



# Mendelssohn

## The Piano Concertos

Rondo brilliant, Op.29

# Martin Helmchen

Royal Flemish Philharmonic

Philippe  
Herreweghe

## Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847)

### Piano Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 25

1	Molto allegro con fuoco	7. 31
2	Andante	6. 19
3	Presto	6. 52

### Piano Concerto No. 2 in D minor, Op. 40

4	Allegro appassionata	9. 36
5	Adagio – Molto sostenuto	6. 06
6	Finale – Presto scherzando	7. 06

7	Rondo brilliant, Op.29	11. 20
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Total playing time: 55. 02

**Martin Helmchen, piano**

**Royal Flemish Philharmonic**

conducted by **Philippe Herreweghe**

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Remarkable: Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, who himself was a piano virtuoso, found it difficult to compose for his very own instrument. As he confessed in 1838 in a letter to his friend and fellow-composer Ferdinand Hiller, writing for the piano “was not the greatest of pleasure” for him. It seemed that, despite the many early solo and chamber-music works he had written for the piano, Mendelssohn still doubted the quality of his works involving this instrument. He had already indicated this when completing the *Rondo Brilliant for Piano and Orchestra in E flat, Op. 29*. In a letter dated February 7, 1834 to the piano virtuoso and composer, Ignaz Moscheles, he criticized his Op. 29 as follows: “Once again, this Rondo has made me very aware of my own lack of novel twists and turns on the piano: this is where I always falter and struggle, and I fear that you will notice this [...] but I cannot imagine how to begin to make even a simple, tranquil piece [...]”.

Such comments made by a composer regarding his own oeuvre should not always be taken too seriously. Johannes Brahms preferred to throw compositions he considered failures into the fireplace and burn them. To be sure, his wrestling with these self-imposed demands also resulted in more music; it paid off in creative results, so to speak – take, for instance, Brahms’ introduction to his first symphony, in which he is on the point of making a break-through in the harmonic complexity.

It is not so simple to read such doubts in Mendelssohn’s music – especially not in his *Rondo brilliant*. On the contrary. He expresses nothing less than self-confidence in the spirited and pleasurable introduction. Here in close succession, rather like a fanfare, first the clarinets and horns, then oboes and bassoons, and finally flutes, trumpets and timpani join in and are almost overwhelmed by the blasting power of the virtuoso piano.

Most likely, it was his scepticism towards his own virtuoso and pleasing pieces that induced Mendelssohn to pronounce these words. This is clarified in a letter dating from the end of 1834: he believed that he could not write a first-class slow movement for the piano; all he could manage were lively, fast-moving movements. And cautionary words from Moscheles contributed to this attitude. For he wrote the following to Moscheles in a letter dated December 25, 1834: “You once told me that I should write a peaceful and substantial pianoforte piece, after all the restless works; and I cannot put that out of my mind. It halts the flow of my progress, because as soon as I think of a piano concerto, I start to think it through – and as soon as I think it through, I recall: Moscheles said this or that, etc., and that puts an end to the whole process.”

There is another reason why Mendelssohn eyed his own compositions for the piano with scepticism: he was suffering from the success of his *Lieder ohne Worte* (= Songs without Words). Many fellow composers

also wanted to swim along on this wave of success and began publishing volumes of similar pieces. Feeling nervous, he wrote the following to his publisher Simrock in Bonn on March 4, 1839 – probably while working on some ‘old-fashioned’ organ fugues, or suchlike: “Still I have not finished the manuscripts I was planning to send you last year. I wanted to complete them with the attention they deserve, and for that I need the right mood as well as leisure time – both of which I often lacked at the time, due to all my concerts. I now hope to manage this in the near future and to thus pay off my debt. However, they are not songs without words. Nor do I intend to publish more of this genre [...]. Were there too much of such rubbish between heaven and earth, in the end, it would be enjoyed by no man. Nowadays, far too much piano music of a similar nature is being written – it is time to start singing a new song, I believe!”

