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About the Cover

by

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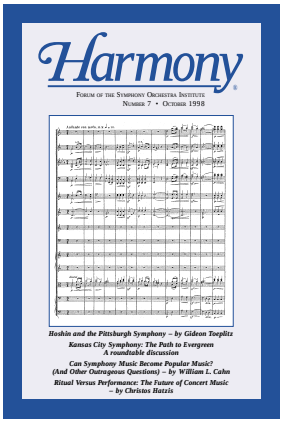

The music on our cover represents the high point in a historic partnership between an orchestra and its leader. On March 3, 1842, the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra premiered Mendelssohn's Third Symphony—our excerpt shows the very first page—with the composer conducting. Felix Mendelssohn served as conductor of the Leipzig orchestra from 1835 until his death in 1847. Even at the time it was generally accepted that, under his enlightened leadership, the Gewandhaus had become the greatest orchestra in the world.

Long before Mendelssohn moved there, Leipzig boasted an unusually distinguished history as a music center, highlighted by J. S. Bach's 27 years as cantor of St. Thomas Church. (He died on the job in 1750, and is buried in the churchyard, in an unmarked grave). The forerunner of the historic Gewandhaus orchestra dates back to Bach's lifetime, when the Leipzig Grosse Concert Society was founded in 1743. In 1781, with the building of the new Gewandhaus—the "cloth hall," named after the guild of cloth merchants on whose site it stood—the Leipzig orchestra quickly took its place among the most prestigious music organizations in all Europe. Mozart played two of his piano concertos there in 1789. Beethoven's First Symphony was performed in Leipzig in 1801, scarcely a year after its Vienna premiere.

Once Mendelssohn took over as the orchestra's fifth conductor in 1835, the Leipzig Gewandhaus set new standards in musicmaking, artistic planning, and leadership. Mendelssohn regularly invited important guest conductors and soloists—Liszt played with the orchestra in 1840, Berlioz led his *Symphonie fantastique* there in 1843—and he broadened the repertoire to include both forgotten masterworks and serious new music. His series of "historical concerts" reintroduced audiences to works by Handel, Haydn, and Mozart that were already slipping from the active repertory. (Imagine living at a time when those three composers were not well known and valued, and when such recent music was considered too old to be worthy of attention.) His pioneering work championing

Bach's music single-handedly paved the way for the great Bach revival of the late 19th century.

Mendelssohn also played a great deal of important new music in Leipzig. He gave the world premieres of Schumann's first two symphonies, as well as the historic, posthumous first performance, in 1839, of Schubert's *Great* C major symphony, which had been discovered earlier that year in Vienna, at the home of Schubert's brother. But, for sheer prestige, no event eclipsed the night in March of 1842, when Mendelssohn led the Leipzig musicians in the first performance of his own Third Symphony, which soon became one of the most popular works in the repertoire. (Later generations dubbed it the *Scottish*, although Mendelssohn rightly felt that it stood on its own, without a nickname.)

Mendelssohn worked continuously in Leipzig to raise performance standards. He was the first conductor there to use a baton, and he instituted the practice, novel at the time, of leading all symphonic music himself, rather than leaving it to the concertmaster. (Wagner, who grew up in Leipzig, remembered a particularly chaotic performance of Beethoven's Ninth shortly before Mendelssohn's arrival; earlier still, when Mozart appeared with the orchestra, he was forced to stamp his feet so hard to keep the musicians together that a buckle flew off one of his shoes.)

Mendelssohn formalized the orchestra's seating plan, with first and second violins split at each side, as was becoming the custom at the time. (Leipzig, so progressive in some respects, was among the last orchestras to allow its musicians to sit rather than stand while playing; the Gewandhaus violins and violas did not use chairs until the first decade of the 20th century!) He also regularly intervened on behalf of musicians' rights, and campaigned vigorously to increase their salaries. And as a popular and energetic civic leader, Mendelssohn was able to raise funds from the wealthy city merchants to found the Leipzig Conservatory, where he served as its first director and hired his good friend Robert Schumann to teach piano and composition.

Mendelssohn's vision for Leipzig as an international music center clearly pointed the way to the future, and, to this day, his years at the helm still serve as a model of insightful leadership, visionary programming, educational ideals, community engagement, and harmony in the workplace.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.