Two men dominate this programme of concertos performed by three women soloists. The first was the dominating if diminutive figure in European politics throughout the early decades of the 19th century, Napoleon Bonaparte. Such was his power and influence that one of the composers we hear today was given a French name so that he might integrate more fully into a world where the French appeared to have the upper hand, while the other almost came to a sticky end at the age of two when his father was found to be breaking one of Bonaparte’s key laws. The second man was Mozart, whose influence was so powerful over the two composers whose music we hear today that they found themselves swimming against the otherwise unstoppable tide of musical progress in 19th century Germany.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Piano Concerto No.1 in G minor, Op.25
Molto allegro con fuoco -
Andante -
Presto

An Introduction

We begin our story in 1799, a decade before Mendelssohn was born. That year, in the political vacuum left in France after the Revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in a coup d’etat. He was seen by many as the great saviour of Europe; every music student knows that he was Beethoven’s great hero to the extent that Beethoven intended his Third Symphony as a homage to Napoleon. In 1803 Napoleon embarked on a campaign to extend his influence over the whole of Europe, declaring himself emperor in 1804 (much to Beethoven’s disgust), and waging a series of wars with Austria, Prussia, Russia, Sweden, Spain and Portugal. He was also determined to invade, occupy and rule Britain; which led to his ultimate downfall when the British defeated him decisively at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.
Escape from Hamburg

There were rich pickings to be made from the turmoil that was sweeping Europe during these Napoleonic Wars, and among those quick to recognise this was Abraham Mendelssohn. His older brother, Joseph, had opened his own banking business in Berlin in 1795 and sent Abraham off to Paris to study banking with a view to his subsequently joining the firm. On his return from Paris, Abraham persuaded his brother that, with the French ports closed, the port city of Hamburg now had a virtual monopoly of trade with Britain and the bank could cash in on this were it to open a branch there. Joseph sent the newly-married Abraham off to Hamburg to establish the bank there. But in 1806, Hamburg came under direct control of the Napoleonic troops, who imposed a strict embargo on trade with England and enforced this with stringent measures against anyone found breaking this embargo. Napoleon’s troops were particularly vigilant in ensuring that no contraband goods were smuggled out and, as the picture above shows, destroyed any goods they seized. However, this was not going to deter Abraham Mendelssohn, who profited hugely from this illegal trade with the British. However, Abraham’s involvement eventually came to the attention of the French troops and under cover of darkness one night in July 1811, Abraham, his wife and his two young children – Fanny, aged 6, and Felix, aged 2 - fled the city and made their way to join Joseph in Berlin, safely out of the reach of the French authorities.
But Berlin was not without its problems, not least a growing anti-Semitism (which many would say reached its appalling zenith with Hitler and the National Socialist Party over a century later). The Mendelssohn’s were Jews and in 1816, hoping to safeguard his family, Abraham forced his children to convert to Christianity and take the name Bartholdy – which he himself did, with his wife, on his retirement from Mendelssohn & Co.. He also encouraged them to become model citizens by introducing them to the great and good of Berlin society and lining up for them an astonishingly extensive education. Both children responded extraordinarily well, and Felix in particular went on to become an exceptional athlete, a strong swimmer, a talented poet and painter, a writer and philosopher, a gifted musician and to be fluent in several languages. For its part, Mendelssohn & Co. went on to become one of Europe’s leading banks, and it was expected that Abraham’s eldest son, Felix, would join the firm once his education was complete. But, with
the Hamburg experience still fresh in his memory, Abraham was well aware that in the fevered political climate of 19th century Europe, even the most successful banking businesses was only ever one step away from political interference and possible seizure. So when Felix seemed keen to pursue a career as a musician, Abraham was happy to allow this and the day-to-day administration of the bank eventually passed to Felix’s younger brother, Paul. (As a footnote, despite surviving the huge financial crisis which affected Germany in the early 1930s, Mendelssohn & Co. survived right through until 1939 when its total assets (estimated at around 27 million reichsmarks - almost US$1.2 billion at today’s values) were seized by Deutsch Bank under the Nazi’s Aryanization programme.

