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# **SINFONIA IX IN C MAJOR, MWV N 09**

## **FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-47)**

Completed March 12, 1823.

Though it was cut cruelly short, there is much to envy about the life of Felix Mendelssohn. He was not only gifted (in music as well as art) and good-looking, but his family's wealth and social standing meant that his and his sister's interests could be supported lavishly. For the celebration of his twelfth birthday, the family constructed a theater in one of the larger rooms of their home, hired an orchestra, and put on a production of a new musical. The composer was young Felix himself.

He had by then also begun to compose string symphonies, which were performed at Sunday gatherings in a larger space built on the grounds of the estate. These *sinfonia*, as he called them, were meant as studies in which the young composer could try his hand at the compositional practices of his predecessors and, increasingly, his older and more established contemporaries. Audiences still have much to admire about them, imbued as they are with all the sensitivity and ambition of a true musical genius.

The first movement of the ninth *sinfonia* begins with a slow introduction in C minor, flipping to major when the tempo changes to a quicker *allegro*. Listeners of the day would have been surprised to hear that Mendelssohn sticks with the same principal theme throughout the movement, straying only occasionally into new areas; the most heightened moment of contrast comes in a fugue-like passage before the return of the main theme in the windup to the movement's close. In the following, more relaxed *Andante*, Mendelssohn reorganizes the orchestra: the first movement had two sections each of violins and violas, and one of basses and cellos combined. In the *Andante*, he divides further—four sections of violins, two of violas, and cellos and basses are separated out. An extraordinary degree of textural and timbral richness is what the young composer was aiming to explore, and the result is memorably intimate, graceful, and tender.

Of the three four-movement *sinfonias*, only this one has a third movement *scherzo*, as opposed to a more courtly minuet; this one is as exuberant as expected. The central trio gives this *sinfonia* its nickname, "the Swiss," as it recalls the yodeling folksongs Mendelssohn encountered during the family's 1822 trip to Switzerland. A touch of drama introduces the finale, cast at first in the portentous C minor of the first movement's slow introduction. Before long, sunny E-flat Major arrives, and with it, remembrances of the first movement. It's a fun and impressive display from a youthful master.

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## ELEGY

### CARLOS SIMON (B. 1986)

Composed in 2016.

From the composer:

Carlos Simon is a native of Atlanta, Georgia whose music ranges from concert music for large and small ensembles to film scores with influences of jazz, gospel, and neo-romanticism.

Simon was named as one of the recipients for the 2021 Sphinx Medal of Excellence. The Sphinx Medal of Excellence is the highest honor bestowed by the Sphinx Organization, recognizing extraordinary classical Black and Latinx musicians. Along with a \$50,000 career grant, Sphinx annually awards the Medals of Excellence to three artists who, early in their career, demonstrate artistic excellence, outstanding work ethic, a spirit of determination, and an ongoing commitment to leadership and their communities. Simon's latest album, *MY ANCESTOR'S GIFT*, was released on the Navona Records label in April 2018. Described as an "overall driving force" (Review Graveyard) and featured on Apple Music's "Albums to Watch", *MY ANCESTOR'S GIFT* incorporates spoken word and historic recordings to craft a multifaceted program of musical works that are inspired as much by the past as they are the present.

*An. Elegy: A Cry From the Grave* is an artistic reflection dedicated to those who have been murdered wrongfully by an oppressive power; namely Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner and Michael Brown. The stimulus for composing this piece came as a result of prosecuting attorney Robert McCulloch announcing that a selected jury had decided not to indict police officer Daren Wilson after fatally shooting an unarmed teenager, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

The evocative nature of the piece draws on strong lyricism and a lush harmonic character. A melodic idea is played in all the voices of the ensemble at some point of the piece either whole or fragmented. The recurring ominous motif represents the cry of those struck down unjustly in this country. While the predominant essence of the piece is sorrowful and contemplative, there are moments of extreme hope represented by bright consonant harmonies.

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## **WARMTH FROM OTHER SUNS**

**CARLOS SIMON (B. 1986)**

Composed in 2019.

Isabel Wilkerson's 2010 *The Warmth of Other Suns*, a history of the decades-long migration of African Americans out of the rural South, was the inspiration for Simon's 2019 string quartet of the same name. In 2020 the Kansas City Symphony commissioned an adaptation for string orchestra.

High-pitched violins (*Rays of Light*) open the first movement, but soon give way to rustling figures of agitation and fear. When this unrest turns to action in the second movement (*Fear*), jolting and syncopated rhythms take hold of the orchestra. Echoes of themes from the first movement return in the third (*Settle*), but now with a sense of warmth and support.

## **STRING SEXTET IN D MINOR, OP. 70, SOUVENIR DE FLORENCE**

**PIOTR-ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-93)**

Composed in 1890; revised 1891-1892.

Tchaikovsky, whose life was so often marred by strife, self-doubt, anxiety, and ill health, often found solace in travel—and he especially loved to escape to sunny Italy. It was after one such trip that he composed this work, originally in the form of a string sextet. He presented it to the St. Petersburg Music Society, which had elected him as an honorary member five years prior. The Russian words he used - *vospominaniya* - translated as *souvenir* in French, would be more accurately rendered as *remembrances* in English.

Almost symphonic in scope, the sextet abounds with color and life. The first movement opens boisterously before a suave and flirtatious theme is introduced. According to the composer's brother Modest, it is the second movement which derives its clearest inspiration from Florence. After a hymn-like theatrical introduction, pizzicato strings play the role of a lover's plucked guitar; a romantic duet between violin and cello ensue. The return journey to mother Russia begins directly in the first bars of the third movement, dominated by a richly decorated, recurring folk tune. In the finale, Tchaikovsky again draws inspiration from Slavic themes, but imbues them not only with energy but with a learned fugal treatment—a nod to his peers in the Music Society.

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