

A Year in Classical Music: 1837, vol. 4

By 1837, Giacomo Meyerbeer was the star composer of the Paris Opéra. He had premiered his opera *Robert le diable* there in 1831. It was a sensational success, but Meyerbeer outdid himself with his next opera, *Les Huguenot*, which had premiered at Paris in the spring of 1836. *Les Huguenot* was Meyerbeer's greatest work. It was the great event of the Paris Opéra in the 1830's, and arguably the most important opera of the 19th century.

Meyerbeer had been born at Berlin in September of 1791, just a few months before Mozart died. Meyerbeer grew up a piano prodigy. His public debut was a performance of Mozart's D Minor piano concerto, played in 1801 when he was still only 9 years old. By his early adulthood, Meyerbeer still thought of himself primarily as a piano player, but he'd been studying harmony and counterpoint with Mozart's former friend and colleague Salieri. Salieri encouraged him to move to Italy, to learn to compose for singers. Once he reached his maturity, then, like Mozart before him he was a cosmopolitan composer. He had mastered the German symphonic tradition and Italian opera, and working in Paris, the artistic capital of Europe, his work absorbed the great city's vogue and sophistication. Meyerbeer helped to reestablish the Parisian grand opera in five acts, one of the great artistic institutions of Europe's Romantic era, from the early 1800's until the First World War. In those years Meyerbeer's operas were performed more than those of any other composer, including Mozart, Verdi, and Wagner.

Meyerbeer spent his adult life traveling between Berlin and Paris. His wife didn't like Paris, and her health was poor. She lived mostly in Germany, frequenting its spas: towns built around natural springs, where the clean water and climate were sought by people who were sick, or who needed rest and an escape from the stress in their lives, or from the filthy and brutal conditions in so many Industrial Age European cities. As for Meyerbeer himself, his German roots were always important to him. Even after he'd established himself as one of Paris's most important artists, it remained important to him to visit Germany as often as he could, especially Berlin, his hometown.

Meyerbeer spent much of 1837 traveling throughout Germany, to be present at German productions of *Les Huguenot*. Government censorship posed an obstacle for many of these German productions that Meyerbeer hadn't encountered in liberal France. Remember that Europe's German-speaking lands hadn't united yet. Germany wouldn't unite under a single government until 1871. In 1837 it was still a collection of kingdoms and city-states, most of them still closely tied either to the Catholic Church, or to one of the different Protestant denominations. This made *Les Huguenot* problematic for Germans, because it's a story about violent Christian religious fanaticism. *Les Huguenot* depicts the Catholic massacre of thousands of French Protestants on St. Bartholomew's Day in 1572, and there's nothing redeeming for the Catholic Church in Meyerbeer's opera. By the end of the opera the Catholics in *Les Huguenot* have gone out of their minds with zealotry, with a violent mob mentality, and that's how *Les Huguenot* leaves them. Meyerbeer himself was Jewish, so many Christians, Catholic and Protestant alike, saw *Les Huguenot* as a Jewish and French liberal effort to slander the Christian faith. In the Catholic parts of German lands, then, *Les Huguenot* was either banned entirely, or the story was drastically changed. In some Protestant German cities Meyerbeer was able to stage *Les Huguenot* in direct, uncensored translations, but in others he ran into problems even apart from the influence of the Catholic Church. Robert Schumann saw a production of *Les Huguenot*

in Leipzig, and in response published a well-known 1837 article condemning Meyerbeer and *Les Huguenot*. Schumann wrote, “I feel today like the young warrior who draws his sword for the first time in a holy cause. [...] Riot, murder, prayer, and nothing more does *Les Huguenot* contain. In vain do we seek one pure, lasting idea, one spark of Christian feeling in it.” Schumann, and soon Wagner, too, would become hostile to Meyerbeer and his music, denouncing him in the music criticism they published. By the later 1800’s they had ruined his reputation in German musical circles, and given Germany’s leading role in classical music, the world had all but forgotten Meyerbeer’s music by the middle 1900’s. His music has seen a revival recently, but even now productions of his operas are rare. They’re very expensive to stage, and they call for extraordinary casts. To perform *Les Huguenot*, for example, you need at least seven truly great singers – seven of the world’s very best operatic voices. Even if money weren’t an obstacle, it’s not often that an opera company could manage to assemble a cast of singers worthy of one of Meyerbeer’s grand operas.