**Five Concertos in Three Years – One in Three Days**

To describe Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (as he was generally known during his lifetime and for some years after his death) as a talented musician is to put it mildly. He was to become a noted violinist, pianist, organist and conductor, and he showed exceptional gifts as a composer from a very young age. By 10 he was composing fully developed works, and at the age of 11 he wrote both a Piano Concerto and a Violin Concerto. In 1823, aged 12, he produced two more concertos, a Double Concerto for Violin and Piano and one for Two Pianos. And at the age of 13 he wrote a second Concerto for Two Pianos. But the Concerto heard in today’s concert, despite being described as “Concerto No.1”, was actually written almost a decade later. By then, Mendelssohn had not only achieved considerable fame as a composer, but was also in demand across Europe as a concert pianist. Indeed, it was on his travels across Europe (specifically in Italy and Switzerland) that he composed this Concerto to play on his return to Germany. He wrote it in just three days.

**“The Dearest Pianist of All”**

Mendelssohn’s piano technique was very different from the extravagant displays of virtuosity shown by so many other concert pianists of the day. As one contemporary critic observed; “His hands were small with tapered fingers. On the keys they behaved like living and intelligent creatures, full of life and sympathy. His action at the piano was as free from affectation as everything else that he did. He sometimes swayed from side to side, but usually his whole performance was quiet and absorbed.” Another wrote “When Mendelssohn sat at the piano, music poured out of him with the richness of an inborn genius”, but perhaps the best praise came from the noted pianist Clara Schumann who said of Mendelssohn; “He remains for me the dearest pianist of all”. Mendelssohn was the soloist in the Concerto’s first performance, held in Munich on 17th October 1831, and something of his unique performing style is evident in the very understated virtuosity of the piano writing.
Youthful Music for a Youthful Performer

The Concerto’s three movements run without a break, each being separated from the other by means of a trumpet fanfare. After the briefest of orchestral introductions, but one not devoid of a certain drama, the piano bursts in and the 1st movement continues in tempestuous mood for a while until the piano introduces a more graceful idea. When the orchestra plays this new theme the piano flutters around happily, and throughout the movement the piano and orchestra indulge in a kind of non-combative dialogue, never competing with each other for dominance, but sharing the good ideas in equal measure.
Among Mendelssohn’s best-loved piano pieces are several sets of “Songs Without Words”, and much of the charming, song-like character of those pieces is found in the lyrical 2nd movement, based on an enchanting theme initially announced by the lower strings.

Mendelssohn’s best music is often characterised by a lightness of mood and an almost bubbly texture typified by the tuneful, energetic, and disarmingly innocent 3rd movement. If, at the age of 22, when he wrote this Concerto, Mendelssohn was well into his maturity as a composer, his musical ideas were – like today’s pianist - still infectiously youthful.

Louis Spohr (1784-1859)  

**Clarinet Concerto No.1 in C minor, Op.26**  
Adagio - Allegro  
Adagio  
Rondo (Vivace)

**A Musical Giant**

*Louis Spohr painted around the year 1809*
Our next story takes place in 1809; the same year, coincidentally, that Mendelssohn was born. It concerns another remarkable man in the world of music. Beethoven wrote in a letter to him; “May you, my dear Spohr, wherever you find real art and real artists, think with pleasure of me, your dear friend, Beethoven”, while in his own time Louis Spohr was widely regarded as the equal (if not the better) of such leading composers of the day as Schubert, Schumann, Weber and Berlioz. His output included over a dozen operas, nine symphonies, 15 violin concertos, four clarinet concertos, choral works and songs, pieces for piano, violin and harp, and a huge body of chamber music including some three-dozen string quartets, four double string quartets, seven quintets, and both an octet and a nonet for wind and strings. He was a leading violin virtuoso – certainly every bit as good as his contemporary, Paganini - a fine conductor and a much-respected teacher. He also wrote an entertaining and informative autobiography, compiled an influential violin tutor, invented the violin chin-rest, was one of the first conductors to use a baton (he caused a scandal when he pulled one out to conduct an orchestra for the first time in London in 1820), and devised the practice (now common in musical scores) of placing letters at strategic points in the music as an aid to rehearsals. He was a fine painter and renowned for possessing an “upright, noble character” and being “a man of convinced liberal and democratic beliefs who was not afraid of speaking out against the repression and autocracy which abounded during his lifetime”. On top of all this he was an absolute giant of a man, standing some 2.04m in height.

