



Lobgesang, or Hymn of Praise

Symphony No. 2 in B-flat major (1840)

Felix Mendelssohn, composer

UW-Madison Choral Union

James Smith, director; Anna Volodarskaya, assistant choral conductor

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University of Wisconsin-Madison

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) was a German composer, conductor, and keyboard player during the early romantic era. He was fairly prolific, writing symphonies, concertos, oratorios, piano music, and other chamber music. He was fortunate enough to grow up in a highly intellectual household. His older sister, Fanny, was also highly talented in the field of music, but due to the conventions of the time, did not pursue a career of it. Her compositional and instrumental talent no doubt raised Felix's level of activity and helped him hone his young talent. In addition to this musical company, Mendelssohn's parents regularly hosted "salons," gatherings at their home in which some of the most highly intellectual figures in Berlin would be guests. His earliest musical education focused on piano, counterpoint, and composition, with the compositions of the Bach family ranking high among the works studied. Felix also had the rare opportunity—much like Haydn at Esterhazy—of hearing his orchestral ideas played regularly by a private orchestra at his disposal, one that was hired by his parents for their intellectual and social events. These circumstances and advantages helped produce one of the leading composers of the early romantic period, in Germany and in all Europe.

Mendelssohn's symphonies are actually numbered according to their publication, not to the date of their composition. His second symphony, *Lobgesang*, or *Hymn of Praise*, was actually written after his third and fourth symphonies, which themselves were composed in opposite order from their numbers. The *Lobgesang* is without question one of his most ambitious symphonic projects. Its length is roughly twice that of most of his other symphonies, and it of course calls for vocal soloists and chorus. Because of this distinction, comparisons were inevitably made to Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, often quite harshly to Mendelssohn's disadvantage. Mendelssohn, for his part, considered his work an original one. He called it a "Symphony-Cantata," thereby attempting to mark a distinction from other works by dint of its format, three purely orchestral movements followed by numerous smaller movements featuring voice, directly using bible script to provide all sung text.

The first movement begins with a brass fanfare, beginning in the low register and moving into the middle. The orchestra replies, and the groups echo and weave around each other. This fanfare theme continues, and Mendelssohn playfully develops it. After a big arrival and cadence point, the lighter second theme begins in the strings. This music is very songlike, and almost sounds like a Rossini aria. Mendelssohn's development section in this first movement is all about mixing: the fanfare theme and the songlike theme mix together, tonality is mixed between the earnest minor tonalities and the buoyant, hopeful-sounding major chords. Orchestration is very mixed and contrasting as well, with moments of fanfare from the brass section juxtaposed against gentle singing in the strings and woodwinds. Like any brilliant composer, Mendelssohn takes his audience on a journey. A very calm period gradually builds into a massive arrival, after which we hear the second theme again. We feel a buildup of both tension and triumph, brass entrances, and rhythmic figures of martial character which gradually morph into the opening theme. This material takes us into a triumphant coda--which continues immediately into the second movement, which begins with a soulful, tragic clarinet solo.

Movement two is a waltz, in a fast triple meter. There is a soulful melody, very reminiscent of the future Dvorak, accompanied by swirling hemiola figures. The tempo is quick, but the motion of the piece is even and melodic.

Movement three is also *attaca*, or attached, to the previous movement, so without pause, we are brought into a lush chorale. This is a heartfelt *adagio* movement. Volume swells and falls in a woodwind-dominated transition section, and the bassoons and clarinets sound the original melody. The movement closes serenely, with sustained chords.

The next movement begins with a reiteration of the first movement's opening fanfare theme. Energy continues to escalate, and the choir bursts in with its entrance. The energy and emotional content of their music takes a journey, going from the triumphant fanfare through more serious and suspenseful figures, all while singing in a very unified, almost relentless manner.

After a time, a female vocal soloist begins. Her melody has a somewhat mysterious quality, while still calming. The tenor enters, as if in a recitative, where a large amount of text is presented in a relatively simple vocal style. The melody becomes more tuneful, covering a larger vocal range with more evenly paced, linear rhythms.

The chorus re-enters, in a hushed, mysterious manner. The entrances become staggered, as if in a fugue, but only for a short time before re-unifying.

A pastoral, calm horn solo precedes the next entrance of the soprano soloist. After several phrases, the chorus to complement and echo. The soprano is then joined by the mezzo-soprano, for a very harmonious vocal duet. This is still occasionally punctuated, and then joined, by the chorus. The music is not entirely lighthearted or jocular, but nor is it too somber or recriminating. Mendelssohn's vocal writing is wonderful. It is entirely melodic and tuneful, interesting, and sounds almost simplistically beautiful when sung quite skillfully. The tenor comes in again with a recitative character, and the music is more serious and urgent. Woodwinds begin aggressively punctuating his phrases, exchanging back and forth with the soloist.

The soprano enters, with a very triumphant, optimistic theme, the highly of which is a wonderful upwards leap of a perfect fifth. The entire orchestra responds in kind, and the chorus enters with a rush of energy. We hear a more complete fugue in the chorus sections, propelling energy forward with its more exact, strict imitations of phrases. Because of the continuous nature of the movement transitions, the end of this section feels like the most complete musical conclusion we have yet heard.

The next section is another chorale, where we hear the voices all moving together rhythmically, and mostly in stepwise, smaller intervals. The tune that emerges is the hymn "Now Thank We All Our God," which may be recognizable to those highly familiar with Christian hymns. One of the most wonderful things about this section is that the voices are a capella, without the accompaniment of the orchestra. It is a very calm, beautiful moment, and a total respite from any frantic or urgent feelings. With the orchestra's re-entrance, Mendelssohn plays with harmony a bit, keeping the chorus in the same key with their hymn while providing sometimes unexpected chords in the accompaniment. This section ends with a beautiful sustained chord.

A tenor solo begins immediately, relatively low in urgency and tension, but still a lively contrast to the preceding section. Tenor is joined by soprano, who sings an extended solo before a harmonious duet section with the tenor, who then takes the lead with a solo. They continue this game of long solo followed by short duet and then exchange of solo, before coming together in a longer, very beautiful duet with more equal roles. We reach a calm conclusion.

The next section begins dramatically, with the male voices of the chorus singing what sounds like an urgent alarm. The music gradually changes from tense to triumphant, as the entire chorus and orchestra collectively sing and play very regal, marchlike music. The symphony concludes with another recap of the very first fanfare, theme one of the first movement. In this character, the symphony ends in joyous triumph.

Program Notes by Daniel Cross