Back to 1837, then: Meyerbeer was busy producing *Les Huguenot*. It left him without much time to compose. Even when he was composing, he was usually working on one of his operas, which took him years to finish. To maintain his reputation, then, to keep his name – his brand – before the public, Meyerbeer made a habit of regularly publishing songs. He was able to write these songs very quickly, and he was well aware how much better they were than the pulp that sheet music publishers filled their catalogs with in those days. This was at around the beginning of the chapter of Western history in which most educated people had pianos in their homes. In 1837, if you wanted to hear music, you had to be able to play it and sing it yourself, so there was a large market for published sheet music.

Meyerbeer sometimes wrote in the German lieder style, sometimes in an Italianate style, and sometimes he wrote French *mélodies*. In 1837 he composed five German lieder. Two of them I recommend you hear on baritone Thomas Hampson’s album of German lieder by Meyerbeer and Rossini, recorded in 1991 with pianist Geoffrey Parsons. They’re entitled *Komm du Schönes Fischermädchen*, or *Come Here, Pretty Fishing Girl*, and *Menschenfeindlich*, which means something like *Misanthropy*. It’s a poem about a lonely man who avoids other people because no one understands him, no one loves him. *Komm du Schönes Fischermädchen* is a setting of a poem by Heinrich Heine. *Menschenfeindlich* is by Michael Beer, Meyerbeer’s younger brother. Hampson offers vibrant, beautifully sung renditions of these and all the rest of the songs on the album, and his interpretations are excellent. He conveys even the subtler shades of expression in the music and poetry so vividly, you understand much of what they have to say without even reading the translations. A good deal of Thomas Hampson the actor comes across along with Thomas Hampson the singer.

Mina (Lied des Venezianischen Gondoliers), meaning *Mina (The Song of the Venetian Gondoliers)* is another setting by Meyerbeer of a poem by his younger brother Michael Beer. It’s on the Thomas Hampson album, too, but I recommend you heard it as performed by Anne Sophie von Otter and fortepianist Melvyn Tan. It’s on a fantastic album of songs by Meyerbeer, Beethoven, and Spohr. The Spohr songs are all for voice, violin, and piano, and some of the Meyerbeer and Beethoven songs are for multiple singers. A clarinet makes an appearance on one of the Meyerbeer songs, too, so there’s a lot of variety to the scoring of von Otter’s album: ensemble pieces to contrast the lieder for solo singer and a pianist. It all adds up to one of the best albums I’ve come across studying classical music from 1837.

Four of Meyerbeer’s six other songs from 1837 are in French, so he’s not working with the German lieder style with those. When Meyerbeer wrote French

mélodies, he tended to treat them like excerpts from an opera. They're expanded into little dramatic scenes, and they were usually performed at the Paris salons by famous singers from the casts of his operas. *La Fille de l'Air*, which translates *The Daughter of the Air*, is a setting of a poem by François-Joseph Méry. It's featured on another of the great albums I came across in my research on the year 1837. The Opera Rara label has released a series of albums that capture the musical experience of the French salons. A salon was an art exhibit produced by one of the academies of critics, professors, and other experts who were the arbiters of taste for French culture. The salons were also high-profile social gatherings for the social elite. The 7th volume of Opera Rara's salon series, entitled *Il Primo Dolce Affano*, or *The First Sweet Pain*, features Liszt's three Petrarch Sonnets – the versions for piano and baritone, not the solo piano transcriptions. In-between the three Petrarch Sonnets are art songs by composers whose work Liszt knew and admired: Meyerbeer, Saint-Saëns, and Verdi, amongst others. It's one of the best classical music concept albums I know of. The music is sumptuous. It demonstrates the very best of what composers working outside the ethos of German lieder could do with the short song form. Soprano Elizabeth Vidal sings Meyerbeer's *La Fille de l'Air* with pianist David Harper. She shows off her upper range throughout the the song, ending on the A-flat that sits over the fourth ledger line above the treble staff.

