

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)
Violin Concerto in E Minor

Sometimes it is easier to explain the existence of a piece of music by looking beyond the composer to the dedicatee for whom it was written. Ferdinand David's connection to Felix Mendelssohn cannot be overstated. David was born in the same house in Hamburg, a year later than Mendelssohn. Both were Jewish and would later adopt Christianity. Both were child prodigies. Both were kindred spirits and became extremely close friends in 1825. Both would perform chamber music together. Both, gangly teenagers were highly accomplished musicians, David concertizing in Berlin and Mendelssohn writing his glorious Octet, before the age of sixteen. A decade later, when Mendelssohn became conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, he naturally gave David the job of concertmaster. When he founded the Leipzig Conservatory, David was picked for the faculty along with Robert and Clara Schumann. If a faculty lounge existed, one can only imagine what the conversation would have been like.

So the following message to Ferdinand David is not surprising either:

"I'd like to write a violin concerto for you next winter; one in E minor sticks in my head, the beginning of which will not leave me in peace."

It is a great insight into the compositional workshop to notice that large chunks were already mentally conceived. There seems to be less of the struggle we sometimes associate with Beethoven or even Schumann. The sketches we have of the Violin Concerto attest to the fact that there was more a channel of inspiration and less guess work.

Another great insight into the compositional workshop is the collaboration with David in almost every technical aspect except the architecture. It is not unusual to find a close collaboration between composer and soloist. Brahms had one with Joachim. Tchaikovsky had one with his lover Kotek. But this collaboration between Mendelssohn and David is perhaps more akin to the relationship between opera composer and librettist. One is the reason for the other. Just after completion and a few changes Mendelssohn wrote to David again.

"I very much want to have your views on all this before I turn it into the printer."

The work was a tremendous success premiered by David on March 13, 1845. Audiences have placed it firmly on the 'great concerti' list, -perhaps more for its Mendelssohn trademark tunefulness than for its grand craftsmanship. The joint beginning of soloist and orchestra is somewhat new – and followed by many composers thereafter. The placement of the first movement cadenza is not traditional, but musically placed for maximum power. The technique required is clearly stupendous, for which violinists must be grateful for David's close collaboration. Not only was Ferdinand David a pupil of Spohr, the 1742 Guarneri violin

which he played at the premiere was inherited by the late Jascha Heifetz. Therefore, it is entirely possible that many in our audience who may have heard Heifetz play this concerto, have heard the same tonal qualities of the instrument that David delivered to his audience in 1845. The violin now is on permanent loan to Alexander Barantschik and is the property of the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco.

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