

Mendelssohn, Symphony No. 4 in A major, Op. 90, "Italian"

- I. Allegro vivace
- II. Andante con moto
- III. Con moto moderato
- IV. Saltarello: Presto

ABOUT THE COMPOSER: German pianist, organist, and composer Felix Mendelssohn was born in 1809 to a very musical family. His older sister Fanny, a talented pianist and composer in her own right, was relegated to amateur status because of her gender. However, Felix found popular success as a composer and conductor during his lifetime. Less modern and experimental than the works of many of his Romantic-era contemporaries, Mendelssohn's symphonies, concertos, and chamber music are beloved today for their youthful style.

WHAT YOU'LL HEAR: Mendelssohn once called his fourth symphony "blue sky in A major." The symphony is a series of vignettes reflecting his impressions of Italy, which he visited at the age of 21. Mendelssohn conducted the symphony's premiere with the London Philharmonic Society. Although the piece was well-received, Mendelssohn continued revising it until his death in 1847. The version played today was published posthumously in 1851, without many of his later modifications.

It is immediately apparent why Mendelssohn called this his "jolliest" work. The first movement, Allegro Vivace, opens with a bright theme in the strings that becomes fragmented as it is passed throughout the orchestra. The movement concludes with the upper strings singing its inevitable and triumphant return.

The second movement, Andante con moto, was inspired by religious processions Mendelssohn witnessed while in Naples. Evidenced by the somber, chant-like melody in a minor mode and supported by a walking bassline, this movement gently fades to nothing as the procession vanishes into the distance. A bit slower and more reserved than the rest of the symphony, this movement provides a moodier counterpart to the symphony's lively opening.

Typical of the third movement of a symphony, Con moto moderato follows the classical minuet and trio form. Mendelssohn continues this tradition, but gives it characteristics of an early Romantic style. Listen for legato—smoothly connected notes—in the strings and woodwinds, and a subtle treatment of brass. The 3/4 meter gives forward motion to this moderately paced movement.

The final movement, Presto, is a sprint through two Italian folk dances: the Roman saltarello (derived from the Italian saltare, "to jump"), and the Neapolitan tarantella. Rapid triplet figures drive the symphony to its dashing conclusion.