

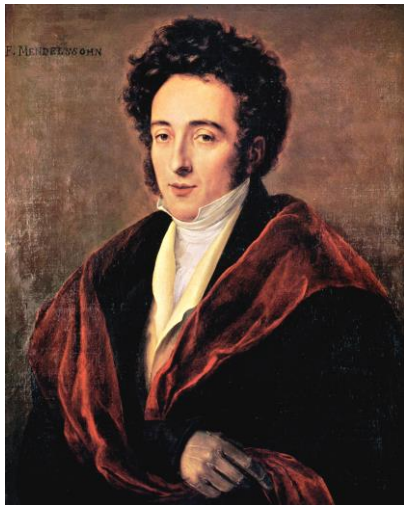
CLASSICAL MUSIC

FINGAL'S CAVE OVERTURE 1913 to 2005

MUSIC BACKGROUND

INSPIRATION

The Gaelic name for Fingal's Cave is "Llaimhbinn" which means "cave of music." This magnificent basaltic sea cave is located on the isle of Staffa in the Scottish Hebrides Islands. Felix Mendelssohn's celebrated overture, honoring the cave and its surroundings, is a landmark of early 19th Century romantic music. He composed this superb work between 1829 and 1830, further revising it in 1832.



Much controversy surrounds the initial inspiration for this overture. One version, apparently even told by Mendelssohn himself, appears repeatedly in the literature, on record liner notes, and in the oral tradition, states that he conceived the first few bars at or in the cave during his visit with Karl Klingemann on August 8, 1829. (Gregory 1975; Mills 1986; & Roy 1963)

However, the more accurate story is based on a letter containing the first 21 bars of the work, which was a sketch for piano (in almost exactly its final form) and which he sent to his family from the Isle of Mull the day before visiting the cave on the nearby Isle of Staffa. (Todd 1993) A slight variant of this tale



tells us that – “He was engaged on a tour of Scotland with his travelling companion Karl Klingemann when he sent a postcard (sic) to his family with the opening phrase of the overture written on it. In a note to his sister, Fanny Mendelssohn, he said: ‘In order to make you understand how extraordinarily *The Hebrides* affected me, I send you the following, which came into my head there.’ (Anon. 2013 a) It is highly unlikely that Mendelssohn would send his music on an open postcard for all to read.

VISIT TO THE SEA CAVE

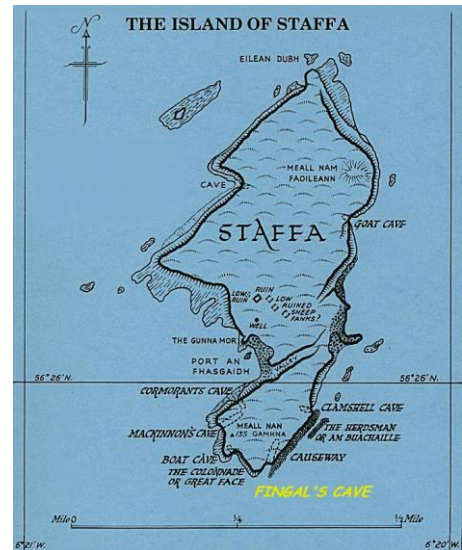
Klingemann tells us that his friend Felix was seasick when they visited the cave and he kept his eyes closed. (Klingemann 1909) Well, let's say, more than likely, he had his eyes partly closed, the better to hear the music stirring in his head. Klingemann left this description of their

visit (translated from the German) – “Staffa, with its strange basalt pillars and caverns, is in all the picture books. We were put out in boats and lifted by the hissing sea up the pillar stumps to the famous Fingal’s Cave. A greener roar of waves never rushed into a stranger cavern – its many pillars making it look like the inside of an immense organ, black and resounding, absolutely without purpose, and quite alone, the wide grey sea within and without.” (Hensel 1882) Notice all the sonorous adjectives and nouns in this text.

In 1832 while in Paris Mendelssohn spoke with Ferdinand Hiller and the latter inaccurately reported that – “ He told me that not only was the general form and colour suggested to him by the sight of Fingal’s Cave, but that the first few bars, containing the principal subject, had actually occurred to him on the spot.” (Hiller 1874) Clearly this is the source of the repeated errors regarding original inspiration of the opening bars of the overture.



