



Mendelssohn Symphony No. 4

Summary Notes

These notes concentrate primarily on features of the symphony that will be useful for 15-mark essays. The same information is replicated on selective annotated score extracts on Moodle.

What should I revise in terms of this symphony?

- You do not need to know this symphony as well as the Haydn, but you need more detail than on the other WCT Wider Listening works and you need to be able to locate key features in the score.
- Make sure that you understand the basic form and structure of each movement, its main keys and thematic ideas.
- Make sure you can quickly find key moments in the piece so that you can give relevant examples from this symphony in 15-mark essay questions. You may be asked about orchestration, form and structure, style or influences

Mendelssohn and the Italian Symphony

Felix Mendelssohn

Mendelssohn (1809-1847) was born into a wealthy and cultured Berlin family. His grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, was a renowned philosopher and his father, Abraham, was a highly successful banker. After Felix became famous Abraham would sometimes joke, *'I used to be known as the son of my father; now I am known as the father of my son!'*

Felix was a precociously gifted child, so much so that the finest musicians of the day hailed him as a second Mozart. This comparison was by no means without foundation; by the time he had reached his mid-teens Mendelssohn had composed a large number of mature works, including twelve string symphonies and his first symphony for full orchestra, written when he was only fifteen. He was sixteen when he wrote the *String Octet*, and the wonderful overture *A Midsummer Night's Dream* followed a year later. Mendelssohn's extraordinary gifts were not confined to composition; he went on to become a brilliant pianist and organist, a fine string player and an inspirational conductor. He was also a very good artist and was widely read.

Yet another dimension to Mendelssohn's glittering career was his far-reaching influence as an organiser and administrator. As a result of his tireless efforts with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and the Leipzig Conservatory, which he founded in 1843, he raised performance standards to new heights and created many opportunities for contemporary composers and performers. He made a major contribution to the revival of interest in Bach's music, which at that time was virtually unknown to the general public.

Mendelssohn went to Italy in October 1830. The trip lasted 10 months – he started in Venice and worked his way south to Rome, stopping in Bologna and Florence along the way. From Rome, he went on to Naples and visited Pompeii before returning to Germany through Genoa and Milan.

His impressions of the trip were recorded in a series of watercolors and sketches – Mendelssohn was a decent amateur artist – and in the present Symphony. There is nothing particularly Italian about the Symphony until its final movement. Rather, the work strives more to convey a series of impressions of Italy – Mediterranean sunshine, religious solemnity, monumental art and architecture, and open countryside.

He wrote of the Symphony "It will be the jolliest piece I have ever done, especially the last movement. I have not found anything for the slow movement yet, and I think that I will save that for Naples". However, the composition did not come easily to him and he was to remain dissatisfied with his work. He finished the piece in 1832, and it was first performed in London in 1833, proving to be a resounding success with audience and critics alike. Only the composer himself seemed dissatisfied, and as with many of his compositions, he planned to make a number of revisions (especially to the last movement). He was never convinced that it was ready for publication and it appeared in print only after his death. The version we have today did not reflect his final conception, yet it remains his most popular symphony!

The first performance of the 'Italian Symphony' took place in London in 1833. In accordance with the practice of the London Philharmonic society of the time, it was the role of the conductor to 'lead' from the piano at the start of each movement, while the 'leader' of the orchestra set the tempo and marked the beat. However, Mendelssohn was not prepared to leave this responsibility with leader of the orchestra and decided to conduct the performance using a baton. The appreciative audience demanded on having the second movement repeated – the performance was a wonderful success: 'On 13 May Mendelssohn was the jewel of the concert, presenting his wonderful A Major symphony for the first time, to thunderous applause' [Moscheles].

The **Allegro vivace** opens with a burst of sound – woodwinds and pizzicato strings – whose irrepressible quavers become the accompaniment to a jubilant string melody. The winds play an especially prominent role in this movement, with Mendelssohn treating them with a great degree of freedom that gives the movement a transparent, airy texture. It's like a musical rendition of the Italian blue sky that impressed Mendelssohn, who was used to the cloud-flecked skies of northern Europe (he once described the Symphony as "blue sky in A major").

In the second movement, an **Andante con moto** in D minor, Mendelssohn recalls the impressive processions he had witnessed during his time in Rome. He evokes these with a dusky melody (oboes, clarinets, and violas) that unfolds over a plodding bass-line. This alternates with two contrasting, relaxed, major-key sections.