To hear the rest of Meyerbeer's songs from 1837, there are two albums to consider. One is by soprano Ning Liang and pianist Ilmo Ranta, the other by soprano Sivan Rotem and pianist Jonathan Zak. Both offer excellent performances, but Liang and Ranta tend to be emotionally reserved and understated in their interpretations, where Rotem and Zak give impassioned, Romantic readings. So Rotem and Zak's album, on the Naxos label, is definitely the one to hear if you choose between the two. The German songs from 1837 on their album are *Hör ich das Liedchen Klingen*, a Heinrich Heine poem about a man who hears someone singing a song his lost love used to sing, and *Scirocco*, a short, sad song, the words again by the composer's brother. Then there are two French *mélodies*. There's *La Folle de St. Joseph*, or *The Mad Woman of St. Joseph*, about a woman pondering suicide in her grief over a lover who's left her. *Chant de Mai*, or *Song of May*, is a love song.

Lastly, Meyerbeer composed the short French song *La Marguerite du Poète*, or *The Poet's Daisy*, in 1837. The only album you can hear it on is the collection of Meyerbeer's *mélodies* by Liang and Ranta – the one I said was “emotionally understated.” I would still recommend that you hear it, though. Liang and Ranta offer another perspective, contrasting interpretations of many of the songs covered by the other albums. Even if their style is more Apollonian, more like what you'd expect in Bach or Haydn, as opposed to the fervent Romanticism that seems the more obvious approach to this repertoire, Liang and Ranta are well worth hearing, so I've put a link to their album up at AYICM.com, too.

That covers the nine songs Meyerbeer composed in 1837. My favorite of them is *La Folle de St. Joseph* – *The Mad Woman of St. Joseph*. It's longer, around four minutes long, giving Meyerbeer time to cover a wide range of expression and tonal color. If you're looking for a place to start with Meyerbeer's songs, you can't do better than Sivan Rotem singing *La Folle de St. Joseph*.

Like Meyerbeer, our next composer, Cécilie Hensel, was from Berlin as well. (That's Hensel, “h-e-n-s-e-l,” not to be confused with Adolph von Henselt, “h-e-n-s-e-l-t,” who we'll get to know on the next episode.) Hensel was better known by her nickname Fanny, and before her marriage eight years earlier, she'd been Fanny

Mendelssohn. Her brother was the composer Felix Mendelssohn. As for the connection to Meyerbeer, not only were Hensel and Meyerbeer both from Berlin, by 1837 the two were distantly related: Heinrich Beer, one of Meyerbeer's brothers, had married Hensel's cousin Betty Meyer. But where Meyerbeer spent his life traveling between Paris and Berlin, Hensel spent almost her entire life in the Prussian capital.

Berlin was a late bloomer next to the other European capitals. In 1837 it was still just a provincial town, in fact. Around 300,000 people lived there, making it only a third the size of Paris at the time. Berlin wasn't a *Weltstadt* – “a world city” – at the time, either. It was remote and still a cultural backwater, far to the north of Vienna and Prague, far to the east of Paris, London, and the Low Countries. All of those other cities date back to Roman times and even before, where the earliest settlements at Berlin didn't appear until the 12th century AD – seven hundred years after the fall of the western half of Rome. So Berlin was a small, young city without much of a heritage to speak of; it had only even been the capital of Prussia since 1701, when Frederick the 1st crowned himself King and moved the capital from Königsberg to Berlin. A Russian writer named Ivan Turgenev studied at the University of Berlin in the 1840's. His comment about Berlin was, “What can one say about a city in which people get up at 6 in the morning, eat dinner at 2 in the afternoon, and go to bed before the chickens?” There was at least a little more than that going on in Berlin in 1837, though. The nineteen year-old Karl Marx was studying law at the university there. He'd been living in Berlin since the previous year. He was becoming more interested in philosophy than in law by this point, though. In 1837 he became involved with a leftist group called the Young Hegelians. The Young Hegelians published radical social, political, and religious criticism that helped point the young Marx in the direction of his *Communist Manifesto*, which he would write eleven years later in 1848.

“Given that I'm neither eccentric nor overly sentimental, I've been wondering how I came to compose in this tender style? I think it's due to the fact that we were young during Beethoven's last period, and we assimilated his art and style. But that style is highly emotional and wrenching. You have gone through and beyond that, while I've remained stuck in it, but without the strength by which that sensitivity can and must endure. That's why I think you didn't hit the right mark in me or address the right issue. It's not so much my compositional skill that is lacking as it is a certain approach to life, and as a result of the shortcoming, my lengthy things are already dying of old age while still in their infancy; I lack the ability to sustain ideas properly, to give them the needed consistency. Therefore lieder suit me best, in which, if need be, merely a pretty idea without much potential for development can suffice.”

