Program Notes for VSO Concert – Mendelssohn Violin Concerto and Bruckner Symphony #5 – October 17-18, 2025

By Jonathan Berkowitz

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809 to 1847)

In Brockway and Weinstock's quirky, opinionated, and oddly appealing 1939 book *Men of Music*, they write, "The story of Felix Mendelssohn is that of a Prince Charming. His is the happiest life in musical history." He created music that was extraordinary for its elegance, clarity, and melody. Yet behind this polish lies a story of prodigy, family legacy, cultural ambition, and a tragically short life.

In brief, he was brought up in a cultivated household by sympathetic parents who nurtured his musical ambitions from the very beginning. He achieved success very early, and by the age of twenty-six, he held the most important post in musical Germany. He had a very happy marriage and five delightful children. He was the most revered composer in Europe before even reaching middle age. As soon as the first clouds began to appear in his sunny life, he died speedily and painlessly.

Felix (Latin for "happy") was born in Hamburg on February 3, 1809, into a family of wealth and influence. His grandfather was Moses Mendelssohn, one of the towering philosophers of the German Enlightenment, sometimes called the "modern Plato." Moses fought for religious tolerance and rational inquiry, and became a symbol of Jewish intellectual achievement in 18th-century Europe.

Felix's father, Abraham Mendelssohn, was a successful banker but less celebrated than his philosopher father. Abraham's wife, Lea Salomon, came from a similarly distinguished family. Their children—Fanny, Felix, Rebecca, and Paul—were raised in a household filled with literature, art, and music. Political unrest in Hamburg spurred the family's move to Berlin in 1811. Born Jewish, the Mendelssohn children were baptized as Lutherans in 1816, in order to assimilate into mainstream German society. In 1822, after Felix's parents were also baptized, the entire family adopted the surname Bartholdy, the name of a family farm. This dual heritage—Enlightenment rationalism, Jewish ancestry, Protestant religion—gave Felix a rich but complex cultural foundation.

Felix's musical gifts emerged early. Both he and his equally talented sister Fanny studied piano, theory, and composition with the best teachers available. He quickly established himself as a musical prodigy. During his childhood, he composed a handful of operas and 11 symphonies. At just nine years old, he made his public debut in Berlin. The young Mendelssohn was astonishingly prolific. At 16 he composed his Octet for Strings, a fresh and inventive piece that remains a cornerstone of chamber music. A year later came the overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a miracle of orchestral colour. He was not just a precocious talent but a composer of lasting originality.

In 1829 Mendelssohn embarked on a concert tour to England and Scotland, which led to his Hebrides Overture (Fingal's Cave) and Symphony No. 3 ("Scottish"). That same year in Berlin, Mendelssohn conducted a performance that changed music history: Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. At the time, Bach's great works had largely been forgotten. Mendelssohn's revival sparked renewed interest in Baroque music, and his advocacy ensured Bach's central place in the repertoire we enjoy today. Mendelssohn continued to compose prolifically while working as a conductor. After writing

Symphony No. 5 ("Reformation") in 1830, he set out on a three-year European tour. His Symphony No. 4 ("Italian"), another of his best-known works, was a result of this period. The "Reformation" was published posthumously, after the "Italian", hence the misleading order of the numbering.

In 1835 Mendelssohn was appointed conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, which he transformed into one of Europe's premier ensembles. His insistence on careful rehearsals and artistic discipline set new standards for orchestral performance. He didn't stop there. In 1843 he founded the Leipzig Conservatory, an institution that attracted leading musicians including Robert Schumann and Ignaz Moscheles to its faculty. The Conservatory quickly became a model for professional music education, ensuring that Mendelssohn's influence extended far beyond his own compositions.

Mendelssohn's personal life was anchored by his wife, children and extended family. His sister Fanny was his closest collaborator, although her talents were constrained by the era's limitations on women composers, including limitations imposed by Felix himself. A composer in her own right, Fanny wrote some of the *Songs Without Words* attributed to her brother. She was a powerful influence on the development of his musical nature and a lifelong inspiration to Felix. When Fanny died suddenly of a stroke in May 1847, Felix was devastated. His health, already compromised by the feverish level of his strenuous career, began to deteriorate rapidly. He suffered his own strokes later that year and died at just 38 years old in Leipzig on November 4, 1847.

In his lifetime, Mendelssohn was celebrated as a composer, conductor, pianist, and cultural leader. His style blends Classical balance with Romantic expression. He revered Mozart and Bach, and his music reflects their clarity and contrapuntal skill. Yet his works are unmistakably Romantic in their warmth, colour, and emotional directness.

Mendelssohn's works continue to enchant. His life may have been short, but his influence, rooted in a family legacy of intellectual and cultural greatness, remains immense. He is a bridge between the Classical and Romantic worlds.

Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64 – Mendelssohn (1844)

Orchestration: *2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings, and solo violin*

Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto was his last concerto and one of his last major orchestral works. It remains among the most beloved and highly-regarded works in the violin repertoire, and indeed symphonic works in general. It became an instant classic, and has remained an essential concerto for all aspiring concert violinists to master. It is admired for its seamless flow, melodic beauty, and perfect balance between soloist and orchestra. Unlike Beethoven or Brahms who wrote concertos that test the soloist's strength against the orchestra, Mendelssohn created a collaborative work that is intimate, lyrical, and yet dazzling.

Conceived in 1838, the work took six years to complete. It was written in collaboration with his friend, the virtuoso violinist Ferdinand David, concertmaster of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. In a letter dated July 30, 1838, 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." Mendelssohn asked for David's advice on technical matters, balancing his lyrical instincts with the demands of virtuosity. The composer was particularly interested in David's opinion on the cadenza: both its level of difficulty and its unusual place in the Concerto. The cadenza turned out to be the work's pivotal episode, distinguishing it from those of the past, and inspiring composers of the future.

Although the final performance score is dated September 16, 1844, Mendelssohn continued to tinker with it right up to its premiere in Leipzig on March 13, 1845, with Ferdinand David as the soloist. This violin concerto was the first one composed with the input of a professional violinist, influencing many such future collaborations.

While the Concerto does have three movements in the traditional fast-slow-fast form, it is marvellously innovative. Without orchestral introduction, the soloist enters immediately. The three movements are harmonically linked and played without pauses between them. And, as noted above, the cadenza is integrated into the form rather than just tacked on near the end of the first movement. Mendelssohn's model was used in later concertos by Bruch, Tchaikovsky, and Sibelius bridging Classical tradition and Romantic expressivity.

The first movement—**Allegro molto appassionato**—begins with the solo violin singing out one of the most famous melodies in the concerto literature. Perhaps this was the haunting melody Mendelssohn first conceived of in 1838 that "gave him no peace". The violin remains the centre of attention throughout the entire work; there are only a few sections that the entire orchestra plays when the soloist doesn't.

The first theme is impassioned, urgent, and richly lyrical. After a passage of rapidly ascending notes, the orchestra restates the opening theme. The melody builds frantically, then subsides to reveal a tranquil and lyrical second theme introduced by the woodwinds, while the soloist plays a sustained note on the violin's lowest string. The violin then plays the melody, leading to the development section which combines the two opening themes. Mendelssohn fashions a climax, not with a fortissimo but at the quietest moment. The development becomes an extended violin solo. This cadenza enriches the entire Concerto. Mendelssohn placed it just beyond midpoint, and wrote it out in full to preclude improvisation. By putting the cadenza here, Mendelssohn allows the violinist to demonstrate technical brilliance not as a final showpiece but as an integral part of the musical ideas.

The cadenza builds up speed through rhythmic shifts that require rapid string crossings, or so-called ricochet bowing by the soloist. It continues when the orchestra re-enters, serving as a link to the recapitulation where the flute, oboe, and first violins play the opening melody. The soloist functions as accompanist to the orchestra, another novel idea for its time. It is also an example of a seamless transition between sections that Mendelssohn strove for. The gentle second theme returns, and the movement ends with a driving coda marked "Presto". The effect is both dramatic and seamless.

The second movement—**Andante**—begins with another unconventional element. With no break between the first and second movements, a bassoon note is held between the two. Mendelssohn

aimed to eliminate the usual applause between movements. Perhaps our modern audiences will likewise learn from this linkage!

The continuity provides a gentle pivot into one of Mendelssohn's most touching slow movements, often described as a song without words (a nod to his famous piano miniatures). The solo violin sings a broad, tender melody over gentle orchestral accompaniment, exuding warmth and intimacy. A more agitated middle section provides contrast, with restless accompaniment and a more urgent violin line requiring great dexterity, before the opening melody returns even more sweetly. This provides a moment of repose, showcasing not virtuosity but lyrical expression.

Instead of a break at the end of the second movement, Mendelssohn wrote a brief melodic passage that acts as a conduit to the third movement—**Allegro molto vivace.** The melody is similar to that of the opening at a tempo between the slow andante and the upcoming fast tempos. The moody atmosphere of the bridge disappears when a brass fanfare leads to a delightful upbeat theme for the soloist. One commentator called it a puckish theme (pun intended) reminiscent of Mendelssohn's trademark "fairy music" in his *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream,* composed during his teens. It blossoms into a rondo, where the theme alternates with contrasting episodes, but with the mood remaining jubilant and celebratory. The first episode has the orchestra introduce a complementary theme. After the main theme returns, the soloist introduces a broader, contrasting melody. The violin and strings cleverly play the two themes simultaneously. The complementary theme returns immediately afterward, leading to a final statement of the main theme and a thrilling coda for a triumphant resolution.