The flowing minuet (**Con moto moderato**), with its legato writing for strings and winds, offers a musical equivalent of the symmetrical forms and restrained beauty of some of the architecture Mendelssohn saw during his Italian sojourn. The trio sounds vaguely militaristic, with its fanfare-like melodic figure for horns and bassoons.

In the **Presto** finale (very unusually in a minor key despite the overall A major), Mendelssohn uses another dance, the raucous Neapolitan saltarello, as the basis of the movement. Because the first movement has an energetic compound-time feel often associated with finales, Mendelssohn has to find even more energy for the last movement. As a result, he never relaxes the tension as the finale hurtles to a close with a minor-key reiteration of the first movement's opening theme.

[adapted from Eduqas notes and program notes by the LA Philharmonic and www.choirs.org.uk]

Question Topics

A) Development of overall form

The four-movement overall structure is standard for the Classical symphony but there are some refinements familiar from other early Romantic composers as well as a few surprises.

- This symphony is one of the first to start in the major and end in the minor. The reverse journey from minor to major is familiar from Beethoven's fifth and ninth symphonies but to start in A major and end in A minor is much more surprising. It is partly because of the folk-character of the finale but it is notable that Mendelssohn does not even turn to the major right at the end.
- Mendelssohn chooses not to go for the aggressive Beethovenian scherzo-type minuet that was common to many later symphonies, but to follow the lead of Beethoven's eighth symphony in writing a more gentle and stately movement more like the original minuet model.
- At the very end of the last movement (bar 239), Mendelssohn brings back a minor version of S1 from the first movement. There is precedent for this also in Beethoven (e.g. ninth symphony)
- The first movement follows sonata form but it is considerably adapted, for example, the addition of an extra development section in the recapitulation at bar 456 (see notes on first movement below for more details). Mendelssohn takes this idea even further in the last movement, which has more or less continuous development and no real recapitulation.

B) Development of first movement (and sonata form)

The first movement follows the broad outline of sonata form, including the expected tonal plan of tonic to dominant and back again. However, there are some considerable additions and adjustments that Mendelssohn makes as detailed below:

- The development introduces a third idea in the minor (S3 at b. 225) which becomes increasingly important as the movement continues (introducing a new theme in the development is first seen in Beethoven's Symphony No. 3)
- There is a false reprise at bar 285 in C major that cuts the development into two main sections
- S3 is subjected to further development at bar 456 after the recap of S2 and before the final coda. Along with the two main parts of the development, this innovation means that there are effectively three developmental phases. Some development in the recap. is not uncommon even in Mozart but the extensive nature of this, including a modulation to F major, is more so.
- The coda at bar 510 is quite long (77 bars) and, like Beethoven ends with many repetitions of perfect cadences and tonic chords

C) Development of second/slow movements

This solemn movement is processional in the manner of the second movement of Beethoven's seventh symphony. It is also worth comparing it to the Pilgrim's march in Berlioz's Harold in Italy, the March to the Scaffold in Berlioz's Fantastic Symphony and the funeral march in Beethoven's third. Although the immediate inspiration might have been a religious procession Mendelssohn saw in Naples, the melody is said to be based on a Czech pilgrim song.

- The movement is in the subdominant minor – a key that Mendelssohn is fond of in general and which is the initial key for S3 in the first movement above.
- The flattened sevenths (C natural) give the music a strong modal flavour.
- The distinctive auxiliary note introductory idea, with its interesting rhythm, is used again both in the transition between A and B and the coda.
- The overall structure of these piece can be understood as what is sometimes called 'slow movement' sonata form – there are two ideas outlined in an exposition that are then repeated with some modifications as a recapitulation with no formal development in between
- The piece ends with a diminuendo accompanied by a dramatic reduction in orchestration until we are just left with *PP* basses and cellos in the last four bars. If you were looking for programmatic content, it is as if the procession has disappeared.

D) Development of minuet/third movements

Mendelssohn chooses not to go for the aggressive Beethovenian scherzo-type minuet that was common to many later symphonies, but to follow the lead of Beethoven's eighth symphony in writing a more gentle and stately movement more like the original minuet model.

