a performer, at a remarkably early age.

Mendelssohn's early manhood brought the opportunity to travel, as far south as Naples and as far north as The Hebrides, with Italy and Scotland both providing the inspiration for later symphonies. His career involved him in the Lower Rhine Festival in Düsseldorf and a period as city director of music, followed, in 1835, by appointment as conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig. Here he was able to continue the work he had started in Berlin six years earlier, when he had conducted in Berlin a revival of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. Leipzig was to provide a degree of satisfaction that he could not find in Berlin, where he returned at the invitation of King Friedrich Wilhelm IV in 1841. In Leipzig once more, in 1843, he established a new Conservatory, spending his final years there, until his death at the age of 38 on 4th November 1847, six months after the death of his gifted and beloved sister Fanny.

To contemporaries of Mendelssohn the notion of songs without words seemed paradoxical. If there were no words, there could be no song. Yet what Mendelssohn achieved was exactly what his title suggested, music in its purest and simplest form, expressing its own musical meaning, imbued with feeling, but without verbal connotation. He expressed strong views about the inevitably ambiguous nature of words, a judgement commonly applied by his contemporaries to music. At the same time short piano pieces of this kind would always find a ready amateur market and would be welcomed by publishers, although this may have been irrelevant to the composer's purpose. The series of *Songs without Words* that Mendelssohn wrote and published from 1830 onwards serve as a very personal musical diary in which the composer expressed very precisely musical ideas that had, he alleged, no verbal equivalent. It was left to later publishers to suggest titles for the pieces, a procedure that Mendelssohn himself deplored. Nevertheless the publisher's titles are included here, as well as the very small number of verbal indications authorised by the composer.

The *Opus 19* collection of *Songs without Words* was the first to be published, appearing in August 1832, originally under the title *Melodies for the Pianoforte*. Marked *Andante con moto* the first of the set 22 offers a simple and attractive melody, with a divided chordal accompaniment. The fourth 21, given the title *Confidence* by the publisher, has a more chordal figuration in its accompaniment, while the fifth 2 gives some justification for the publisher's suggested title *Restlessness*.

The second set of half a dozen pieces appeared in Bonn in 1835 as *Opus 30*. The first of the set 19 is meditative in mood, while the third 7 has been given the English title Consolation. The turbulent fourth piece 6 has the assumed title *The Wanderer* and the sixth 5 has the composer's sanctioned title of *Venetian Boat-Song*.

A third set of pieces was published two years later, in 1837, as *Opus 38*. The group opens with *The Evening Star* 8, a lilting 12/8. From the same set comes the second piece, perhaps familiar as *Lost Happiness* 18, the fourth 17, with its arpeggio introduction, *Hope*, and the sixth 15, with its descriptive and sanctioned title *Duet*, as one voice answers another.

A further group, the fourth, was published in 1841 as *Opus 53*. From this come the third 12, marked *Presto*

agitato, the fourth 16 in more meditative mood, and the fifth 20, *Folk-Song*, which seems to grow in power as new voices join the song.

1844 brought the fifth collection, *Opus 62*, from which four pieces have been chosen. The first 3, with the slightly inappropriate editorial title of *May Breezes*, is in a very different mood from the third 14, which is a funeral march. The fourth 13, written in 1843, has the editorial title *Morning Song* and the sixth 1 is very familiar as *Spring Song*.

The sixth group was the last to be published in Mendelssohn's life-time. It was issued in 1845 as *Opus 67* and was to be followed by two further, posthumous collections. The first 10, *Meditation*, was written in 1844, while the delicate second piece 4 dates from 1839. The hymn-like third of the set 9 has been given the title *Song of the Pilgrim*, and the fifth 11 *The Shepherd's Complaint*.

