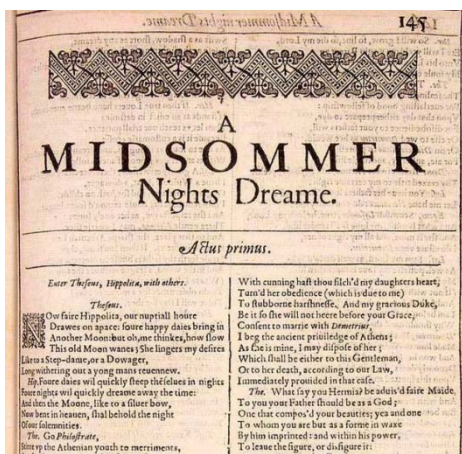


A Listener's Survey: Tracing the Articulation of a Shakespearean Play through Music

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy on *A Midsummer Nights Dreame* by William Shakespeare

[illegible]

By William Shakespeare



By Felix Mendelssohn

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To survive the centuries, cultural expressions such as William Shakespeare's plays and sonnets had to have been grounded in something special that would hold the appeal of generations of not only his native English and European cultures and the Western world, but the crossover through cultural boundaries and worlds enough to create the wonder and moments of comprehension that has kept audiences enthralled and coming back for more. If we were forced to read the original language Shakespeare's plays were written in, we would lose our enjoyment because of the incomprehensibility of this archaic expression. Shakespeare purists like their Shakespeare settled by a warm fire with a good book in iambic pentameter with English pronunciation. The dream lives on. But that audience may be shrinking every year in comparison with the growing audience enjoying the adaptations and afterlife of many of Shakespeare's works. The timeless stories of his plays have resonated across the centuries and the globe.

If one has not seen, let alone read, a Shakespeare play there are many modes of adaptations or retellings that capture the enjoyment where an audience can learn that the piece they've witnessed was an inspiration from William Shakespeare. Our example of continued enjoyment and modern appeal is illustrated in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play written by William Shakespeare, and later music, composed by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy commonly known as Felix Mendelssohn.

Felix Mendelssohn first wrote the musical composition for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* after reading a German translation of the play. He was 17 years old when he presented the piece (Seiji Ozawa). The concert overture was not particularly written to be associated with the stageplay, it was Mendelssohn's paean to this enjoyment of the play he saw performed in German. This overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is becoming more of a study in letting

something stand on its own merits. Adding actors and skits or words to it seems to be universally acclaimed as creating the effect of muddying the music. So today, we enjoy this first piece in purity.

Music in its universality of common language has the ability to transport the listener immediately into its inner world of being. The language of English is not needed, or an understanding of English, or any other language, to communicate an evocation or a vision. Music may be the shorthand of communication that cuts across barriers. The listener may not be able to understand immediately the effects of a piece or the why of their changed perception, nonetheless it is there. Listening to the “Overture” to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has produced special meanings for listeners for almost two hundred years. After he had turned 34, Mendelssohn was asked to write some more for the play, some incidental music. (Seiji Ozawa) The “Overture” stands as a singular piece of art. The opening chords sets up the listener to a haunting elevation to goodness and joy. Many years after Mendelssohn's death, his music became a tug-of-war for Nazi machinery. Mendelssohn was thought to be Jewish.

Why was this piece chosen? Having a fascination with the *Carmina Burana* led to an investigation of Carl Orff and any potential relationship that could be established with the works of Shakespeare. In finding a reference of Orff composing incidental music to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to replace the music of Felix Mendelssohn, it was found that his composition was in response to a movement to ignore Mendelssohn's composition. Orff's commissioners turned out to be the Nazi government during World War II (Kater).

When Felix Mendelssohn became inspired by William Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and wrote this music, he entered the stream of cultural revolutions that embeds a creative work into human consciousness beyond what could be considered the ordinary life of a

good play. Mendelssohn's "Overture" is considered to be brilliance. Mal Vincent of the *Virginian-Pilot* observed that the production of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra elected to leave well enough alone by keeping the prismatic "Overture" free of equitable attempts of frolicking, acting, or any other distraction. (Vincent) Seiji Ozawa, leading the Boston Symphony Orchestra, used that direction in his production that featured soloists Kathleen Battle and Frederica von Stade with the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, and Judi Dench as Narrator. This study of understanding and appreciation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* grew from listening to this 1994 recording.

