

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy

(b. Hamburg, 3 February 1809; d. Leipzig, 4 November 1847)

Incidental music to Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, in the German translation by Johann Jakob Christian Donner, op. 93 (1844-5)

Toward the end of 1840 Felix Mendelssohn, then firmly ensconced in Leipzig at the height of his fame, received an unusual offer from the royal house of Prussia in Berlin: the newly ascended King Frederick William IV wished to establish a Berlin Academy of the Arts comparable to the French Académie Royale, and Mendelssohn, as the greatest living German musician, was invited to head its musical section. Flattered by this high honor and tempted by the large salary of 3,000 a year, Mendelssohn was inclined to accept, and asked for a further specification of his actual duties. This simple question was eventually to embroil him in five years of tedious correspondence with various high-level Prussian bureaucrats. Although he moved with his family to Berlin in 1841, step by step the scope of his duties and the size of his salary were reduced until finally, at the end of 1845, the appointment was terminated by mutual consent and Mendelssohn returned to the more hospitable climate of Leipzig.

The Berlin appointment can hardly be described as musically barren, however. The new king, himself an amateur draftsman with a keen interest in architecture and landscape gardening, was a confirmed adherent of the romantic movement in German arts and letters and sought a revival of classical theater in his private theater in Potsdam. Various projects were proposed to Mendelssohn for musical setting: Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, Racine's *Athalie*, Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. Of these, all but the latter were to reach fruition – spectacularly so in the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – and were duly performed before an invited audience in the king's private theater, followed a short while later by a public performance. Finally Mendelssohn balked at the king's proposal that he write music for the whole of Aeschylus's *Orestia* trilogy, arguing that no living composer was capable of handling such a task. Relations with the king instantaneously cooled; the interesting series of theatrical ventures came to an end; and through Mendelssohn's departure from Berlin and early death the world was withheld a successor to what has undoubtedly become his most popular score, the incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, op. 61.

*Oedipus at Colonus* was the third of Mendelssohn's theatrical projects for Frederick William IV. Composed for solo vocalists, male chorus, and orchestra, the score was completed on 25 February 1845 and premièred in Potsdam on 1 November that same year, with the first public performance taking place nine days later in Berlin. A vocal score of the work, "without words," was published by Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, in 1851 as "no. 22 of the posthumous works."

The Plot: *Oedipus*, now aged and blind, has spent many years wandering in exile after being rejected by his sons and the city of Thebes. Accompanied by his daughter *Antigone*, he arrives at a sacred grove in *Colonus*, a village near Athens, where he is guaranteed protection by the Athenian king, *Theseus*. He is then visited by *Creon*, the present King of Thebes, who seeks his help in saving the city from its assailants. *Oedipus* refuses, and *Creon's* attempt to kidnap him and his two daughters is only thwarted by the aid of his protector, *Theseus*. Now *Oedipus* is visited by Thebes's assailant, his own son *Polyneices*, who begs his forgiveness for having driven him from Thebes and his blessing for the impending battle. *Oedipus* again refuses, and *Polyneices* leaves to face certain death. Thunder and announce the approaching death of *Oedipus*, who retires to the sacred grove with *Theseus* and dies amidst mysterious yet conciliatory signs from the gods.