- The movement follows the Minuet / Trio / Minuet reprise model and so is relatively traditional
- Although both the Minuet and Trio are nominally in binary form (including a repeat of the first half in each case) the second halves are expanded, particularly in the Minuet, which takes the form A1 :|| A2 A3 Codetta. The A2 section (bar 21) modulates around related keys as you would expect but A3 (bar 42) develops rather than reprises A1, including further modulation
- The Trio (bar 77) is takes a similar form but the third main phrase is much more closely modelled on the first compared to the Minuet
- The Trio opens with a bassoon and horn fanfare opens trio with distinctive pp idea responding in violins (no other strings)
- After a reprise of the Minuet, the movement closes with a coda (bar 202) that combines elements of both Minuet and Trio as way of rounding it off.

E) Development of finale / last movements

The finale is an extremely fast Saltarello (an Italian folk dance). After a reasonably clear exposition, Mendelssohn hurtles to the close without paying much regard to the usual requirements of sonata form.

- The movement is in the tonic minor of the opening A major, which is very unusual. Most symphonies go in the other direction.
- Mendelssohn names the last movement after an Italian Saltarello but arguably the rhythms are at least as much based on those of a Tarantella (another Italian dance that is traditionally associated with victims of spider bites)
- At the very end of the last movement (bar 239), Mendelssohn brings back a minor version of S1 from the first movement, creating a link across the whole work. The linking together of movements can be seen in Haydn and more explicitly in Beethoven (e.g. the Ninth Symphony) but linking last movements to previous ones is particularly a feature of later Romantic symphonies.
- The first movement follows sonata form but it is considerably adapted. Mendelssohn takes this idea even further in the last movement, which has more or less continuous development and no decisive recapitulation (false recap at bar 179)

F) Development of the orchestra

Mendelssohn is considered relatively conservative in his orchestration and his Italian symphony was written for the exact same forces as Haydn's Symphony 104. Despite these fairly modest forces (remember that Berlioz's *Fantastic Symphony* predates this work by two years) Mendelssohn conjures up a real variety of distinctive colours and textures, with truly independent and creative use of woodwind and brass.

- The symphony opens with pulsating woodwind chords and a violin tune in octaves (first movement, bar 1). The clarity and energy of this orchestration is one of the immediately attractive features of the work (the 'blue skies in A major' referred to above)
- The second part of the first subject has a range of interesting orchestrations starting with clarinets and bassoons doubling the melody in thirds over a low bubbling accompaniment of string arpeggiations in bar 110. In the recapitulation from bar 405 this is reversed with arpeggiating woodwind figures accompanying the strings in thirds – note that the cellos are above the violas in this passage, which creates a mellower, richer sonority.
- The doubling of the Andante melody on high bassoon, low oboe and viola at bar 4 helps create a solemn feel with its sparse two-part texture but richly scored melody.
- A gentle bassoon and horn fanfare opens the Trio (b. 77) heralding a distinctive pianissimo dotted violin idea.

G) Development of harmony and tonality

Mendelssohn's harmonic language is broadly the same as that of his Classical predecessors. He uses chromaticism and modulates quite widely but not significantly more than Haydn and Mozart. His relatively slow harmonic rhythm is enlivened by interesting and colourful textures.

- A typical example of Mendelssohn's gently chromatic harmony are the diminished sevenths in bars 37-8 of the Andante, which are created by the chromatic descending melody in the first violin
- Mendelssohn often uses extended and modified dominants, particularly in inversions. For example in the codetta of the last movement, the second half of 97 (and the next few bars) functions as the dominant of E but with the seventh (A) in the bass, an added ninth (C natural) and no root present.
- An examples of a relatively distant key is the false reprise in C major in development of the first movement.
- Like Haydn and Mozart, Mendelssohn likes to move to minor keys, as he does in bar 97 of the first movement where the dominant turns briefly to the dominant minor. This apparent fondness for the minor goes further however, with A and D minors being the first keys in development and, most dramatically, the whole last movement being in the tonic minor.

H) Development of drama, narrative and programme

Like much of Mendelssohn's music this symphony is evocative rather than narrative as such. The symphony reflects the composer's response to Italy on a variety of levels without telling a specific story.

- Mendelssohn once described the Symphony as "blue sky in A major" and this can be heard at the very opening in the transparent but somehow piercing woodwind accompaniment texture.
- The second movement feels like a procession with its walking bass and Czech pilgrim song melody. The repetition at opening enhances this effect.
- The trio seems to make references to Mendelssohn's home country with hunting calls perhaps more evocative of German forests
- The rhythms and pedals of the last movement evoke not only the saltarello of the title but also the tarantella. Both of these folk dances involve fast triplet rhythms.

