**SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY**

November 13-14-15, 2009

**MENDELSSOHN** **Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Opus 107 "Reformation"**
Andante; Allegro con fuoco
Allegro vivace
Andante
Andante con moto; Allegro vivace

INTERMISSION

**SAINT-SAËNS** **Piano Concerto No. 4 in C minor, Opus 44**
Allegro moderato; Andante
Allegro vivace; Andante; Allegro

**STRAUSS** ***Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, Opus 28**

**Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Op. 107 "Reformation"**
FELIX MENDELSSOHN
Born February 3, 1809, Hamburg
Died November 4, 1847, Leipzig

In 1829 officials in Berlin began plans to observe the three-hundredth anniversary of the Augsburg Confession the following year. The Augsburg Confession of 1530 had–after a period of violent religious warfare–produced the first formal statement of Lutheran principles, and as part of its celebration the Berlin government commissioned a symphony from the 20-year-old Felix Mendelssohn. It may at first seem odd that such a commission would go to a young man who had been born Jewish (the family converted to Christianity when Felix was 7); perhaps the young man's revival of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in April 1829 made him seem a likely choice to compose music for a Lutheran celebration. Mendelssohn began work on the symphony that fall and completed it in the spring of 1830, but then plans went awry: the revolutions that broke out across Europe in 1830 worried those in power, and the Berlin government canceled its observation of the Augsburg Confession. The symphony remained in manuscript for over two years, and Mendelssohn finally led the premiere in Berlin on November 15, 1832.

Though it was commissioned to observe a historical event, this symphony is abstract music: it has no text, tells no story, has no program. But Mendelssohn does draw some of his themes from Lutheran church music, and the symphony's progress from a turbulent first movement to resounding triumph in the final pages may suggest an implicit program. The first movement opens with a slow and suitably solemn introduction; as part of this Mendelssohn has the strings present very quietly the "Dresden Amen," which Wagner would use in *Parsifal*, composed fifty years later. Gradually the pace accelerates into the dramatic *Allegro con fuoco*, where the main subject–in D minor–is stamped out by the full orchestra. This is an extremely dramatic movement, and some observers have been drawn to detect here a reflection of the religious wars that preceded the Augsburg Confession, though this must remain conjectural. At the close of the development, Mendelssohn brings back the "Dresden Amen," but the movement presses on to a fierce conclusion: the full orchestra thunders out one more time the main theme of this impressive movement.

The two central movements have no obvious relation to religious matters. The *Allegro vivace*–a scherzo in everything but name–is built on piquant outer sections and a flowing trio;

Mendelssohn rounds the movement off with an extended–and very effective–coda. The *Andante* is so short that some have felt that it functions merely as a prelude to the last movement: it is built on only one theme, the violins' long-lined opening melody, and proceeds without pause directly into the finale. Here flutes, soon joined by other woodwinds, sound the hymn *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, attributed to Martin Luther himself, and the music grows in excitement and speed and then hurls itself into the main theme, marked *Allegro maestoso*. This heroic, climbing theme–stamped out in unison by the full orchestra–will form the basis of the last movement. Much of the development is contrapuntal: Luther's hymn-tune is treated as the subject of a fugue at points, and various bits of that hymn reappear as part of the development. Mendelssohn builds the heroic conclusion on the first two phrases of Luther's hymn, which now ring out triumphantly.

SOME NOTES: This symphony has had something of a checkered career, beginning with the cancellation of the occasion for which it was written. The first performance in November 1832 was not a success, and the composer himself turned on this work; to a friend he wrote: "I cannot stand it any longer, I would rather burn it than any of my other pieces; it should never come out." And Mendelssohn in fact did not publish this music: it did not appear until 1868, twenty-one years after his death, when it was given the misleadingly high opus number 107. At that same time it was titled his "Fifth Symphony", only because it was the last of his five mature symphonies to be published (it is actually the second in order of composition). Mendelssohn himself never heard this music called the *Reformation* Symphony; his own working title was "Symphony for the Celebration of the Church Revolution." There is also confusion about which key the symphony is in: it is usually listed as being in D minor, but that is the key only of the main body of the first movement; the introduction and last movement are in D Major, and the symphony is sometimes listed as being in that key. Despite all these woes and confusions, this music has escaped its creator's own harsh judgment and survives today on the basis of its good themes, sound construction, and the fiery virtuosity of Mendelssohn's writing.

