TONIGHT'S REPERTOIRE

WHAT YOU ARE **ABOUT TO HEAR**

MENDELSSOHN (1809–1847)
Sinfonia No 10 in B minor (1823)
Adagio – Allegro – più presto

Violin Concerto in E minor Op 64 (1844)
Allegro molto appassionato
Andante
Allegretto non troppo – Allegro molto vivace

MOZART (1756-1791)
Overture, La clemenza di Tito K621 (1791)

Sinfonia Concertante, K364 (1779)
Allegro maestoso
Andante
Presto

It's not a competition, obviously. But should we care to line up Mozart and Mendelssohn in the child prodigy stakes, it's Mendelssohn who would surely win hands down. You might find that surprising, especially since notions of Mozart as a prolific child genius, from whom masterpieces flowed like water, are so firmly etched in our collective unconscious. But in terms of sheer quality and sophistication, the music that Mendelssohn produced as a teenager far outstrips that of Mozart.

Just think of the Octet for strings, written when Mendessohn was 16, or the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from the 17-year-old composer – works that have become so firmly established in their concert repertoires that we forget they're the products of an astonishingly gifted child. Mendelssohn's earliest compositions date from 1820, when he was just 11 (they include – deep breath – a violin sonata, a piano trio, several songs, three piano sonatas, choral works and even an opera), and tonight's opening piece is one of 12 String Symphonies that Mendelssohn composed between the ages of 12 and 14. At that time, he was a pupil of Carl Zelter, and these String Symphonies inevitably display the influence of Zelter's rather conservative teaching, not least in their backward glances to the music of CPE Bach.

But they're no mere childhood exercises. The String Symphony No 10, completed in May 1823 when Mendessohn was 14, is a single-movement work (it's been suggested it may originally have been joined by two complementary movements, though they've never been unearthed) of enormous confidence and sophistication, whose solemn, Haydn-inspired introduction is followed by a dashing faster section that's Mendelssohn through and through.

We leap to the other end of Mendelssohn's 38-year life for his second work in tonight's programme. The Violin Concerto was the last major orchestral piece he produced, and, unlike the childhood music he wrote at a rate of knots, it took him a while – six years, in fact, though Mendelssohn has the excuse of directing Leipzig's Gewandhaus Orchestra and founding the city's Music Conservatoire. The Concerto is rooted in friendship, that between Mendelssohn and violinist Ferdinand David, who first became friends and chamber music collaborators as far back as 1825, when David was 15 and Mendelssohn 16. When Mendelssohn founded the Leipzig Conservatoire, he soon enlisted David as its inaugural violin professor, and when he took on the directorship of the Gewandhaus Orchestra, no prizes for guessing who he hurried to appoint as its concertmaster.

The first inklings of a Violin Concerto came in 1838, when Mendelssohn wrote to David: 'I should like to write a violin concerto for you next winter. One in E minor runs through my head, the beginning of which gives me no peace.' In the end, Mendelssohn only completed the work on 16 September 1844, and worked closely with his friend on it. One of David's specific requests was that the Concerto should avoid virtuoso display for its own sake, with the result that, though the piece is hardly without its difficulties, it remains relatively playable, and a favourite for younger violinists (incidentally, tonight's soloist, Nicola Benedetti, recorded it as just her second CD release, at the age of 18).

Felix Mendelssohn

David (who else?) premiered the Concerto in Leipzig on 13 March 1845. It was an immediate hit, and has remained popular ever since.

Nonetheless, it's a quietly innovative piece. Mendelssohn the conductor wasn't fond of applause between movements of a longer work, so composed links joining the Concerto's three movements: a solo bassoon that refuses to be quiet once the haunting first movement has ended; then a more elaborate dialogue between the soloist and orchestra to launch the scherzo-like finale. Furthermore, Mendelssohn breaks Classical convention by placing the violinist's solo cadenza, not towards the end of the first movement, but at the climax of its central development section, an innovation that was picked up and copied by composers including Tchaikovsky and Sibelius.

Another 'last piece' opens the second half of tonight's concert. *La clemenza di Tito* was the final opera Mozart completed, notoriously interrupting work on the *Requiem* and *The Magic Flute*. It was a bit of a last-minute commission, but coming from the Estates of Bohemia, and intended for a grand celebration of Leopold II's coronation as King of Bohemia in September 1791, Mozart could hardly refuse (though Salieri had – Mozart was second choice to set the libretto by Metastasio). *La clemenza di Tito* focuses on Roman Emperor Titus and his apparent capacity for forgiveness towards all those who have conspired against him – the message for the incoming Holy Roman Emperor can't have been clearer.

Mozart's opera wasn't much of a success. In fact, the Empress summed up her reaction in a succinct, two-word review: 'German rubbish.' Its Overture, however, shows all the nobility you might expect for an opera dealing with such a lofty figure.

Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante K364 takes us back to much earlier in his career, when the 23-year-old was feeling stifled and underused in his employment with Prince-Archbishop Hieronymus Colloredo in Salzburg. He'd just come back from a tour taking in Munich, Mannheim and Paris, however, and his joy and sense of freedom at the new discoveries he made are plain to see (or hear) in this remarkably buoyant, inventive piece.

Though the specific reasons he wrote the work aren't known, it's clear that the Sinfonia Concertante meant a lot to Mozart, possibly because of his love for the viola. He was an accomplished violinist, but particularly enjoyed playing the deeper

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

instrument in chamber works because of its role in the 'middle' of the music. In his Sinfonia concertante, there's no sense of the viola playing second fiddle: Mozart builds a remarkable partnership between his two soloists, who copy and chase each other through the work's copious melodic invention, as well as blending together with astonishing beauty. Just listen to their stealthy first entry, if you can hear it – on a long-held, high E flat, disguised by the noise of the orchestra so that you barely register they're there. The long, heartfelt slow movement may have been Mozart's musical response to the death of his mother, who had passed away in Paris during the family's European tour: here, the two soloists seem to play balancing roles, one lamenting while the other consoles. Mozart closes, however, with a return to high-spirited joy in his lively rondo finale.