

Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, Op. 56, “Scottish”* (1842)
Felix Mendelssohn (1809 – 1847)

I. *Andante con moto – Allegro un poco agitato*

II. *Vivace non troppo*

III. *Adagio*

IV. *Allegro vivacissimo – Allegro maestoso assai*

The Third Symphony was the result of Mendelssohn’s visit to Scotland in 1829. Many characteristics of Scotland appear in the work – the melancholy, the mists and fogs, the sea, the rocky coasts, the reserve of the people. Mendelssohn remembered these characteristics for many years before the work was finally completed in January, 1842.

The Symphony has a unified concept. Mendelssohn wanted the work to be played without interruption. The first movement is in sonata form. Winds and lower strings present a slow introduction, which is based on a somber theme that Mendelssohn sketched while visiting Holyrood Palace in Scotland, where Mary, Queen of Scots, was living when David Rizzio, her private secretary, was murdered. This somber motif spawns several other themes in the work. Strings and first clarinet present the movement’s principal theme, which is developed at some length. The second subject is presented and then brilliantly developed. After the recapitulation and a lengthy, powerful coda, the movement closes with a recall of the introduction’s somber theme.

The second movement begins with opening calls in woodwind and brass, and the clarinet then plays a lively Scottish dance to an accompaniment of repeated staccato notes in strings. This charming melody is developed at some length and with much brilliance. It is followed by a delicate *staccato* second subject in the strings. The rest of the movement is concerned with an elaborate free working-out of these themes.

The third movement consists of the free development of a slow *cantilena* in alteration with a more serious, march-like second subject. Each time the main theme returns the accompaniment is more varied and elaborate.

The finale begins with a sprightly theme, Scottish in nature, that is presented by violins in thirds and sixths against repeated *staccato* chords in the violas, bassoons, and horns. This theme is taken up by the winds and briefly developed. After a vigorous, subsidiary passage in full orchestra, a melodious second theme in E minor is played by higher woodwinds over a

tremulous organ point in the first violins. This is worked up in alteration with a brilliant second subsidiary based on the same general melodic and rhythmic idea. There follows a long, elaborate working-out of all this thematic material, after the fashion of a free *fantasia*. The movement would be in the sonata form, were it not that, after the *fantasia*, the third part is replaced by a free coda on a new theme. This new subject – stately and march-like in character – is developed by the full orchestra as a closing apotheosis.

*Footnote: The current “politically correct” term for this work is “Scottish.” “Scotch” was acceptable in the nineteenth century, but nowadays the Scottish people consider “Scotch,” except when referring to whisk(e)y or broth, to be mildly offensive.

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