For 15 years, listeners enjoyed the brilliant 12-minute piece of music called "Overture", opus 21. The King of Prussia asked Mendelssohn for more (Seiji Ozawa). While critics continue to debate whether Mendelssohn took the easy route of using elements of the "Overture" to establish themes in the "Incidental Music," audiences have continued to cast their vote with Mendelssohn. A 17 year-old Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy composed the Overture in 1926. That prodigy proved the genius in the composition of the incidental music in 1843, 17 years after the overture. Mendelssohn lived during what is considered the Romantic period in music. Romantic in this musical sense was not about romantic love but a new freedom experienced by the composer to explore the farther reaches of themes and sections of a composition. Expression and feeling are hallmark terms for Romantic music, and in Mendelssohn's Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* those terms were realized with the evocative opening four chords through the romp and heady middle passage to the inspiring preparatory thematic ending. This listener thought of a rock musician in listening to this piece, yet Mendelssohn was conservative in his style during this daring era.

Moving through the overture and incidental music, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Gustav Mahler come to mind, as we can now place Mendelssohn's inspired passages in some of their compositions. Of particular note is Mendelssohn's Nocturne that recalled Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*, his 6th and haunting final symphony. In "Nocturne", *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* Oberon ruminates about his wife Titania while she slumbers in his drug-induced sleep. This beautiful musical passage has become a favorite of audiences and this listener alike. We hear in this passage echoes of elements from Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*.

Upon listening to Seiji Ozawa conduct the Boston Symphony, this listener became immediately enthralled with the "Overture" and later, after moving on finally to the "Incidental Music" without another repeat of the first track on the CD, the storyline imposed through the expressive music was simply captivating.

Mendelssohn and his sister Fanny grew up in a well-to-do household and as children were able to utilize their resources and talents to put on plays and concerts on the family estate in Germany. Shakespeare's plays had been translated into German 25 years earlier. Mendelssohn read a copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and within a month had composed the "Overture". (Laki) He was not encouraged to go further in music. His father, a banker, wanted to make sure Felix would apply himself to his studies before he supported further music training. Mendelssohn's father received his notification of Felix's commitment through the high acclaim of the "Overture".

Does the form of music as a cultural side-by-side comparison with a play stretch credulity? Mendelssohn's gift in sharing Shakespeare's play was through his talent as a musician. His choice in placement of Acts, Scenes, and Lines seem inspired. His composition of overture, incidental music, narrative, songs and chorus provide a complete spectrum of a tale

familiarly known as Shakespeare's. The "Incidental Music" begins at Act II. Certainly the quality of the "Overture" has held our attention and did inspire a curiosity about the story of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Judi Dench's artistic delivery of Oberon's ruminations about Titania and her dotage, as well as Puck's reversing a spell on one of the players inspired that curiosity. We are given some narrative and lyrics of the storyline in the "Incidental Music". The listener cannot discern why Act I is missing from Mendelssohn's composition. One can imagine that the magic of fairies takes over Mendelssohn's imagination in Act 2. The body of symphonic music, narrative, and songs are enjoyable and evoke a story all their own. That Romantic period in music had seen a lot of incidental music composed for a number of plays. The Prussian king's passion for these plays and their music prompted him to request such music for a play of Shakespeare's. (Seiji Ozawa)

During this era certain thematic elements in music became familiar to the audience. Light trills and frolicking refrains could easily evoke fairy-like elements. (Seiji Ozawa) Puck enters in Act II and asks "How now, spirit! Whither wander you?" The listening audience now knows fairies are about. And so continues the next three pieces. Puck and the fairies Oberon and Titania introduce themselves and their roles in the play. "March of the Fairies" has Oberon inform his role with "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows, Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows." II.i.628-629. (Shakespeare) (Seiji Ozawa). Oberon intends to trick his wife to sleep, if the narration is followed. The play has him anointing the eyes of Demetrius to behold Helena in honor when he awakes. Next the chorus is brought in by Titania whose lore shares uses of nature's appurtenances. The narration is naturally sparse with the dialogue of the play (Shakespeare), yet the chosen passages cut to the heart of action. The vibrancy and robust music

interprets the missing dialogue in its own surreal way. The listener may assume that Demetrius meets his mark.

