



more than the score...

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Songs Without Words

Book 1, Op. 19, No. 1

for piano solo

Presented by Daniel Grimwood

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PETERS EDITION LTD

A member of the EDITION PETERS GROUP
LEIPZIG · LONDON · NEW YORK

Published by Peters Edition Ltd, London
2–6 Baches Street London N1 6DN
www.editionpeters.com
This edition © 2017 by Peters Edition Ltd, London



Daniel Grimwood

talks about

Mendelssohn's Songs Without Words, No. 1

Mendelssohn was one of the foremost Romantic composers. German by birth, he later moved to England where he became one of the darlings of Queen Victoria.

Along with Mozart and Saint-Saëns, Mendelssohn was one of the most impressive child prodigies in the history of classical music and, indeed, had composed some of his most famous works by the tender age of sixteen. As the inventor of the 'Song Without Words', he first coined the phrase in a letter to his sister, Fanny Mendelssohn, in relation to a composition he was working on. His sister was also a composer: some of the Songs Without Words that were published under Felix's name were, in fact, composed by Fanny.

The construction of the song

This first of Mendelssohn's Songs Without Words might be imagined as an organ piece with three distinct voices. These three voices are: the melody, the song without words which, on the organ, would be played by the right hand; the bass line, which would be played by the feet on the pedals; and the left-hand accompaniment, which would be played on a different manual by the left hand. So, when we play this on the piano, we should think of three completely distinct timbres running at the same time.

From the very start of preparation of this, I think that it's wise to practise each of these three components separately, observing how they interact with each other: the falling phrase against the rising scale in the left hand. And there are elements that can be enjoyed, like the rising scale in the bass – paying attention to the Lydian sharpened fourth in bar 3.

Practice techniques

With the accompaniment figure – the semiquaver arpeggios – for much of the piece they have to be divided between the hands, two

notes in the left, two notes in the right. So I would suggest first of all practising it with one hand and then trying to make it sound exactly the same but with both hands, paying attention that the passage between the two thumbs is even and smooth. And then what we're going to do is practise every combination of two parts, so the bass and the treble, the treble and the semiquavers, the bass and the semiquavers, all the time paying attention that the semiquavers are the quietest part: they should be very much in the background but still clear.

A very useful way to practise bringing the melody out and keeping everything else in the background is to sound the melody and touch

Mendelssohn was one of the most impressive child prodigies in the history of classical music

the keys for all of the other notes but without them sounding. Then, gradually, we might want to start introducing the bass and then we'll find that it's very much easier to play it with the semiquavers softer because they've already been played in ghost form.

There's an interaction between the treble and bass voices and there are a couple of moments where it's very, very nice to enjoy how they converse with each other, from the end of bar 9, for instance.

Where the right hand breaks free from its constraints and has a little solo from the second half of bar 19, I think it's enough that it does that. We don't need to add anything more to turn it into a big grand cadenza: just keep it simple.

Daniel Grimwood is a performer of international renown, and has performed a wide variety of music in prestigious venues in London, New York, Moscow, and across Europe, North America, Asia and Africa

Songs Without Words Book 1, No. 1

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

Op. 19, No. 1

Andante con moto

cantabile

p
Ped. Ped. Ped. * Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. *sim.*

4

7 *f* *ten.* *p*

10 *ten.* *dimin.*

13 1. Ped. * Ped. *