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VIOLIN CONCERTO IN E MINOR, Op. 64
by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809 - 1847)

Just completing his second concerto for violin could have been cause enough for Felix Mendelssohn's celebration. He had been, after all, a child prodigy as a composer (some say more talented than the great Mozart) and the first concerto for violin he composed at age 13 in the Classical style of Mozart had been worthy. But in the maturity of the artistic development of his Romantic style, the violin brought challenges.

Mendelssohn had never mastered the violin. Yet, when he was retained as conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and had appointed as concertmaster his old friend, Ferdinand David, he proposed to compose a signature concerto for him. Mendelssohn wrote that he had selected a key and complained that he couldn't get the opening melody out of his head, but he soon faltered. What ensued was six years of intermittent progress and agony as the *Concerto for Violin in E minor* took shape. There was constant correspondence between the two, with countless drafts and trial runs. Mendelssohn at times seemed hopelessly overwhelmed, and is quoted as once beseeching his friend, "Don't laugh at me. I am ashamed and cannot get past my fumbling."

None of that insecurity manifested in the work; it was instead quite daring for its day. There is no orchestral introduction, for instance, and no breaks between movements: the first and second connected with a sustained note in the bassoon, then an orchestral bridge into the third (to break the audience habit of applauding movements, according to legend). Throughout there is Mendelssohn's ingenious gift of melody but old-fashioned hard work for the soloist. From the difficult double-stopping required in the second movement to the written-out and demanding cadenza, to the breakneck speed that builds in the third-movement dialogue with the orchestra, such virtuosity is required that mastery of the Mendelssohn is considered a rite of passage for striving young soloists.

DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION

by Richard Strauss (1864 - 1949)

Unwittingly, Richard Strauss may have portrayed the absolute antithesis of celebration in his tone poem, *Death and Transfiguration (Tod und Verklärung)*. Indeed, English music critic Ernest Newman described this as music to which one would want to neither die nor awaken. "It is too spectacular, too brilliantly lit, too full of pageantry of a crowd; whereas this is a journey one must make very quietly, and alone".

For a composer who had reached but 25 years of age, a musical portrait of the death of an artist seems most unlikely, so much so that Strauss himself caused his friend, poet Alexander Ritter, to write the interpretation after it was composed. In the opening *Largo* a sick man lies dying, but the *allegro molto agitato* intrudes as a battle for life; then the mood relaxes into the *meno mosso* as thoughts of his life pass before him: childhood innocence, struggles of his manhood, attainment of his worldly goals; until the *moderato* brings the longed-for transfiguration "from the infinite reaches of heaven".

Strauss came to insist he was correct. One Derrick Puffett quotes the composer's daughter-in-law as recalling his deathbed comment: "It's a funny thing Alice, dying is just the way I composed it in *Tod und Verklärung*."

ANDREW SORDS, in the tradition of child prodigies, has established himself as one of the preeminent new faces of classical violin. At age 24 he is already a critically acclaimed veteran of the concert stage. He is the winner of the 2005 National Shirley Valentin Violin Award, the 2004 and 2005 National Federation of Music Clubs Competition, the Fortnightly Music Club of Cleveland and the Festival de la Orquesta Sinfonica de las Americas Competition of the Casals Festival among others.

Born in 1985 in Newark, Delaware, Sords later moved to Shaker Heights, Ohio, and began his violin studies with Liza Grossman, the founder of the Contemporary Youth Orchestra with whom he recorded the Saint-Saens *Concerto No. 3*. He studied at the Cleveland Institute of Music with Linda Cerone and David Russell, and performed for the legendary Midori in masterclasses in New York and at the University of Southern California. Most recently, Sords studied under Chee-Yun at Southern Methodist University.

Having performed in American concert halls and venues in Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia,, Sords received international exposure as the top Google Classical News story in 2008 as well as topping the Top-40 Charts in Classical. In addition to his guest appearances, Sords is concertmaster for the Mansfield (Ohio) Symphony Orchestra, and is the featured violinist in a documentary on violin technique. Strongly committed to extending classical music to all, Sords dedicates a portion of his time at almost every engagement to educational outreach, masterclasses and community programming. For more information, find him at www.andrewsords.com.