I) Development of melody and theme

Mendelssohn is known for his lyrical melodies and his themes tend to be balanced and punctuated with clear cadences as in the Classical style.

- The first subject of the opening movement is typical in that it is both lyrical but also fizzing with energy.
- Mendelssohn has a tendency to bring in new melodic ideas during the development as in bar 225 in the first movement, where a completely new theme (S3) is introduced that ends up achieving considerable prominence in the rest of the movement.
- He often tries to explore links and similarities between themes as when S3 in the first movement turns into S1 at bar 318
- In the coda of the last movement, Mendelssohn brings back a minor version of the first subject of the opening movement – a common feature of Romantic symphonies.

J) Development of texture

Mendelssohn generally presents ideas initially in clear melody dominated homophony but he is inventive with his use of accompanying textures and he likes writing thicker contrapuntal textures as well.

- The light and energetic presentation of the second subject at b.110 in the first movement is a typical MDH texture, with woodwind in thirds and arpeggiations passing between the violins
- Some examples of contrapuntal textures
 - The first appearance of S3 at bar 225 in the first movement is imitative
 - Stretto at 249
- The texture in the Andante second movement is interesting as it begins in sparse two-part counterpoint (bar 4) before repeating the same idea with added contrapuntal lines (bar 12)
- The transition of the first movement (bar 66) has an exciting antiphonal texture between wind and strings in the transition

L) Influence of dance, folk and national music

Mendelssohn uses a range of dance and folk inspirations for this symphony, some of them obviously connected with the Italian theme and some not.

- The Andante second movement may have been inspired either by a religious procession that Mendelssohn saw in Naples or modelled on a Czech pilgrim song. Either way it the modal inflections (flattened seventh – C natural in D minor) are a clear folk reference. The idea of a slow march or procession is also found in Beethoven's seventh symphony and the pilgrims' march in Berlioz Harold in Italy.
- The third movement moves away from the faster Scherzo movements often found in the Minuet after Haydn and Beethoven and (like Beethoven's Eighth symphony) returns to the slower and more refined origins of the Minuet dance.
- The soft fanfares in the bassoons and horns in the trio of the third movement seem to refer less the 'Italian' of the symphony's title and more to hunting in the forest back home in Germany.
- The last movement is explicitly modelled on the Italian Saltarello, a folk dance that involves energetic leaps and skips. It also, however, has many characteristics of the Tarantella, a fast dance traditionally connected with being bitten by a spider. The drones at the beginning clearly support the folk-dance feel.

Movement structure outlines

First movement

Exposition		
1	First Subject (S1)	A major
66	Transition	
93 110	Second Subject (S2) S2b	E major (sometimes shifting to minor)
187	Codetta	
Development		
210	First Development	Modulating including A and D minors and B major
285	False Reprise	C major
297	Second Development	Modulating including E minor, F# minor and major
Recapitulation		
369	First Subject (S1)	A major
391	Transition passage	
405	Second Subject (S2)	A major
456	Third Development	Modulating including A minor and F major
510	Coda	

Second movement

1	A (with a two-bar introduction)
45	B
57	A1
75	B1
86	Coda

Third movement

Minuet		
1	Theme A1	A major to E major
21	Theme A2	Extends the dominant (minor), then various keys.
42	Theme A3	Back in A major
57	Codetta	
Trio		
77	Theme B	E major
93	Theme B1	Dominant (minor), then various keys as in Minuet
109	Theme B	Back in E major
57	Codetta	
Minuet reprise		
125	Theme A1	A major to E major
147	Theme A2	Extends the dominant (minor), then various keys.
167	Theme A3	Back in A major
183	Codetta	
Coda		
183	Combines A and B	

Last movement

Exposition		
1	First Subject (S1)	A minor
34	Transition	
53	Second Subject (S2)	E minor
61	S2b	
97	Codetta	
Development (and some recapitulation!)		
103	First Development	Modulating including E and C and G minors. Lots of imitative writing.
179	False Reprise	E minor to C major
195	Second Development	Dominant pedal of A minor but the goes to D minor
234	Coda – includes some elements S1 from first movement as well.	A minor