The 4th movement finally leaves the realm of the fairies with the entrance of Hermia rising from a sleep calling for Lysander who is not there. Both have been tricked through the lure and lore of the woods to pursue another destiny. Oberon has set about a cure for everything and his servant Puck has done his best with the instructions given him, [II.i.264] “Thou shalt know the man By the Athenian garments he hath on.” Here begins the eros and error staging of the story.

Oberon maintains his eminence throughout the play and music, but the emphasis of his actions are somewhat muted in the music. The narration does capture his trick upon Titania to fall for the next beast to come her way. The andante-allegro molto, the quickened pace of the music, speaks to the actions being carried out by Oberon's designs upon Titania and Demetrius. Puck throws the potion onto Lysander's eyes, “the man by the Athenian garments” who becomes entranced with Helena, leaving Hermia to awaken alone. Helena spurns Lysander's drugged advances and moves away from him [II.i-ii]. This swirl of human/fairy interaction is choreographed in the play and the music to resolve into the re-gathering of all the couples and then to the three weddings. The composer's pace of music and the play's pace of action gather together and emphasize the disparate relationships between the characters. Does Oberon's conflict with his mate in fairy world have some influence in the conflicts between Demetrius /Helena and Lysander/Hermia even before he meddled with potions?

The play has a set of players to enact an intermission at King Theseus' celebration a few days hence. Their intent is to play the story of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, an Ovidian tale wherein a plot mirrors Lysander and Hermia's plan run to away through the woods in order to maintain

their love. In *Pyramus and Thisbe*, we find the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, where the lovers die through misunderstanding (Blits). Now, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* reveals another Shakespearean plot device of a play within a play. The music's narration is accompanied in allegro comodo, a comfortable tempo that does not detract or distract from the concluding storyline. In a drama, such as *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the main characters die.

Ovid's story of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is inserted as juxtaposition to the comedy and romance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Pyramus dies, Thisbe dies. But Oberon has reversed his spells and declares "...pairs of faithful lovers be Wedded, with Theseus, all in jollity." [IV.i.96]. No one dies in the play except the star-crossed lovers in the play within the play. The insertion of this storyline in the symphony is so brief that it suggests Mendelssohn's need to provide some balancing tension in the symphony to lightly preview a better ending approaching in the story. This line in the play and music puts a break in a feel-good story by the introduction of one of life's little realities, destruction. Mendelssohn apparently understood the need to maintain a balance that clearly was defined by Shakespeare.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a comedy and romance. Mendelssohn's music, the "Overture" and "Incidental Music", provides the listener with enough romantic and light-hearted passages and refrains to suggest romance. Comedy is in the ear of the beholder. Certainly Judi Dench delivers our comedic impulses through her cockney accents of Prologue and Bottom. The audience is treated to this consummate actor who provides all the narration in the symphony. The music is certainly romantic and there is enough to evoke a story behind the composer's intent. As stated previously, the "Overture" captivates with its simple yet spellbinding opening chords.

Mendelssohn moves through the "Overture", exploring every nook and cranny of exposition to finally end with a rich variation of the opening chords. We wait on more of the

story. A reader of Shakespeare's play will not confuse Act I with Mendelssohn's "Overture." The "Overture" was Mendelssohn's salute to his enjoyment of the play overall. He reveals the play in the "Incidental Music." Theseus talks about his approaching marriage to his captured bride, the beautiful Hippolyta, and soon after we are bombarded with an unhappy troupe coming in audience to Theseus. Unhappy are Egeus and his daughter Hermia, her suitors Lysander and Demetrius, and then the love-lorn Helena. The "Overture" stands alone in its overall revelation of the potential and meaning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Beautiful music can only herald a feel-good play.

We know the music came from the Romantic period of music composition. Mendelssohn carried his creative impulse throughout the composition in exploring every boundary of development. Evocation as style is heard and felt throughout, as he intended. The play has more comedic moments. Oberon's meddling for selfish reasons, and then to correct what he perceived as Demetrius' unjust treatment of Helena, causes quite a few hilarious moments in the play. But we are not short-changed in the symphony. Soloists Kathleen Battle and Frederica von Stade sing the parts of First and Second Fairy. The play lists Fairy with no designated First, Second, or other. This Fairy's lines are delivered by the narrator in the music. But Battle and von Stade sing 1st and 2nd soprano parts, a fine distinction to the lyrics in the musical composition as First and Second Fairies. The use of soprano and mezzo with the accompaniment of chorus of sopranos and altos showcase the lightheartedness of the play and musical storyline and the heavy characterization of fairies.

