



Felix Mendelssohn



- Title:** Felix Mendelssohn, Composer
- Time Frame:** 30 minutes
- Overview:** Students will learn what music composers do and, specifically, learn about the Romantic-era composer Felix Mendelssohn and his suite, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- Standard:** Historical and Cultural Perspective: Recognize great composers and their most significant musical works (M-HP-E5, M5, H5).



Felix Mendelssohn

Felix Mendelssohn was a German composer, pianist, organist and conductor of the early Romantic period (19th century). He was a child prodigy, though his parents didn't want to exploit his talent. When it became clear that he planned to dedicate himself to music, they began to allow him to perform, and have his compositions performed, in public; he was 13 years old. In addition to composing, Mendelssohn played the piano and violin and was a painter. Though he lived at the same time as many more radical and flashy composers (such as Franz Liszt and Hector Berlioz), he preferred a more conservative and tonal approach to composing. His composing idol was Johann Sebastian Bach and he is credited with bringing Bach's music back into the mainstream—most people had forgotten Bach by the 19th century!

Mendelssohn wrote more than 120 works in his lifetime, including symphonies, concerti, overtures, chamber music, choral works, and **lieder** (German solo vocal works). He began publishing and performing his compositions in 1822 and composed until he died in 1847—25 years.

Mendelssohn composed ***A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture*** when he was 17 years old after reading Shakespeare's comedic play. Mendelssohn read a lot of Shakespeare as a child and his favorite play was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This was the first **concert overture** (a musical work that represents a literary work, story, or place, but that isn't played as an introduction to the performance of that work) written. His sister Fanny Mendelssohn (herself a composer) said of this work: "We were entwined in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Felix particularly made it his own. He identified with all of the characters. He recreated them, so to speak, every one of them whom Shakespeare produced in the immensity of his genius." The ***Incidental Music*** was composed 16 years later for a performance of the play commissioned by the new King of Prussia. The very famous "Wedding March" comes from Mendelssohn's *Incidental Music*. Queen Victoria of England chose "Wedding March" for her daughter's wedding. This is why the it is so popular at weddings today! Listen to the "Wedding March" here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0wmzoHd6yo>

What is a composer?

Composers, like book authors, have an idea and put it on paper. They are creative people! Sometimes composers' ideas come from nature or are inspired by a story, piece of art, or beautiful location. In Mendelssohn's day, composers wrote music by hand on staff paper, erasing what they wrote to re-voice a chord or change a melody (or starting over on a new piece of paper!). Today, many composers use notation software, like Sibelius or Finale, when composing. Some composers write at the piano so they can hear what the music sounds like and others sit down to write out fully-formed ideas without ever playing anything.



Many composers do not have an easy path to becoming successful and money-making composers—however, Mendelssohn did. Composers like Mozart, Haydn, and Bach, who were not wealthy, relied on wealthy and/or royal patrons to commission works (and sometimes provide a home) for their events. Other composers, such as George Friedric Handel had parents who did not support their musical abilities and actively tried to hinder their advancement. Felix Mendelssohn came from a wealthy family that encouraged his and his sister Fanny’s musical and intellectual interests. His parents knew many influential thinkers of the 19th century. They hosted regular **salons**, where they allowed Felix and his sister Fanny to perform their original compositions and conduct small orchestras. Salons are gatherings of people, usually at a home, held partly to entertain and partly to educate the attendees. A salon might have one specific topic or focus on one artistic genre or it could be a blend of music, poetry, visual art, or philosophy.



19th century salon

The influential writer Goethe was among the influential and famous people who dined with the Mendelssohn family. By the time Mendelssohn was a young adult, he was very well-traveled and frequently visited England, Scotland, Italy, and other cities in Germany to perform concerts or premier his works (and was inspired by two of those places that he wrote the “Scottish” Symphony (Number 3) and the “Italian” Symphony (Number 4). He visited England so often that he befriended Queen Victoria and would dine with her family while in the country!

Once a composer has his or her idea fully written out, it is often hard for him or her to have the piece performed if it didn’t have a **commission** (when one person/organization or collection of organization hires a composer to write a new piece that will be performed once it is completed). Hiring musicians, finding rehearsal and performance space, and finding an audience willing to give a new composition a shot all often stand in the way of new music being performed. However, new music can be incredibly exciting and fresh—you’re among the first ones hearing a new composition! How would you feel if you created something but couldn’t get anyone to perform, see, or hear it? How would you feel after hearing your work performed and getting positive feedback?

After students have learned about Mendelssohn, ask students to bring in original compositions, artworks, poems, or other works of art and host a salon in class, as the Mendelssohn family did when Felix was a child. Encourage discussion about each work and students to share their ideas openly.