The Concerto was warmly received at its premiere and by contemporary critics. By the end of the nineteenth century, the piece was already considered one of the greatest violin concertos in the repertoire. In 1906, the year before his death, the celebrated violinist Joseph Joachim told the guests at his 75th birthday party that, in his opinion, the Germans have four violin concertos. He explained that the greatest, most uncompromising was Beethoven's. The one by Brahms was the closest to it in seriousness while Bruch's was the richest and most enchanting. But the dearest of all, what he called "the heart's jewel", was Mendelssohn's. It remains his most enduring, beloved work, embodying the composer's gifts of elegance, lyricism, formal clarity, and Romantic passion. It provides violinists both a technical challenge and a chance to sing and offers audiences a perfect blend of drama and beauty.

Postscript: Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto was the first classical piece recorded on the long-playing (LP) 12-inch vinyl format, a sturdier alternative to the fragile 78 RPM records. This groundbreaking recording, issued by Columbia Records in 1948, featured soloist Nathan Milstein and the New York Philharmonic conducted by Bruno Walter.

The following biography first appeared in the 2024-25 season.

ANTON BRUCKNER (1824 to 1896)

“They want me to write differently. Certainly, I could, but I must not. God has chosen me from thousands and given me, of all people, this talent. It is to Him that I must give account.” ~ Anton Bruckner

When one hears the name Anton Bruckner it is usually in the same sentence as Gustav Mahler. They were two of the most prominent composers of symphonies and vocal music of the late Romantic era. During their lifetimes they were largely eclipsed by Richard Strauss. But the 1960s saw a remarkable renaissance of their music. They are often lumped together because of the size, length, power, and orchestration of their symphonies. They also each wrote nine symphonies—the magic number thanks to Beethoven—as well as their use of Austrian folk songs, and Vienna’s importance in their lives. Both were influenced by Wagner and Beethoven and fixated on Beethoven’s Ninth.

But the two composers couldn’t have been more different. Their music represents the opposing social and philosophical polarities of a period. Here are a few descriptors, courtesy of musicologist Harold Schonberg, to highlight their differences. Bruckner stood for repose, certitude, naïveté, and provincialism, while Mahler represented unrest, doubt, sophistication, and internationalism.

Mahler, a man of doubt and anxiety, unsuccessfully sought answers to the great questions: Where do we come from? Where does our road take us? Bruckner, in contrast, wrote symphonies to try to honour God. He was a devout man with a simplistic view of the world and the hereafter. Not a man of doubts, he was guided by the principle that everything man does should reflect the glory of God.

We’ll save a detailed discussion of Mahler, and more about how Bruckner and Mahler differed, for a concert featuring Mahler’s music.

Bruckner was born in a small Austrian village and grew up in a musical household. His schoolmaster and organist father nurtured Anton’s early passion for music. At a young age Bruckner already displayed remarkable talent for the organ and violin. He had a mostly informal music education, receiving lessons from local musicians and church organists in his village. At 13, Bruckner enrolled at the St. Florian Monastery in Linz, where he honed his skills in composition and organ performance, laying the groundwork for his future symphonic works.

After completing his studies, Bruckner began his professional career. Playing the organ and teaching music in churches and schools throughout Austria, he was also a beloved teacher of organ, harmony, and counterpoint at the Vienna Conservatory. Eventually, he surrendered the security of a teaching career to take the post of organist at Linz Cathedral. At the same time, he studied advanced harmony and counterpoint. Rigorous, self-imposed training meant that, as a composer, he was a late bloomer. All his major works were composed after the age of 39, beginning with three choral-orchestral masses and his first symphony.

In 1875, at age 51, he joined the teaching faculty at the University of Vienna. Several important conductors began to take an interest in his music. But the establishment critics in Vienna tore his music apart. They didn’t understand or appreciate the boldness and originality of his music. In the

wildly partisan Vienna of the time, there were the Brahmsians and the Wagnerians. The press, dominated by the Brahmsians, classified Bruckner as a Wagnerian. Bruckner's career suffered from his unwitting involvement in this fierce battle.

Over the last 25 years of his life, he composed most of his greatest works. However, he struggled to get his orchestral music performed, especially after a disastrous premiere of his Third Symphony. It wasn't until the 1884 premiere of the Seventh Symphony that he received the acclaim he deserved. The monumental Eighth and Ninth Symphonies further established his legacy as a master symphonist. Throughout his life, Bruckner experienced financial difficulties. By the early 1890s, he had become a famous and honoured figure. When the Emperor granted him a pension, he was able to resign from the Conservatory and the University. He died in 1896 and was buried in the crypt of St. Florian.

