



Without Words

MENDELSSOHN

WALDEN

BRUCE LEVINGSTON, PIANO

“There is so much talk about music, yet so little is said. I believe words do not suffice for such a purpose. People often complain that music is too ambiguous. With me it is exactly the reverse... the thoughts which are expressed to me by music that I love are not too indefinite to be put into words, but on the contrary, too definite.”

— FELIX MENDELSSOHN,
from an 1842 letter discussing
his *Songs without Words*

MENDELSSOHN

- 01 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 2:14**
Op. 102–N° 4 in G minor
- 02 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 3:26**
Op. 67–N° 3 in B-flat major
- 03 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 2:29**
Op. 38–N° 2 in C minor
- 04 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 4:35**
Op. 38–N° 6 in A-flat major *Duetto*
- 05 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 1:40**
Op. 102–N° 3 in C major
- 06 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 3:56**
Op. 53–N° 1 in A-flat major
- 07 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 4:29**
Op. 30–N° 6 in F-sharp minor
Venetianisches Gondellied

WALDEN

- 08 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 3:37**
N° 1 *Prelude*
- 09 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 2:33**
N° 2 *for the left hand*
- 10 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 4:03**
N° 3 *Love Song – Duet*
- 11 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 3:08**
N° 4 *Berceuse*
- 12 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 4:47**
N° 5 *Elegy*
- 13 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 4:36**
N° 6 *Protest*
- 14 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 3:21**
N° 7 *Lullaby*

MENDELSSOHN

- 15 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 2:43**
Op. 19–N° 2 in A minor
- 16 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 4:11**
Op. 19–N° 1 in E major
- 17 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 3:46**
Op. 19–N° 5 in F-sharp minor
- 18 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 2:41**
Op. 19–N° 6 in G minor
Venetianisches Gondellied
- 19 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 3:39**
Op. 62–N° 1 in G major
- 20 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 3:03**
Op. 67–N° 5 in B minor
- 21 SONG WITHOUT WORDS 3:25**
Op. 85–N° 4 in D major

PREFACE

NOTES BY BRUCE LEVINGSTON

Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words* simply defy ordinary description. Refined and nuanced, they constitute some of the composer's finest and best-known works. For nearly two hundred years, they were regarded as charming relics, select romantic gems performed in small concert halls and salons. While their subtle, ornamental qualities certainly shine brightest in more intimate settings, closer inspection reveals an unexpected depth and complexity to these miniature masterpieces. Their interpretive and technical demands are considerable, requiring sensitivity to voicing, pedaling and dynamic control. Meant to enchant rather than dazzle, they evoke myriad dreams revealing some of the composer's innermost reflections. Like private entries in a musical diary, they offer a rare glimpse into this reserved but passionate artist's thoughts.

In recent years, Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words* lived on my piano. Amidst turbulent societal change, these moving works remain a source of solace and peace. At the height of

the pandemic, Dr. Kirk Payne – an old high school friend treating Covid patients – reached out. He wished to fund a beautiful memorial to those lost and those fighting the disease. With his generous support, I commissioned Price Walden, a longtime admirer of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*, to compose a new set that would reflect upon our own era. Hearing Walden's seven splendid pieces, I selected fourteen of the finest works from Mendelssohn's collection—seven to precede the new cycle and seven to follow.

A superb watercolorist, Mendelssohn displays his mastery of line and color throughout these exquisite tone poems. Resonant with allusions to many of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*, Walden's cycle ventures beyond its source to imagine a new and inspired tonal canvas. Through their music, both composers – in conversation across centuries – explore the realms of memory, nature, joy, anguish, loss, gratitude, and love— eloquently communicating in a shared language too definite for words.

PART I

SEVEN SONGS WITHOUT WORDS FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809 — 1847)

In the intricate tapestry of Mendelssohn's oeuvre, every piece embodies a distinct emotional landscape. Beginning with the ethereal Op. 102, No. 4, the music unfolds like a windswept, autumn day. Beneath its yearning themes, surging arpeggios swell out of the shadows, only to vanish into darkness. The following work, Op. 67, No. 3, transports one to a more pastoral setting. Opening with a delicate, descending chordal motif, it unfolds into an idyllic, pastel-shaded study. Restless and stirring, the C minor Op. 38, No. 2 features an expressive, arching melodic line. The lively syncopated accompaniment adds passion and wit, while the dark, Beethovenian key contributes a sense of urgency. The spirited finale closes with a playful passage that cleverly juggles the motifs between the hands.