In 1839, it became evident that he already rather detested the numerous concert tours he had to undertake as both pianist and composer. And as for success with critics and audiences? This apparently meant nothing to Mendelssohn. Already he was notching up successes as early as 1831, when he composed his *Piano Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 25*. In a report dating from 1832, the Royal Philharmonic Society in London wrote that during his previous performances, Mendelssohn had made such an extraordinary impression on his audience with his piano concerto that he had now been invited to repeat it. It was a justly-earned compliment to the musical genius of the young man. More than any other musician, his achievements reminded them of the almost unbelievable known facts regarding the life of Mozart: as did the latter, Mendelssohn combined an uncommon talent in composition with admirable skill as a pianist; he also had a remarkable memory, was able to improvise with great ease as well as sight-read the most difficult music. Judging by what they had just heard of Mendelssohn’s works, the Royal Philharmonic insisted that the world of music could now hope for a succession of the most beautiful music from the composer. In exchange, Mendelssohn could count on an audience that understood him in both London and Berlin. [...] He left the orchestra after the performance to a standing ovation.

March 1837 was a good month for Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. His oratorio *St. Paul* was performed successfully in both Leipzig and Boston. And later that month, on March 28, he married Cécile Jeanrenaud in the French Reformed Church in Frankfurt. A few weeks later, after a rather more strenuous than relaxing ‘honeymoon’ spent visiting various relatives, the couple went on to Bingen am Rhein to rest and recuperate. There, during a stay that lasted several weeks, Mendelssohn began work on his *Piano Concerto No. 2 in D minor, Op. 40*.

Two months later, Mendelssohn completed this work. At first, he

could not organize performances of the newly created concerto, as he was away on a succession of arduous travels. One of the trips took him to Birmingham, to the most important music festival in England, the Birmingham Triennial Music Festival (1784 – 1912). Here, he appeared on stage several times within the course of just four days: conducting the Overture to his *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and his oratorio *St. Paul*; improvising on the organ and performing Bach’s *Preludes and Fugues*; conducting a Mozart symphony; and finally playing the solo part for the première of his *Piano Concerto No. 2*.

As in the first piano concert, here the three movements run on into one another: there is no actual break between the movements, whether in the music or in the harmony. The drum roll is also at first reminiscent of Mendelssohn’s *Piano Concerto No. 1*. Nevertheless, it is clearly a different and more mature piece of music: rather than attempting to astound his audience with virtuoso keyboard theatrics, Mendelssohn had aimed for a more demanding content. Following the initial drum roll of the first movement (*Allegro appassionato*), the piano also intervenes – admittedly, after a few bars. However, it does not try to show off its heroic qualities; rather, at first by means of two D-minor chords, it restrains the motif at the beginning, the melody of which is clearly defined by the orchestra; after which, by means of a subsequent string of quavers, it breaks into contemplative tones of an improvisatory nature.

Arno Lückner

English translation: Fiona J. Stroker-Gale

## Martin Helmchen

Martin Helmchen was born in Berlin in 1982. He received his first piano lessons at the age of six. From 1993 until graduating from school in 2000 he was a student of Galina Iwanzowa at the Hanns Eisler Academy in Berlin. After 2001, he studied with Arie Vardi at the “Hochschule für Musik und Theater” in Hannover. His career received its first major impulse after winning the Clara Haskil Competition in 2001.

Orchestras with which Martin Helmchen has performed include: the Deutsche Sinfonie-Orchester Berlin, RSO Stuttgart, Bamberg Symphoniker, NHK Symphony Orchestra, Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, Royal Flemish Philharmonic, BBC Symphony Orchestra, and the chamber orchestras of Zurich, Amsterdam, Vienna, Lausanne, Cologne and Munich. He has worked with conductors such as Marek Janowski, Philippe Herreweghe, Marc Albrecht, Vladimir Jurowski, Jiri Kout, Bernhard Klee, and Lawrence Foster.

Martin Helmchen has been a guest at the Ruhr Piano Festival, Kissinger Summer Festival, the Festivals in Lockenhaus, Jerusalem, Spoleto (Italy), the Rheingau Music Festival, the Spannungen Chamber-Music Festival in Heimbach, the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Festival, the Schwetzingen Festival, the Schleswig-Holstein Festival, as well as the Marlboro Festival in Vermont (USA).

Chamber music is a highly valued part of Martin Helmchen’s life, which he always includes in his performance programme. For years now, he has collaborated closely with Boris Pergamenschikow till his decease in 2004; at present, he regularly gives concerts and recitals with Heinrich Schiff and Danjulo Ishizaka. Furthermore, he has partnered Gidon Kremer, Christian Tetzlaff, Isabelle Faust, Daniel Hope, Antje Weithaas, Tabea Zimmermann, Sharon Kam and Lars Vogt.

