

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)



FAST FACTS

- He and his sister took piano and violin lessons from the best teachers
- Wrote symphonies, operas, and more by age 14
- Wrote the famous “Wedding March”
- His “Songs Without Words” require skill, excellent technique, and great sensitivity
- Conducted first performance of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* since Bach’s death

Born: 1809 (Hamburg, Germany)

Died: 1847 (Leipzig, Germany)

Felix Mendelssohn’s musical talent is often compared to Mozart’s, although each composer’s music was quite different. Mendelssohn’s grandfather was an important Jewish philosopher, and his father was a banker, so young Felix was born into a family of status and wealth. As a result, Felix and his sister Fanny were given piano lessons by the best teachers, and went to Paris to study Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart. In addition to being able to paint and speak in several languages, Mendelssohn began composing music at age 11, and had written symphonies, *Singspiele* (German operas), chamber pieces, and a variety of piano and organ pieces by age 14. Within the next few years, he wrote a string octet (for eight players), and composed the music to accompany William Shakespeare’s play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The play includes a piece that is known as the “Wedding March”, the famous music that you hear when a bride walks down the aisle in a wedding.

Aside from the “Wedding March”, Mendelssohn’s fame mainly comes from his piano music, in which he combined perfect technique with passion and expression. He is known as a “virtuoso” on piano and organ because of these skills. Some of Mendelssohn’s most famous piano works were 48 short pieces called “Songs without Words.” These pieces stretched the piano player’s technical ability, because they were written for either singer with piano accompaniment, or piano solo (an “accompaniment” is music, usually in piano, that supports a solo part). In either case, there was a clear melody, which was easy to sing, but difficult to play if the pianist performed by himself, because Mendelssohn’s accompaniments alone were very active. These “Songs without Words” also challenged a pianist’s ability to play with sensitivity and dynamics. Mendelssohn required the pianist to play multiple different dynamics in one hand in order to make the beauty of the melody part clear, which can be very difficult for even skilled pianists! Mendelssohn was very important in the early part of the Romantic period for expanding the piano player’s musical ability, and even the capability of the piano itself.

Mendelssohn was also famous for his conducting skills. J.S. Bach’s music had fallen out of fashion after he died, so Mendelssohn sought to return it to the spotlight. In 1829, he conducted the first performance of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* since Bach’s death in 1750.



Let’s Listen!

- Watch a performance of Mendelssohn’s String Octet: [click here](#).
- *Song Without Words*, Op. 38 No. 6: [click here](#).