

Felix Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 5 ("Reformation")

Program Notes

When Felix Mendelssohn set out to compose what we now know as the "*Reformation*" *Symphony*, he was only twenty years old—but already a composer of astonishing assurance. Written in 1830 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, a foundational document of Lutheranism, the symphony reflects both the young composer's deep knowledge of Protestant musical heritage and his mastery of orchestral form.

Yet the symphony's path to the public was rocky. The planned 1830 celebrations in Berlin never materialized, and the work received a cool reception at its eventual premiere. Mendelssohn himself grew dissatisfied with it, at one point declaring he would rather burn the score than see it published. He withheld it from print for the rest of his life; it appeared as Op. 107 only posthumously, despite having been composed before several of his earlier-numbered symphonies.

The symphony unfolds in four movements, saturated with Lutheran symbolism.

I. Andante – Allegro con fuoco

The symphony opens with a slow, solemn introduction that quotes the "Dresden Amen" — a Renaissance-era liturgical cadence that would later appear in Wagner's *Parsifal* and carry enormous weight in the Protestant tradition. From this reverent beginning, the movement erupts into a turbulent *Allegro con fuoco*, full of dramatic conflict and forward momentum. The two musical worlds — the ancient, sacred phrase and the restless, modern energy — are held in productive tension throughout.

II. Allegro vivace

A lighter, dancing scherzo-like movement provides welcome contrast. Its buoyancy and rhythmic verve offer a moment of reprieve from the symphony's weightier spiritual concerns, though a sense of purposeful motion never fully disappears.

III. Andante

This brief, song-like movement acts as an emotional heart for the symphony. It is a wordless aria for the first violins, filled with a sense of operatic yearning and prayerful intimacy. It leads directly into the finale without a pause.

IV. Andante con moto – Allegro vivace

The transition is one of the most famous moments in the symphonic repertoire. A lone flute breathes out the melody of Martin Luther's chorale, "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" (*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*).

The orchestra gradually joins in, building a massive variations-based finale. The movement culminates in a triumphant D Major celebration, symbolizing the victory of faith through a grand, contrapuntal fusion of the chorale theme and symphonic development.

Historical and Musical Significance

The “*Reformation*” *Symphony* occupies a distinctive place in Mendelssohn’s output. Unlike the sunlit lyricism of the *Italian* Symphony or the misty atmospherics of the *Scottish*, this work is explicitly programmatic and theological in inspiration. Yet it never sacrifices musical integrity for symbolism. Instead, Mendelssohn integrates historical material—liturgical motifs and chorales—into a cohesive Romantic symphonic structure.

For modern audiences, the symphony offers both dramatic contrast and spiritual depth: a young composer’s tribute to a centuries-old tradition, expressed through orchestral color, contrapuntal craftsmanship, and soaring melody.