That's from an 1835 letter to Felix Mendelssohn by his sister Fanny, in response to his critique of her 1834 *String Quartet in E-flat*. It had been one of her most ambitious, large-scale projects. Hensel's string quartet is a beautiful piece, constructed along the same lines as Beethoven's *Harp Quartet* – it wouldn't be published until 1988, so it's only recently begun to establish its place in the repertoire. But as the letter to her brother reveals, Hensel lacked confidence in herself, likely in large part because her father and brother had always dissuaded her from writing and publishing music in a full-time, professional capacity. Composing music wasn't in keeping with the roles society assigned to women of the upper class in those days: she was supposed to be a housewife, and she largely accepted the role she'd been assigned, putting her ambitions as a professional composer and performer second to her responsibilities as a wife and mother. To whatever extent her father and brother divested Hensel of the confidence to work with long-form compositions,

then, to whatever extent they compelled her to forgo symphonies and sonatas and keep to miniature piano pieces and songs, they and their social mores are to blame for an immeasurable loss to music. Think of the towering masterpieces Hensel might have left us, if she'd gotten the same encouragement as her brother.

It's important to recognize that Felix's criticism of Fanny's music itself was very much constructive criticism, though, even if it was blunt at times; and Fanny herself was just as blunt in her letters to Felix, critiquing his compositions. As brother and sister and as musicians, they valued each other's approval of their work highly, and if her father and brother had discouraged her career ambitions as a composer, the painter William Hensel, her husband since 1829, was warmly supportive of them. Felix's approval had become less of an emotional need for Fanny since she married. And besides the influence of the men in her life, the *zeitgeist* had much to do with Fanny's decision to devote her work to songs and piano miniatures. Most of the early Romantics had little use for the abstract, large-scale sonata form that string quartets and symphonies are built upon. Consider Frédéric Chopin: he wouldn't have been constrained by the gender roles of the day, yet he wrote few large-scale pieces. The large part of his output was miniatures for the piano. Chopin and Hensel were melodists and miniaturists, and as such they were composers of their time, through and through. Hensel's muse was more avant-garde than her brother's, in other words. She was a genuine Romantic, where Felix — a more conservative Romantic Classicist — still had one foot firmly planted back in the past, in the ethos of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. Hensel's oeuvre was like Chopin's: hundreds of miniatures, together with just a handful of large-scale pieces. In Chopin's case, those large-scale works include the two piano concertos and the three piano sonatas, the cello sonata, and a piano trio. With Hensel, we have the string quartet, an exhilarating piano trio that many point to as her masterpiece, two piano sonatas, and *Das Jahr*, a cycle of thirteen piano pieces: one for each month of the year, plus a postlude. Of the thirty composers I've studied for *1837: A Year in Classical Music*, only five produced a symphony, concerto, string quartet, or piano sonata that year: Luigi Cherubini, Anthony Philip Heinrich, Louis Spohr, Felix Mendelssohn, and César Franck. If you count Franz Liszt's piano transcriptions of the 5th, 6th, and 7th of the Beethoven symphonies, that makes for six. So composers occasionally still wrote the lengthy, abstract forms that had been the cornerstone of the high Classicist style of Haydn and Mozart, but in the 1830's song, song-like miniatures, and opera carried the day.

In 1837, then, Fanny Hensel composed music in two genres: she wrote 11 lieder and 2 single-movement piano pieces, to complete a cycle of piano pieces she'd been working on for several years. Of those eleven songs, three I couldn't find on record. The first is entitled *Komm Mit*, or *Come Along*, the second *Altes Lied*, or *Old Song*, and the third *So Hast Du Ganz Und Gar Vergessen*, or *So Have You Completely Forgotten?* Of the eight songs I did find recordings of, there are settings of Heinrich Heine, of Lord Byron, of Goethe, of a Ludwig Hölty, and one of an anonymous poet.