**A Foot in the Past**

Abraham Mendelssohn had gone to Hamburg in search of money, and so did Louis Spohr. The son of a flute-playing doctor who encouraged his young sons to learn the violin, changed the boy’s name from the Germanic Ludwig to the French Louis in a bid to smooth his path through life under what was then thought to be a long-term French occupation of the German-speaking lands, and grudgingly allowed him to pursue a career in music rather than medicine (and what sensible parent would not do that?), Spohr’s first big musical venture was to put on a concert in Hamburg. He was just 15 and believed that his astonishing talents as both violinist and composer would wow the Hamburger. They didn’t, and the concert was a disaster. Spohr did the sensible thing, and found a job as a violinist in a court orchestra while improving both his musical and technical skills through playing and studying the core repertory. Very shortly afterwards he was appointed to the prestigious post of konzertmeister at the court in Gotha where he developed a near-obsession with the music of Mozart. As Wagner commented after having met Spohr at a private gathering at Mendelssohn’s home, “he was a tall, stately man, distinguished in appearance, and of a serious and calm temperament. He gave me to understand, in a touching, almost apologetic manner, that the essence of his education and of his aversion to the new tendencies in music had its origin in the first impression he had received on hearing the music of Mozart”. This tendency to look back to the earlier masters
rather than look forward has ever since harmed Spohr's reputation, and he is often referred to, disparagingly, as an “arch-conservative”.

An Eye to the Future

That arch-conservatism was reflected in most of Spohr’s 300-or-so compositions which tend to look back to Mozart and beyond rather than forward with Wagner and Liszt. Yet, as one writer on music observed in 1843, Spohr was seen by some as the “founder of a new feeling, if not of a new school in music”. He was also responsible, albeit inadvertently and despite being a violinist by profession, for some of the more significant technological advances in clarinet design. Two years after composing the first of his four clarinet concertos, Spohr wrote; “At that time my knowledge of the instrument was more or less confined to its range, so that I took little account of its weaknesses and wrote some passages which, at first glance, might seem impossible to play. However, Herr Hermstedt, instead of asking me to make changes, sought rather to perfect his instrument, and by constant practice, soon achieved such mastery that his clarinet produced no more jarring, muffled or uncertain notes”. Spohr then went on to detail the changes “Herr Hermstedt and other good clarinettists” suggested be incorporated into all newly manufactured clarinets. Finally, Spohr expresses the hope that his Concerto should “inspire other composers for the clarinet (surely the most perfect of wind instruments if played the way that Herr Hermstedt does) to avoid the
monotony of most existing clarinet compositions…and to look for more possibilities for an instrument so rich in range and expression”.

**Herr Hermstedt's Concerto**

In the words of Pamela Weston, “Spohr's concertos, decidedly violinistic in style, proved so difficult that Hermstedt was obliged to add seven extra keys to his standard five-keyed instrument. Later he changed to a 14-keyed model, which had tuning slides. Ever adventurous, Hermstedt experimented with different mouthpiece materials and was one of the first to use a metal ligature”. Simon Hermstedt (1778-1846) served from 1801 until 1839 as court clarinettist to Duke Günther I of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen, very close to Gotha where Spohr was based. Hermstedt was said to have evolved a style of clarinet playing which was apparently derived from that of the violinist Kreutzer, and “combined great technical brilliance and striking gradations of tone”. He encouraged his employer to learn the instrument, and in return the Duke sent Hermstedt to Gotha with an instruction to commission a new concerto for the instrument from Spohr. The result was the Clarinet Concerto in C minor which was completed in January 1809 and first performed in Sondershausen on 16th June 1809.
The slow introduction to the 1st movement opens with the movement’s main theme, a plaintive, falling figure, with which the clarinet announces its presence a short way into the allegro. The solemnity of the opening (a surprisingly sombre piece of writing for a 24-year-old composer) is soon lost as the clarinet indulges in some gentle but nevertheless agile figurations. In terms of musical form, there is rather more innovation here than might seem apparent from the elegantly poised musical language, and nobody would ever confuse this with the music of either Spohr’s great hero, Mozart, or his famous contemporary, Beethoven.

