

q5/3/03

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*It has been argued that Mendelsohn was a master-craftsman in the art of instrumentation, choosing at least 3 contrasting passages. Discuss.*

Mendelsohn wrote the Hebrides overture in the summer of 1829 in response to seeing and walking in the Hebrides and in particular visiting Fingal's Cave on an island in the outer Hebrides. Like Mozart before him, he was regarded as a child prodigy and composed several works before he was seventeen. Therefore when we consider the question posed, we must acknowledge Mendelsohn set about writing his concert overture with an esteemed background.

The concert overture has many different forms but Mendelsohn used Sonata form for his Hebrides overture (a common decision to make in this Classical period). It could be argued that Sonata form is indicative of Mendelsohn's relative conservatism as it has a fairly strict pattern to follow, both in terms of form, key and temperament:

It is clear that Mendelsohn did indeed use three contrasting passages with the addition of the 52 bar long Coda (normally a more brief concluding passage at the end of a work). Sonata form has many positives that work well in this Overture: Mendelsohn's original theme (fig 1) is clearly audible in the cello part in bar 1 of the exposition which gives the grounding for the whole piece (indeed, it has been argued that this theme is the genesis of the whole piece but that is a different essay entirely.) and is repeated in all parts of the work. Because the themes are so important they need to be clearly exposed and the exposition does this effectively.

Sonata form also allows for two subjects in the exposition (bars 1-96) and he intertwines them immaculately. An example of this is the chord structure of the two subjects: they are both constructed from notes 1,2,3 and five of the scale but this does not mean to say they are too similar: the second subject is in D major and is a four-bar melody as opposed to the smaller 1 bar motif of the first subject. The first subject is a springboard for the second subject but is not relied upon. In this way Mendelsohn demonstrates his 'master-craftsmanship'.

Key change is another prevalent feature of Sonata form that Mendelsohn utilizes to weave his material together- The various key changes in the work are shown in the explanation of Sonata form and the relativity of each passing key to the tonic (B minor) is clear- Mendelsohn uses the relative major as well as the tonic major for major key changes, but also moves through keys including the dominant in rapid succession in different parts of the piece: for example, me

moves through E major, C major, G major, Bb major, F major, C minor and G minor in only 16 bars between bar 100 and 116. The key changes are intrinsically linked to the way Mendelsohn weaves his different themes together whilst still retaining new and exciting ideas for further in the piece.

The 'three contrasting passages' mentioned in the title are the exposition, development and recapitulation. After the exposition, which introduces the bold main themes of the piece, Mendelsohn uses the development to explore a wider range of tonal mixture (and indeed conflict) in the work. We must remember that several of the themes and underlying harmonies are direct imitations of his experiences in the Hebrides (some say the rising quavers in the bass in bar 15 along with the full texture at that point is a reference to the rising waves at Fingal's cave) and so a more daring middle section is apt for this work. As stated earlier, there is a rapid key change during the development along with a bold perfect cadence at bar 88 and the surrounding bars heavily decorated with semiquavers in the strings. It is a mark to Mendelsohn's craftsmanship that he can manipulate this orchestra (consisting of flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, timpani, trumpets, horns, violins, violas, cellos and double basses) to such tonal variety yet still keep the driving force of the piece.

The recapitulation shows just how much control Mendelsohn has on his piece. He resolves the tonal conflict by repeating the music in the exposition, giving the work a sense of gravity and uniformity which is exemplified best by the key: the entire recapitulation is centred on the tonic- both in its original form and in its tonic major- so the listener feels landed and complete. The Coda is, unlike the conventional calm and short coda of the classical period, turbulent and indicative of the piece- trilling violins in bar 217, the original theme 1 returning but FALLING in thirds through 5 bars (226-231) and massive brass fanfares (bars 247-252 and 255-256) make the coda dramatic and electrifying before, like a man grasping the lead of a rabid dog, Mendelsohn curtails the drama to a deeply tranquil end with a combination of the first subject in the flute and the 2nd in the clarinet. The way Mendelsohn handles this tumultuous music is nothing short of master-craftsmanship.

There are two more issues to mention that show the skill of the Hebrides- texture and instrumentation. The instruments the Hebrides is scored for is typical of the classical period and relatively small, as detailed above. However, Mendelsohn does not use this to hinder the drama of the piece with bright, tranquil motifs (the initial theme in the cello in bar 1) contrasting heavily with the dramatic full-orchestral sound heard at bar 87 and other instances.

To conclude, we have shown that there are numerous examples of the way Mendelsohn has shaped the Hebrides- including contrasting texture, the use of sonata form and the contrasts within that form- to make it memorable and weave his varying ideas together. It should be noted that Mendelsohn reviewed and heavily changed the piece several times over his musical career to get it into the

shape we see it today.

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texture