Subtitled *Duetto*, Op. 38, No.6, is an expansive work featuring two voices engaged in ardent dialogue. Enveloped by a rich, flowing accompaniment, the deeply etched melodies are supported by piquant harmonies and colors that combine to create one of Mendelssohn's finest keyboard works. Playful and Puckish, Op. 102, No. 3 is a delightful little tarantella. It exudes a charm and humor that recalls Mendelssohn's magical score for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Undulating figures set the stage for the Schubertian Op. 53, No.1. Suffused with imagination and wit, this beguiling piece conjures a bucolic scene by a brook. In contrast, the haunting *Gondellied*, Op. 30, No. 6, evokes a mysterious Venetian waterscape. A wistful cantilena beckons while arresting trills and murmuring chords intertwine to form a work of ineffable beauty.

PART II

SEVEN SONGS WITHOUT WORDS CÉCIL PRICE WALDEN (B. 1991 —)

The first piece in Walden's cycle honors the Gladstone Institutes, an inspiring medical organization dedicated to finding cures and treatments for diseases. The clarion notes and chords of this moving *Prelude* set the tone for the entire series, evoking optimism and resilience. The second work, *for the left hand*, instills an impression of yearning introspection. The tension between the music's improvisatory nature and continual ascent in register culminates in its final searching cadence. *Love Song - Duet*, which follows, is an essay of profound emotional complexity. This poignant piece echoes Mendelssohn's *Duetto* with its tender dialogue deftly woven through treble and bass. The two voices touchingly meet as one on the concluding E-flat.

Inspired by Mendelssohn's gentle Op. 67, No. 3, *Berceuse* offers an interlude of peace and tranquility. *Elegy*, on the other hand, serves as a stark reminder of the fragility of existence. Its mournful recurring motif and heartrending melody offer moving testament to the depths of grief.

The penultimate work, *Protest*, surges forth as a timely and powerful call for defiance against tyranny. The cycle concludes with a songful *Lullaby*, imbued with an aura of renewal and rebirth. A fitting epilogue to Walden's odyssey, it offers peace, hope, and the promise of new beginnings.

PART III

SEVEN SONGS WITHOUT WORDS FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809 — 1847)

The ornamented phrases of Op. 19, No. 2 harken back to Mendelssohn's beloved Bach. Its plaintive, contrapuntal bass and bittersweet melody weave a finespun musical tapestry. With opulent harmonies and luminous melodic lines, Op. 19, No. 1 exudes youthful joy and love. The mood changes with the tempestuous Op. 19, No. 5, which unleashes a whirlwind of restless figurations. An unexpected shift to the major draws this turbulent dream to a surprisingly serene close. The melancholy *Gondellied*, Op. 19, No. 6, turns back into the shadows. Its sonorous, dusky opening evokes lapping water and rowing oars, while an Italianate theme in thirds and sixths recalls a somber song heard on a misty canal.

The sublime Op. 62, No. 1 – aptly dedicated to Clara Schumann – combines childlike tenderness with sophisticated poise. Set in darker tones, the dolorous Op. 67, No. 5 presents an affecting dialogue that lingers in the memory long after its last notes have faded. The final work, Op. 85, No. 4, is a true song, coupling expressive melody with ravishing harmonic detail. Beneath its tranquil surface, this music radiates a rare combination of passion, contentment and peace, offering a touching conclusion to Mendelssohn's wordless journey in sound.



BRUCE LEVINGSTON

Bruce Levingston is an acclaimed concert pianist and recording artist. Praised by *The New York Times* for his “mastery of color and nuance,” Levingston has performed in many of the world’s most prominent venues, including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, and the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden. Founder of Premiere Commission, Inc., he has commissioned and premiered important works by many eminent composers. *The New Yorker* has called him a “force for new music.”

One of today’s most frequently-streamed classical artists, Levingston’s recordings have received numerous accolades. His album *Heavy Sleep* was named among the “Best Classical Recordings of the Year” by *The New York Times*. *Gramophone* called his playing “masterly,” and *The American Record Guide* noted, “Levingston is a pianist’s pianist.”

Renowned for “innovative and glamorous programming” (*The New Yorker*), Levingston has collaborated with many influential artists and institutions, including Philip Glass, Chuck Close,

Alessandra Ferri, Herman Cornejo, Colin and Eric Jacobsen, Brooklyn Rider, Ethan Hawke, Jorma Elo, Wayne McGregor, American Ballet Theatre, Aspen Festival, Aspen Institute, Alliance Française, Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum.

A native of the Mississippi Delta and lifelong advocate of human rights, Levingston performed at the United Nations to honor the heroism in World War II of the people of Denmark, raised funds to free “refuseniks” from The Soviet Union, performed in Hamburg and Berlin as a U.S. delegate for the American Council on Germany, and, in 2017, gave a special world premiere performance for the opening of the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum. He co-commissioned and performed the Carnegie Hall premiere of the oratorio, *Repast*, based on the life of the civil rights figure Booker Wright. Author of *Bright Fields: The Mastery of Marie Hull*, the comprehensive biography of the noted Southern painter, Levingston is the Chancellor’s Honors College Artist in Residence and Holder of the Fant Chair at the University of Mississippi. He lives in Oxford, MS and New York City.

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