Drawing by Durand & Engraving by Boutrois - 1797



LITERARY INFLUENCES

The Mendelssohn family was well acquainted with the works of the Scottish poet, Sir Walter Scott. In July 1829 before visiting Staffa, Mendelssohn and Klingemann went to Abbotsford and talked briefly with Scott. “In coming to Scotland in 1829, both Mendelssohn and Klingemann would have been attracted by the poetry and novels of Sir Walter Scott, and in making the difficult journey to Staff and Fingal’s Cave, they would have been equally aware of its association with Ossian, specifically the epic poem *Fingal*, published by James Macpherson in the 1760s... In Germany the appeal of Ossian was owing in part to Herder’s belief that in the poems lay the sources of German folk poetry, and in part to the translations of Ossian that Goethe incorporated into his sensational novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774).” (Todd 1993)

MUSICAL INFLUENCES

The influences from two Beethoven symphonies crop up in this overture. One of the diminuendo passages occurring twice in the first movement of Beethoven’s 5th Symphony was clearly copied by Mendelssohn; one only needs to listen to hear the striking similarity.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE WORK

“Of all Mendelssohn’s overtures, none demonstrates a more complex compositional process than *The Hebrides*. From the evidence of the primary sources we know that the overture

was conceived in Scotland ... (1829); its composition was finished and immediately revised in Italy (1830); it was revised again in France and England (1832); it was first performed, revised once again, and arranged by Mendelssohn for piano duet in England (1832); and it was finally published in parts, duet arrangement, and score by Breitkopf & Härtel in [Leipzig] Germany (1833, 1834, & 1835).” (Todd 1993) Incidentally, Leipzig was Mendelssohn’s home town.



Pictured here are the original manuscript of the score & the printed score for first flute by Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig

TITLE OF THE WORK

RECEPTION OF THE WORK & ITS RESULTING IMPRESSIONS

The great opera composer, Richard Wagner, called this overture a “masterpiece of a landscape painter of the first order.” (Todd 1993) Among Mendelssohn other overtures, “*The Hebrides* stands as the overture most heavily dependent on the visual for its inspiration and meaning.” (Todd 1993)

Many portions of the work vividly bring to mind the crashing waves in the cave, the seagulls flying outside, and other visual impressions directly connected with a visit to this fabulous site. It was these aspects that I stressed with the slides I used for the first audio visual public presentation of this overture to American cavers at the NSS Convention in Birmingham, Alabama in 1967. (Brison 1967) Furthermore, anyone visiting Fingal’s Cave, with Mendelssohn’s music running through their head (or perhaps whistled out loud) will be overwhelmed by how appropriately the music conveys the majestic symmetry and the emotional satisfaction of this place.

The mathematics and geometry of music combined with the architectural spaces in a cave can result in a perfectly acceptable aural reproduction of a specific cave. All that is needed is to incorporate the solid geometry of a given cave space into the compositional process. Felix Mendelssohn showed the way to do just that back in 1828. His *Fingal’s Cave Overture*, faithfully and most remarkably transposes the architecture of that most symmetrical sea cave, that geometrically perfect cave, into a magnificent piece of classical music, a sonic analogue of that specific cave.

THIS DISCOGRAPHY OF THE OVERTURE

This is probably the first time in the history of discographical research that an attempt has been made to list all the recordings of a given work of classical music starting from the age of acoustically recorded 78rpm and 80rpm records to electrically (microphone) recorded 78s then on to micro-groove analog 33rpm and 45rpm records and then right on through to compact disc digital records of today, all told, covering over 90 years of recording history. (Anon. 2013 b)

This listing of the different recordings of the overture from 1919 up to 2005, allows one to pass in review nearly the entire history of recorded music. These various discs, each in their own way, represent the various important developments in sound recording and in record pressing technology within the industry over that period of 86 years, from the early vertical groove 80rpm acoustic recordings right up to the sophisticated compact disc digital recordings.

The data for each of these entries was gathered from numerous sources, mainly the records themselves wherever possible, but also from many published written references, record catalogs, and Internet database sources. One extremely useful source was the Website AHRC Research Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music at King's College London, which provided not only recording dates but also the recording locations for many of the different versions here.

A detailed musical analysis and comparison of every entry here was not possible given my lack of education in music theory (*solfège*). Some indication of the treatment given by various conductors can be ascertained from the running times provided here for each version, which clearly indicate the tempo, be it slow, moderate, or rapid. Nonetheless, this unique discography could well serve as a very useful tool for a more gifted and knowledgeable musicologist interested in carrying out a detailed and scholarly study of Mendelssohn's great work.

The costs of recording a full orchestral performance of this overture have risen so considerably in the beginning of the 21st century that many record companies have decided to draw from their files and reissue old recordings that have been re-mastered for digital release.

See also other compositions inspired by Fingal's Cave and titled as such: two different Celtic pieces (one traditional piece performed by many groups – both under World Music – Scotland) and one by Anne Wylie (under World Music – Scotland); three arrangements of Mendelssohn's music for organ (under Popular Music – United Kingdom); plus two rock arrangements of Mendelssohn's music (under Rock Music – Hard Rock & Disco – *The Caves*); and a rock number by The Pink Floyd (under Rock Music – Psychedelic).

Ref: Anon. 2013a, The Hebrides (Overture), [Wikipedia](#)

Anon. 2013b, History of Sound Recording, [Wikipedia](#)

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