Keith Anderson

Friedrich Hermann (1828–1907)

In 1843 Friedrich Hermann entered the Leipzig Conservatory, which had just been founded by Felix Mendelssohn, and became a violin student of Ferdinand David. He also studied composition with Moritz Hauptmann and Mendelssohn himself. He later joined the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and was appointed Professor of Violin at the Leipzig Conservatory in 1848. Violin students will remember Friedrich Hermann as the editor of many violin works published by the Peters Edition. He also wrote a violin manual and was a prolific arranger and composer. According to a contemporary "in 1852 a symphony of his composition was executed at the Gewandhaus concerts with great success". Hermann's violin and piano arrangement of the Songs Without Words works exceptionally well and provides a wonderful addition to the violin repertoire. The word "arrangement" is almost an overstatement because Hermann did not add anything to the music. He merely divided melody and accompaniment and managed to leave the nature of the originals completely untouched.

Axel Strauss

Axel Strauss

Violinist Axel Strauss performs throughout the United States, Europe and Asia. A native of Germany, he balances his performance schedule with his position as Professor of Violin at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. He has won numerous prizes including the 1998 Naumburg Violin Award and the silver medal at the Enescu competition when he was only seventeen. He has toured Japan with the Philharmonic Violins Berlin and Germany with the Hamburg Symphony Orchestra. He made his American début at the Library of Congress in Washington DC and his first of many New York concerts was presented at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully hall in 1998. He performs on an outstanding violin by J. F. Pressenda, Turin 1845, on extended loan through the generous efforts of the Stradivari Society in Chicago.

Cord Garben

German pianist Cord Garben (b. 1943) began his career as a vocal coach at the Staatsoper Hanover. Later he produced numerous Deutsche Grammophon recordings for Fischer-Dieskau, Karajan, Benedetti Michelangeli and Rostropovich, receiving seven Grammy awards for his work. In 1986 Deutsche Grammophon made him Director of Vocal Productions. As pianist he has worked and recorded with some of the greatest singers of our time. He has also conducted radio and symphony orchestras of Berlin, Tokyo and Hamburg including DG recordings with Benedetti Michelangeli as soloist. Garben gives master classes in Lied interpretation throughout the world and is author of several books including The Song Cycles of Franz Schubert and a biography of Benedetti Michelangeli. Garben is President of the Johannes Brahms Society in Hamburg.

The series of *Songs without Words* that Mendelssohn wrote for piano and published from 1830 onwards serve as a very personal musical diary, purely and simply expressing its own musical meaning without verbal connotation. In arranging some of them for violin and piano the Leipzig violinist Friedrich Hermann was able to create a useful addition to the repertoire of his instrument without making any significant changes to the texture and form of the original compositions.

Felix MENDELSSOHN

(1809–1847)

Songs without Words

(selection)

Arranged for violin and piano by Friedrich Hermann (1828–1907)

1	Allegretto grazioso, Op. 62, No. 6	2:36
2	Allegro agitato, Op. 19, No. 5	3:04
3	Andante espressivo, Op. 62, No. 1	2:17
4	Molto Allegro, Op. 67, No. 2	2:34
5	Allegretto tranquillo, Op. 30, No. 6, 'Venetian Boat Song'	3:16
6	Agitato e con fuoco, Op. 30, No. 4	2:49
7	Adagio non troppo, Op. 30, No. 3	2:18
8	Con moto, Op. 38, No. 1	2:13
9	Andante tranquillo, Op. 67, No. 3	3:30
10	Andante, Op. 67, No. 1	2:28
11	Moderato, Op. 67, No. 5	2:28
12	Presto agitato, Op. 53, No. 3	2:29
13	Allegro con animato, Op. 62, No. 4	1:29
14	Andante maestoso, Op. 62, No. 3	3:09
15	Andante con moto, Op. 38, No. 6, 'Duetto'	2:51
16	Adagio, Op. 53, No. 4	2:52
17	Andante, Op. 38, No. 4	2:23
18	Allegro non troppo, Op. 38, No. 2	2:08
19	Andante espressivo, Op. 30, No. 1	4:40
20	Allegro con fuoco, Op. 53, No. 5, 'Folk Song'	3:07
21	Moderato, Op. 19, No. 4	2:18
22	Andante con moto, Op. 19, No. 1	3:26

Axel Strauss, Violin • Cord Garben, Piano

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