Bruckner remained a humble and devout man throughout his life. He never lost his simple character, his rural accent and dress, his social naïveté, or his unquestioning deference to authority. He was an odd figure among the sophisticated Romantic composers who were his contemporaries. He had profound spiritual beliefs and a deep connection to the Divine which he expressed through his music. Musicologist Deryck Cooke writes, "[Bruckner's symphonies offer] a sense of the awe-inspiring, born of the naked wonder, fear and delight of elemental humanity confronted by the mysterious beauty and power of nature and the vast riddle of the cosmos."

The last words go to Harold Schonberg, "Bruckner's music, with its Gothic arch, its tremendous spans, its organlike sonorities, its bigness in time and space, is essentially cathedral-like music of belief, and one probably has to be a believer to identify fully with it." Whether one is attracted by or irritated by Bruckner's works, one cannot help but be attracted by their repose and unhurried serenity, the perfect antidote to the frenetic pace of modern life.

Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major – Anton Bruckner (1878)

Orchestration: *2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.*

Bruckner wrote nine symphonies (the Ninth was unfinished) encompassing many techniques, but all had the same symphonic conception and formal pattern. Some critics said he composed only one symphony but wrote it nine times! All have four extended movements reminiscent of Beethoven's late works. The key to his symphonies is his use of tonality over a long time span, up to 30 minutes in some of his slow movements. Bruckner's orchestration is economical. He alternates families of instruments, such as brasses against woodwinds, to achieve a sound out of proportion to the modest number and type of instruments he uses. Bruckner made copious revisions to his symphonic scores, so anxious to get the music played that he would let conductors do almost anything with it. He said more than once that the correct performance of his music could await future generations. So, the "Bruckner problem" is which version is best in performance. Generally, it is the first one.

Symphony No. 5 is a monumental achievement and unique among his symphonies. It has various nicknames: the "Tragic," the "Counterpoint", the "Faith", or even the "Cathedral of Faith". Bruckner

himself referred to it affectionately as his “fantastic” symphony. Listening to it can feel like stepping into a vast Gothic church: the walls soar, the spaces echo, and every detail contributes to an overwhelming sense of grandeur. It is one of his most spiritual and architectural symphonies; not flashy but monumental.

The first movement—**Introduction: Adagio – Allegro**—begins with a mysterious slow introduction, one of Bruckner’s most striking openings. The strings whisper in hushed tremolo, while the brass announce solemn chorales. Out of this, the Allegro emerges in a vigorous sonata form whose themes alternate between serenity and storm. The slow introduction returns before the coda, giving the movement symmetry. This is the only Bruckner symphony with a full-scale slow introduction, echoing Beethoven’s *Eroica*.

The slow movement—**Adagio. Sehr langsam**—is vast and meditative. Here the music becomes prayer. Strings sing long, noble lines, answered by woodwinds like voices in a choir. At times the mood darkens, but always with a sense of consolation and release, as though Bruckner offers faith in the face of suffering. It is the music of meditation, a quiet dialogue with eternity.

After solemnity comes the third movement—**Scherzo. Molto vivace – Trio**—bursting forth with rustic, energetic dance rhythms, almost like an Austrian folk dance magnified to symphonic scale. The Trio is gentler, a moment of calm, but still tinged with folk character. The Scherzo returns in full force.

The final movement—**Finale. Adagio – Allegro moderato**—is the crown of the symphony, and one of the most remarkable in all of Bruckner’s works. It weaves together everything heard before. It begins with another solemn and grand introduction before launching into a complex Allegro that combines fugues, counterpoint, and variation. Themes from earlier movements reappear, unified into a vast structure. The unforgettable climax comes in the double fugue, where two themes, one energetic and one chorale-like, are combined with breathtaking contrapuntal mastery. At the end, the brass blaze forth in a triumphant chorale, as if the entire Symphony resolves in a monumental affirmation of faith.

Though overshadowed in popularity by Bruckner’s Fourth (“Romantic”) and Seventh, the Fifth is admired for its intellectual rigour and grandeur. Bruckner only heard it in a piano reduction, but never performed by an orchestra. It was premiered after Bruckner’s death in 1894 and, even then, in a heavily edited version.

Listening to Bruckner’s Fifth feels less like attending a concert and more like participating in a pilgrimage. The music guides us from mystery to struggle, from prayer to celebration, and finally to a radiant affirmation of faith. It may be compared to a private act of devotion: music written not for applause and immediate acclaim, but for the soul and posterity. Stepping inside this towering cathedral of a symphony, even for just one evening, rewards the listener with an awe-inspiring experience.