The Tanglewood Festival Chorus sings the part of Chorus of Fairies. First and Second Fairy and Chorus of Fairies deliver through verse the orders of Titania and Oberon. The "Overture" and "Incidental Music" together are called *Incidental Music* to Shakespeare's play.

(Seiji Ozawa) The music carries more of the fairy element of the play. Mortals Hermia, Theseus, Prologue, and Bottom have brief narrative lines all delivered superbly by Judi Dench. The listener does not have to know who is speaking as much as what is being said. This presentation using one person to deliver all the lines, and in appropriate dialogue, keeps the listener involved in the story rather than who is in voice. The "Overture" was not intended as background music for the play. Incidental music, as was developing through the era in which Mendelssohn composed, was as the name implies incidental to the play.

Rather than transforming Shakespeare's play, we are invited to experience the play in another form. The narration, songs, and chorus provide enough storyline to help understand the core of the play. While comedy in the play cannot be transmuted into music as well as romantic love, the romantic parts are certainly well represented in music. The muted narration with Bottom and the Prologue are enough to let us know there could be more in the play. Perhaps we want to actually see the play. This listener feels satisfied enough with the story in symphonic form to really have no desire to read or see the play. Judi Dench's characterizations highlighted the essential elements of the play to allow the listener to understand the overarching importance of fairies and particularly Oberon and Titania in the play. The lightheartedness of the songs and feminine singers and chorus continued the emphasis on romance. The style of the composition called romance made that unique intersection of style and story to produce the magic and wonder of this symphonic piece. The thorough enjoyment of Mendelssohn's music eventually made it a necessity to read the play.

From Puck's opening question "wither wander you" to Oberon reversing the glamour that is implied when he awakens Titania and speaks of correcting the errors with Lysander and Demetrius, we know that lovers will come together as they must in joy in the end. The wedding

song that we have heard time and again at weddings and in film and television is from Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Number 9 of the "Incidental Music" called "Wedding March". This grand piece heralds the grand ending of the play. Music is an interesting way to introduce the concept of Shakespeare. Most people have heard the "Wedding March". Would you like to see the play that produced such music?

Because Mendelssohn's music cannot produce the entire dialogue of the play in lyrics, only a select few lines are used to inform and carry the play. There is an interesting play on cadence occurring in Mendelssohn's music and Shakespeare's play. The players in the play mention performing the lines of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in 6s and 8s. Recalling Oberon's "Be as thou wast wont to be" IV.i.75, and onward, the narrative lines in the music read in iambic tetrameter catalectic. Not only is the catalectic occurring in the line, but it also seems to occur in reverse with an added line in Oberon's instructions to the fairies. V.i.413:

Oberon:

Now, until the break of day,
Through this house each fairy stray.
To the best bride-bed will we,
Which by us shall blessed be;
And the issue there create
Ever shall be fortunate.
So shall all the couples three
Ever true in loving be;
And the blots of Nature's hand

Shall not in their issue stand;
 Never mole, hare lip, nor scar,
 Nor mark prodigious, such as are
 Despised in nativity,
 Shall upon their children be.
 With this field-dew consecrate,
 Every fairy take his gait;
 And each several chamber bless,
 Through this palace, with sweet peace;
 And the owner of it blest
 Ever shall in safety rest.
 Trip away; make no stay;
 Meet me all by break of day.ⁱ

Much is made of iambic pentameter and there is much of it in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare obviously had the gift in understanding the need to keep his audience awake by changing cadence to throw their listening rhythm off just a bit. The switch to 7s would not have been caught except for reading the text of the play and the exchange by Quince and Bottom, as they discussed the writing of the prologue. Quince wanted it written in “eight and six” and Bottom suggested “eight and eight”. III.i.23 It is to this use of 7s that has the listener enchanted by Judi Dench’s acting the lines in musical cadence.

It is this reminder of the style for ballad stanza that gives a subliminal message to the audience of what is to be expected in a Shakespearean play. After 400 years, the stanza’s

cadence measures our appreciation. The language may have changed a bit, but the cadence informs the original style.