If, as he claimed, Spohr had no real understanding of the clarinet when he embarked on the Concerto, he certainly had an uncanny feel for its potential, and its ability to produce long, lyrical and soulful lines is beautifully displayed in the 2nd movement where the soloist is supported only by violins and a cello. Equally idiomatic is the playful 3rd movement in which the clarinet dances athletically over its range, adding sudden pauses and unexpected changes of key as if in a bid to shake off any hint of arch-conservatism.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Violin Concerto in E minor, Op.64
Allegro molto appassionato
Andante
Allegretto non troppo – allegro molto vivace

A Leipzig Resident

Mendelssohn conducting at the Leipzig Gewandhaus
Our final musical story of the evening is set in the years 1843 and 1844 and takes place in the German city of Leipzig. Famous among musicians for its association with J S Bach, who was cantor at the Thomasschule from 1723 until his death in 1750, Leipzig’s importance in the history of music goes far beyond its Bachian connections. It is home to one of Germany’s oldest opera houses (opened in 1693) and the oldest orchestra in continuous existence today - the Leipzig Gewandhaus (since 1781). It can be said also to have been the cradle of music publishing, of music criticism, of musical scholarship and of the academic study of music. Much of the city’s musical fame came about as the result of Mendelssohn moving there in 1835 to take over the conductorship of the Gewandhaus orchestra. Along with this appointment he was awarded a doctorate by the University of Leipzig, but any joy his new status afforded him was short-lived, since his father died only a few months after Mendelssohn had arrived in the city. However, for the next four years he worked tirelessly to promote the city’s musical heritage through a series of concerts which brought to the attention of a wider audience the music of J S Bach who, up to that time, was regarded merely as a historical figure associated with the city a century earlier. The worldwide and, so far, unrelenting revival of interest in and adulation of Bach’s music is almost wholly down to Mendelssohn’s promotion of this previously unremarkable composer. Mendelssohn returned to Berlin in 1841, but two years later was back in Leipzig having accepted the invitation to become the founder director of the city’s new conservatory, which took in its first cohort of 22 students on 3rd April 1843.

A Conservatory Director

The Leipzig Conservatory ca.1844
The Leipzig Conservatory offered its students instruction in composition, violin, piano, organ and singing, supported by classes in chamber music and choral singing. Most significantly, Mendelssohn inaugurated something which was completely new to conservatory training at that stage, classes in the history of music and research into forgotten work. The faculty included Mendelssohn himself, who taught composition and choral singing, Robert Schumann (piano and score reading), Moritz Hauptmann (harmony and composition), Ferdinand Böhme and Henriette Bünau (singing), Carl Ferdinand Becker (organ and music history – not the only professional organist to specialise in music history and research), and Ferdinand David, who taught violin.

With a Conservatory to run, an orchestra to rehearse and conduct and a number of new compositions to be written, the years 1843 and 1844 were incredibly busy for Mendelssohn. These years were made all the more busy for him since he was still living in Berlin where he was cathedral organist and choirmaster and co-conductor of the Berlin Symphony Concerts. If such frequent commuting between two cities almost 150km apart was not enough, between May and July 1844, when there was something of a respite from musical activity in Germany, Mendelssohn paid his eighth visit to England where he conducted six concerts of his own music with the Royal Philharmonic Society.

A Concerto for a Friend and Colleague

*Ferdinand David (1810-1873)*
Exhausted by all this musical activity, as well as from so much travelling, Mendelssohn took time off once back in Germany to recuperate in the countryside near Frankfurt. It was here on 16th September 1844 that he completed the Violin Concerto in E minor which he had actually started some six years earlier as an intended gift to his friend Ferdinand David. It was David who gave the Concerto’s première on 13th March 1845 with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra conducted by Niels Gade. Mendelssohn was far too busy with other commissions and travelling to direct the performance of what was to be his very last orchestral work, and possibly the one that has come to be his most universally popular.

From the very start of the Concerto’s 1st movement, as the solo violin soars gracefully above the subdued orchestra, the reasons for the work’s popularity are obvious. It is full of rich, lyrical melodies, and passages of dazzling virtuosity which serve a clear musical purpose – not for Mendelssohn the shallow displays of pointless technical bravura found in the superficiality of the work of so many of his “forward-looking” fellow-concerto composers. But as with Spohr, so Mendelssohn under the outward appearance of a Mozart-inspired conventionality, was doing adventurous things with musical form. A cadenza placed in the middle of the movement, rather than at its end, is one such example, as is the use of the bassoon to hold back the applause (expected after the first movement of concertos right up to the early years of the 20th century) as the music moves uninterruptedly into the 2nd movement. As with the Piano Concerto heard at the start of this concert, this could easily be one of Mendelssohn’s famous Songs Without Words, its exquisitely lyrical theme lovingly expounded by the soloist against the most affectionate of orchestral accompaniments. A reflective bridge passage leads gradually into the 3rd movement which is playful and buoyant, and strongly reminiscent of the light, bubbly scherzo movements which characterise Mendelssohn’s youthful works.