The young pianist Martin Helmchen has already been awarded two of the most important prizes in the music scene: the Crédit Suisse Young Artist Award and the ECHO Klassik. He received the Crédit Suisse Award in September 2006. The prize included his début with the Vienna Philharmonic under Valery Gergiev, performing Schumann’s Piano Concerto during the Lucerne Festival. He was awarded the ECHO prize jointly with cellist Danjulo Ishizaka, as “Nachwuchskünstler des Jahres” (= up-and-coming artist of the year).

Martin Helmchen has signed an exclusive contract with the PentaTone Classics label.

## Royal Flemish Philharmonic

Artistically adaptable symphony orchestra, the Royal Flemish Philharmonic has the artistic flexibility to be able to interpret a range of styles in a historically responsible manner. The chief conductor, Jaap van Zweden, is responsible for the large-orchestra repertoire. His wide orchestral experience, which includes a period as Leader of the Concertgebouw Orchestra, has helped to shape the unique character of the Philharmonic. To achieve this, he works closely with the principal conductor Philippe Herreweghe who, because of his background, focuses on romantic and pre-romantic repertoire. This orchestra's principal guest conductor is Martyn Brabbins.

The Royal Flemish Philharmonic has its own concert series in the large concert halls. This gives the orchestra a unique position in Flanders. The orchestra performs regularly in the Queen Elisabeth Hall and deSingel in Antwerp, the Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels, De Bijloke and the Concertgebouw in Bruges. In addition to giving their regular concert series, the orchestra firmly believes in developing educational and social projects to guide children, youngsters and people from all sorts of social backgrounds through the world of symphonic sounds.

The Royal Flemish Philharmonic regularly receives invitations to perform in all the major concert halls around the world: the Musikverein and the Konzerthaus in Vienna, the Festspielhaus in Salzburg, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the Suntory Hall and the Bunka Kaikan Hall in Tokyo, the Philharmonie in Cologne and in Munich, the Alte Oper in Frankfurt, the Palace of Arts in Budapest and the National Grand Theatre in Peking. International concert tours in various European countries and in Japan have a firm place in the musical calendar.

Together with the publisher, Lannoo, the Royal Flemish Philharmonic has created a series of audio books for children. The orchestra can also regularly be heard in Klara radio programmes and seen on the digital television channel EURO1080. The press has acclaimed various of the orchestra's CDs; for example, the Beethoven symphonies that principal conductor Philippe Herreweghe recently recorded (PentaTone). Recent recordings also include Jaap van Zweden conducting the music of Shostakovich (Naïve) and Martyn Brabbins conducting the music of Mortelmans (Hyperion).

## Philippe Herreweghe

Philippe Herreweghe was born in Ghent. There he studied medicine and psychiatry at the university and piano at the Music Academy. He founded the Collegium Vocale Gent, La Chapelle Royale and, later, the Ensemble Vocal Européen, thus establishing himself as a specialist in renaissance and baroque music. Since 1991, he and the Orchestre des Champs-Élysées have applied themselves to playing romantic music on period instruments. From 1982 to 2001, he served as Artistic Director of the Festival of Les Académies Musicales de Saintes. At the start of the 2008-2009 season, he became the principal guest conductor of the Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic. In his capacity as principal conductor of the Royal Flemish Philharmonic, Philippe Herreweghe has been focusing for the last ten years on interpreting the pre-romantic and romantic repertoire adequately and refreshingly.

He has also appeared as guest conductor with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, the Concerto Köln, the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and other illustrious orchestras and ensembles. Some of his most significant recordings include the vocal masterpieces of Bach (such as the St. Matthew and St John Passions, the Mass in B Minor and the Christmas Oratorio), an anthology of the French 'Grand Motet', the requiem masses by Mozart, Fauré and Brahms, oratorios by Mendelssohn, and *Schönberg's Pierrot lunaire*. He is working on recordings of the complete Beethoven symphonies with the Royal Flemish Philharmonic, in collaboration with the international label PentaTone.

The European musical press acknowledged Philippe Herreweghe's artistic vision by proclaiming him Musical Personality of the Year in 1990. In 1993, Philippe Herreweghe and the Collegium Vocale Gent were appointed Cultural Ambassadors in Flanders. A year later he was awarded the Order of the Officier des Arts et Lettres and in 1997, Philippe Herreweghe received an honorary doctorate from Louvain University. In 2003, he was made a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur in France.