Hensel had met Heinrich Heine, one the most important of the German Romantic poets. Like many prominent artists of the day, including Paganini, Liszt, and Clara Schumann, Heine visited the Sunday concert series the Mendelssohn family produced at Berlin in the 1820's. In 1829 Fanny wrote to a friend, "Heine is here, and I don't like him at all. He talks incessantly about himself, looking right at you to make sure you're paying attention." She'd elsewhere written that she didn't particularly care for Heine's poetry, either, "except when he abandoned his ironic conceit." What did she mean by "his ironic conceit?" Heine called himself "Romanticism's harvester and gravedigger." He built up the fairy tale Romantic world and then tore it down in

his poems. He wrote rhapsodic hymns to the passionate love affairs and infatuation with nature that so preoccupied Westerners of the 19th century, but he also kept himself aloof from those clichés, even sneered at them. Jeffrey Sammons, who wrote a biography of Heine in 1980, said that “for Heine it was all true: the feeling *and* the frustration, the hope *and* the delusion, the desirability of the beloved *and* her dimwitted cruelty.” Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff, another German poet of the early 19th century, said that almost all of Heine’s verse ends with suicide. But if Hensel didn’t like that “ironic conceit” in his poems, she also said, “They contain delightful things, and though for ten times you might be inclined to despise him, for the eleventh time you cannot help confessing that he is a poet, a true poet! How he manages the words! What a feeling he has for nature, such as only a real poet has!” Hensel also liked setting Heine to music because his poems tended to be short and concise, well suited to her penchant for writing musical miniatures. Many of Heine’s poems take up just a few quatrains. Hensel had first discovered Heine’s poetry ten years earlier, in 1827. Through the course of her career she set 26 of his poems to music. In 1837 came three of those: *Ach, die Augen sind es wieder*, or *O, Those Eyes Again, Im Wunderschönen Monat Mai*, or *In the Lovely Month of May*, and *Warum Sind Denn Die Rosen So Bläß*, or *Why Are the Roses So Pale?* Right there in the title of that last one we see a good example of Heine’s “ironic conceit.”

Heine was 39 years old in 1837 – just seven years older than Hensel, so they were very much contemporaries. Hensel worked with Heine’s verse more than any other poet, except for Goethe. She composed settings of 46 of Goethe’s poems, but only one of those dates from 1837: *Wanderlied*, or *Wanderer’s Song*, drawn from Goethe’s novel *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre – Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years*. It’s the sequel to *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, a book that Arthur Schopenhauer called one of the four greatest novels ever written. Goethe, one of Europe’s great thinkers and writers, had just died in 1832. Early in his career he’d been associated with the *Sturm und Drang* movement of the 1760’s and 1770’s: *Sturm und Drang – Storm and Stress* – that early rumbling of Romantic sentiment that had disturbed the moderation, restraint, and proportion of Enlightenment-era music.

Lord Byron, the British poet, was another of the great heroes of Europe’s early Romantic era. We’ve already seen some of his influence on classical music in 1837 on the previous episode, *A Year in Classical Music: 1837*, vol. 3. Franz Liszt transcribed Hector Berlioz’s symphony with obbligato viola, *Harold in Italy*, for viola and piano in 1837; *Harold in Italy* was Berlioz’s instrumental depiction of Lord Byron’s narrative poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Byron lived most of his adult life away from England, to escape the notoriety for public scandals and considerable debt he’d left behind there. He especially loved southeastern Europe, the Balkans: he was fluent in Albanian, and became such a hero to the people of Greece, it was suggested that if he’d lived longer he could have been made the king of Greece. Lord Byron had died in 1824. Hensel set two of his poems to music in 1837: the first is entitled *Farewell*, the second, *Bright Be the Place of Thy Soul*.

Ludwig Christoph Hölty only lived to be 28, born in 1748 and killed by tuberculosis in 1776. He was the most gifted of a circle of young poets at the University of Göttingen in the 1770’s. His verse was set by many of the great German speaking composers after him, from Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert to Brahms. One of Hölty’s poems, *The Old Farmer to His Son*, was celebrated by Prussians for summing up the virtues of Prussian society. It reads, “Use always fidelity and honesty, up to your cold grave; and stray not one inch from the ways of the Lord.” So that’s a very different culture than the Paris Meyerbeer knew at time. Hensel had set Hölty’s poem

Die Schiffende (which means *The Sailor Girl*) to music ten years before, in 1827, but it deserves mention in this discussion of her work in 1837 because she published the song that year. It was her first published work.