**Piano Concerto No. 4 in C minor, Op. 44**
CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS
Born October 9, 1835, Paris
Died December 16, 1921, Algiers

Franz Liszt and Camille Saint-Saëns might seem at first an unlikely pair. One was the greatest pianist of the nineteenth century, a master showman whose Mephistophelean manner could cause audiences to tremble in his presence. The other was a dapper and impeccable Frenchman given to a love of travel and to making witty observations about music. And yet, the two were good friends, and they admired each other's music. Liszt proclaimed Saint-Saëns the world's greatest organist, and he led the premiere of Saint-Saëns' opera *Samson and Delilah* in Weimar. Saint-Saëns dedicated several of his pieces to Liszt, conducted Liszt's music in Paris, and adapted Liszt's conception of the tone poem in his own works (in turn Liszt arranged one of these, *Danse Macabre*, for piano).

Saint-Saëns took something else from Liszt: the concept of cyclic form. Both composers had been anxious to escape the domination of German music, and particularly to free themselves from sonata form, which is built on the opposition of different material. In its place, Liszt came up with what he called "the transformation of themes," a process by which certain seminal theme-shapes evolve across the span of an entire work, taking on a different character as they reappear in different forms.

One of the finest examples of the transformation of themes is Saint-Saëns' Fourth Piano Concerto, which he composed in 1875, the year after *Danse Macabre*. This concerto rejects sonata form and the three-movement structure of the traditional concerto. In their place, Saint-Saëns creates something quite different: the Fourth Concerto is in two parts, each consisting of two sections, so the overall effect is of a four-movement work. But what makes this structure so interesting is that the two parts of the second section are variations on themes from the two parts of first section. That may sound crabbed and over-intellectualized, but in fact this concerto is at once fresh, appealing–and very subtly made.

The notion of continuous variation is central to this music. In the opening *Allegro moderato*, orchestra and piano take turns introducing the central theme. This is varied even as it is introduced, and the separation of soloist and orchestra continues for some time–not until several minutes into this movement do they finally play together. The music continues without

pause into the second section, marked *Andante*. From out of the piano's softly-swirling waves of arpeggios a new theme gradually emerges, a chorale tune presented first by the woodwinds. This gradually plays up to a thunderous climax, then subsides to a quiet conclusion.

The second half of this concerto is not precisely a mirror image of the first, but it is built on themes from the first half, now varied in subtle ways, including some imaginative rhythmic transformation. The *Allegro vivace*, which might be thought of as the "scherzo" of this concerto, is based on the theme from the opening *Allegro moderato*. But where that theme had been in a sedate 4/4 in its earlier incarnation, now it reappears in a very quick 2/4, and–almost like magic–Saint-Saëns recasts it as skittering dance in 6/8; the remainder of this section leaps between these two meters. The piano's runs race into an *Andante* that is either a transition between the two sections of this half or a separate section in itself (opinions vary). In any case, it offers some quiet contrapuntal variation of the opening theme; the chorale tune appears along the way. The music gathers force and speeds directly into the concluding section, a brisk *Allegro*. In one more imaginative evolution of his themes, Saint-Saëns builds this on the chorale tune, but now that gentle little tune has been recast in 3/4 and–shouted out by the piano–it takes on an entirely new, and much sterner, character. This final section puts that theme through a series of increasingly brilliant variations that finally hurtle to a knock-out close.

SOME NOTES: Saint-Saëns was the soloist at the first performance of the Fourth Piano Concerto, which took place in Paris on October 31, 1875. The music had not been published at that point, and he played from his manuscript. Also, San Diegans should be aware of Saint-Saëns' connection with this city: Saint-Saëns was commissioned to write a piece for the Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915 (for which Balboa Park was built). He responded by writing a work he called *Hail, California*, scoring it for orchestra, military band, and a chorus of 300. The piece was performed in San Diego at that time, and Saint-Saëns himself came to California and led a further performance of *Hail, California* in San Francisco.

***Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, Op. 28**
RICHARD STRAUSS
Born June 11, 1864, Munich
Died September 8, 1949, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

The third of Richard Strauss' great tone poems tells the story–in splendidly graphic music–of Till Eulenspiegel ("Till Owl-Mirror"), who was apparently a real person from the fourteenth century. Described in one early account as "A merye Jest of a man called Howleglas," Till was a rogue from the peasant classes who became famous for his tricks against the nobility and social order. These exploits made him not just a joker but a folk hero, and a body of tales has come down about his mischievous adventures. Strauss drew from these tales for his tone poem *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche*, composed in 1894-95 (*lustige* translates variously as "merry, happy, gay"). First performed in Cologne on November 5, 1895, it has remained an audience favorite ever since.