Another curiosity may be the reference of Athens is mentioned 28 times in the play. In the plays *Tempest*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and now *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare has produced a few constants. Some of these constants are the use of nature and spirits, otherworldly or supernatural beings. These are not the plays of a religion such as Christianity, and seem to play to a large enough segment of an audience who understand and appreciate such beings. Contemporary of Shakespeare is Galileo, whose celestial discoveries shook the foundation of the Christian church. During that period, reactionaries damned “any university as an Athens, meaning a hotbed of atheism...” which seems to suggest Shakespeare had intent in mind in the development of the story around Athens in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Herbert). Another definition of Atheism is “not of my religion.” Shakespeare does appear to join the company of new thought prevalent during this period. He dared to step outside the usual binds of rules of playwriting and verse. Perhaps his usage of Athenian references is not so simple as place rather than thought. The story of *Pyramus and Thisbe* occurs in Babylon. Shakespeare critics note his mixing place, tense, fashion, and events with no seeming order or purpose. We can only wonder. We remember him as well as other forward thinkers, such as Galileo, today. Is it the passion inherent in a Shakespeare play such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that inspired Mendelssohn to write that overture?

The transformation of play to music is revealed in the enjoyment Mendelssohn had of Shakespeare's play. He wrote the Overture in less than 30 days. (Laki) When we can think of a distillation to the essence of something, it is music that is appropriate to distillation. Many words are written about the beauty and integrity of the “Overture”, but to so capture the essence of A

Midsummer Night's Dream was Mendelssohn's immortal calling. This love fest of a wonderful play and fantastic music does come with some challenge.

Nazi Germany increased Mendelssohn's place on the cultural map. Because the Third Reich believed Mendelssohn to be a Jew, they put a call out to composers to replace his music of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Carl Orff answered that call. His rendition has never met with acclaim. He continued to rewrite it over 25 years. The problem with his music was, other than no one liked it, Nazi Germany lost. History tried to lump Orff into Nazism, but many are now suggesting he was a composer trying to make the most of a difficult time. (Kater) Carl Orff had already gained fame as the composer of the "Carmina Burana", which continues in popularity today. Mendelssohn suffered from the effects of anti-Semitism before and after the war in Europe and America. In recent decades, his musical genius is in the ascendancy of recognition. No small part of that is owed to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Through the music of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a listener can come to know a play of William Shakespeare. The inspiration and the dream of Shakespeare to write something that everyone could appreciate stood on solid ground in his theatrical offerings. His plays enjoyed the presence of Lords and Groundlings. People recognized themselves where they would in one play or another.

Mendelssohn wrote the "Overture" to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from his heart. He was a young boy who loved life, had the resources and support of his family to explore the arts, and from a German translation of Shakespeare gave us one of the enduring musical icons of all time. Add to that the "Wedding March", the dream music at many weddings today, we have Shakespeare carried as a tiny kernel of awareness in the most innocent of us. Imagine humming

a tune that we have heard on numerous occasions just to find out the tune was inspired by one of William Shakespeare's plays.

Music composed through inspiration of another cultural piece is not unique to composers and songwriters throughout history. Even William Shakespeare was inspired by others. Earlier we referenced Ovid's *Pyramus and Thisbe*, a play we see reenacted or retold in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as well as in *Romeo and Juliet*. We know Shakespeare got mileage from many of the old stories and classics of his day. Like many writers and composers of today, Shakespeare knew he could tell the story in such a way to appeal to present day (for the 16th century) audiences. Mendelssohn felt that calling to lift the music of his day to a level his contemporaries could understand and appreciate. Seiji Ozawa helming the Boston Symphony Orchestra meets a new era in cross-cultural cooperation. Here we have an artist of Japanese-descent conducting a world renowned orchestra in a land not typically known for its diversity until recently. Add to this mixture in the symphony of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the artistry and gift of Dame Judi Dench. An Englishwoman well-versed in Shakespearean stagecraft shows us how the English do it. And to top it all off, it is a Black singer, the soprano Kathleen Battle, along with Frederica von Stade of German stock, giving us the excellent vocals to a great composition. Within the musical apparatus, Shakespeare has inspired cooperation and shown that beauty can work together, when like Oberon, we surrender to what is inevitable—enjoyment of what is before us.

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ⁱ See attached Iambic Evaluation.