And for good reason. This music is just plain fun–Strauss' handling of the large orchestra is brilliant, and this music lets an audience sit back and enjoy itself. Strauss bases the tone poem on two themes, both associated with his main character: the tremendous horn call heard in the first few moments and a swirling, darting clarinet figure introduced shortly thereafter. These themes show different sides of the roguish hero, and Strauss said that they "weave in and out of the whole texture in the most varied disguises and moods as the situations press on to the catastrophe in which Till is hanged." Strauss casts *Till Eulenspiegel* in rondo form: these two themes return in a variety of forms, separated by episodes that detail Till's exploits. Though Strauss said that he wanted this piece considered solely as music, he himself supplied a detailed program for it, penciling into a published score his description of what was happening at each moment; these comments make it possible to follow the course of events fairly exactly.

The music opens with a relaxed and dreamy introduction that the composer himself described as music for the beginning of a fairy-tale: "Once upon a time . . . " Till's horn theme, one of the greatest solos ever written for that instrument (and one of the most difficult), breaks in upon this reverie; this builds to a climax, and we hear the second Till theme, a saucy little figure for clarinet that Strauss marks "happy" (in one of many terrific touches in this score, this is an ingenious transformation of the once-upon-a-time music from the very beginning). Strauss lets these two themes develop (and settle in our minds), and off we go. The first adventure is Till's

riding his horse madly through the marketplace, scattering pots and pans as he goes. Things quiet down, and Till shows up in his next disguise, dressed as a priest and oozing piety; violas and bassoons sing the rocking and comfortable tune that Strauss associates with this disguise, which breaks off and heads into the next episode. Here Till falls in love (solo violin), and soon he is staggering around helplessly: "he has really got it badly," Strauss wrote of this section, and the first violins' swooning glissandos make that clear. But Till is jilted, and he explodes, rushing off furiously and vowing revenge. The first target to draw his fire is a set of pedagogues, introduced by a stiff tune from bassoons and bass clarinet. Till joins in their solemn disputes, then sneers at them–with a great orchestral raspberry–and vanishes down an alley whistling an innocent little tune (sung by the violins).

Now the great horn call returns, and Till heads off on new adventures. These rise to a climax, but suddenly break off. The real Till died of the Black Death in 1350, but Strauss creates a very different end for his hero: he has been captured (rolling drums) and put on trial before ponderous judges (great blocks of orchestra chords). He tries to joke his way out of it (the little clarinet tune darts in and out), but the judges' chords steamroller this into silence. Till is condemned to death by hanging. Characteristically, he leaps up the gallows steps, and his death is marked by faint shudders in the flutes and soft pizzicato chords.

This might be the ending–and a grim one–but Strauss rounds things off beautifully. Out of the silence comes the "Once upon a time" music from the very beginning, and this flows so reassuringly that we know at once that none of the events in this tale could ever have happened. Then–suddenly–Till jumps up for one final romp, the music dances wildly, and our rogue exits (presumably thumbing his nose at all of us) on great rips of orchestral sound. It is a perfect ending to music that sets out to charm and delight–and always succeeds.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger

**WHY THIS PROGRAM?**

**by Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, Archivist, San Diego Symphony**

**Nov. 13-15, 2009:-** Jahja Ling reminds us, "This still Mendelssohn's 200th birthday year, but, besides that, the *Reformation* is a wonderful piece. The finale is always stirring to all audiences, with the pealing out of the great Luther hymn. Mendelssohn has
a lot of soul, and when I look at the score of something he wrote I am always amazed at how under-rated he has been as a composer. Sure, he didn't start quite as early as Mozart, he wasn't often revolutionary like Beethoven, but so what? There weren't many of those, but how many Mendelssohns have there been?"

The maestro described the Saint-Saëns Fourth as the "most exuberant of his concertos. Saint-Saëns was a great melodist. People can whistle the themes as they go out. This concerto ought to be played at least as much as the more popular Second Concerto. Collard is one of the most famous and awarded Saint-Saëns interpreters, and his and our playing of this enjoyable piece ought to be a treat for everyone. So should *Till Eulenspiegel.* This is the most fun piece to play and to listen to. Strauss did the most amazing things with his thematic material. It is so very vivid in its telling the story. His orchestration calls for a virtuoso group of players. We have that."

Amazingly, I could find no reference to any previous performance of Mendelssohn's Reformation" Symphony in the SDSO's repertoire history. The history also records only two prior performances of the Saint-Saëns Fourth Concerto. Grant Johannesen introduced it here during the summer season of 1952, when Fabien Sevitzky conducted. Adawagin Pratt played it under Catherine Comet's guest baton in the 1998-99 season.

*Till Eulenspiegel* is a different story. The San Diego Symphony has programmed this popular favorite ten previous times. Earl Murray led its first reading here during the 1965-66 season. Christof Perick guest conducted the orchestra during the 2001-02 season for the tone poem's most recent outing here.