To hear Hensel's eight lieder from 1837, I recommend the following five albums. The best single record of Hensel's songs currently available is on the Hyperion label, with soprano Susan Gritton and pianist Eugene Asti performing. Their album offers the best readings of Höltz's *Die Schiffende*, and of Goethe's *Wanderlied*. A close second is an album on two discs released in 2001 by the Troubadisc label, which is based in Munich. Pianist Kelvin Grout collaborates with four singers to give us 54 of Hensel's songs. The performances are excellent, they sparkle with joy and yearning, capturing just the right spirit for this early Romantic music – if not quite as consistently as on the Hyperion record, they come close. Volume one of Troubadisc's collection of Hensel's songs includes my favorite performance of Heine's *Warum Sind Denn Die Rosen So Blau*, and volume two my favorite interpretation of Heine's *Ach, die Augen sind es wieder*. Tenor Kobie van Rensburg sings both songs with Grout on piano. Then there's an album of Hensel's songs using a period instrument. Fortepianist Keith Weber performs with soprano Julianne Baird, and the effect is very different. The fortepiano producing a much less powerful sound than the modern grands on the other records, Baird has to hold her voice back more, so we get an idea of the way these songs probably sounded when Hensel herself played them, in a sitting room rather than a concert hall. It's a more intimate musical experience. I recommend this album for the two songs by Lord Byron that Hensel composed that year. Hensel's setting of Heine's short poem *Im Wunderschönen Monat Mai* is a duet. It's on a unique album of duets called *First Encounter*, performed by soprano Barbara Bonney, mezzo-soprano Angelika Kirchschrager, and pianist Malcolm Martineau. That's a world-class ensemble, and they perform songs by Mendelssohn, Hensel, Schumann, Brahms, and Dvořák – a very good program. Lastly, there's an album on the Thorofon label featuring an oratorio Hensel wrote in 1831, along with seven vocal duets. Hensel wrote the oratorio, for four vocal soloists, choir, and orchestra, to commemorate the victims of a cholera epidemic. While the performance is not by a world-class ensemble, it's enough to leave its audience with a measure of Hensel's sophistication as a composer in her early maturity; she was 26 when she wrote it. The 1837 duet on the album – *Sprich, O Sprich*, by our anonymous poet – gets a dramatic, moving performance by soprano Michaela Krämer, tenor Florian Simson, and pianist Elzbieta Kalvelage. The poem depicts a soldier sent to war, far from the arms of his beloved. They pledge their eternal love, they promise one another they'll meet again. Their souls unite as one. Hensel's eight songs from 1837 are all of exceptional quality. She was a master of the German lied, without question. In particular, though, of the eight she composed in 1837, this duet – *Sprich, O Sprich*, as performed by Krämer, Simson, and Kalvelage – together with *Die Schiffende* on the album by Gritton and Asti and *Warum Sind Denn Die Rosen So Blau* by van Rensburg and Grout, are the three of Hensel's songs that really stand out to my ears.

There are two discs of Hensel's lieder on the Naxos label, as well, by soprano Dorothea Craxton and pianist Babette Dorn, but I'd recommend you avoid those. Craxton's singing is awkward, her way both with diction and pronunciation and with the musical line is just... awkward. Her records do a disservice to Hensel's songs, depriving them of their beauty. I've found this problem noted in the published criticism of these albums, as well, so it's not just me.

The one remaining album featuring an 1837 composition by Hensel is entitled *Fanny Mendelssohn: Piano Works*. It's performed by Polish pianist Elzbieta Sternlicht.

In 1837 Hensel finished the last two movements of a cycle of piano pieces she'd been writing since the year before. She might originally have intended to publish them, but for whatever the reason, she decided not to in the end. The booklet essay that comes with Sternlicht's album provides the dates when all the different movements were composed, and their order in Hensel's cycle. To my surprise, no one has ever recorded the entirety of Hensel's 1837 cycle of piano pieces. Sternlicht plays six movements of it on her album, along with other solo piano works from various points in Hensel's career. The first piece in the cycle, by the way, was one of her brother Felix's favorite piano pieces: the Allegro grazioso in C minor.

The first full-time professional composer in American history – by far the most prolific and well-known American composer before the Civil War – was Anthony Philip Heinrich. Heinrich had been born to the upper class in Bohemia in 1781. He grew up studying violin and piano, amongst other things, and in 1800 he inherited a prosperous business from his foster father. He dealt in linens, wine, and financial exchange. In 1805 Heinrich visited the United States and in 1810, just twenty-two years after the Constitutional Convention had been held there, he moved his business to Philadelphia. A very wealthy man by this time, he'd set himself up as an importer of European fineries to the New World. In his spare time he directed music at the Southwark Theater at Philadelphia. In 1811, though, with the Napoleonic Wars raging back in Europe, disaster struck. The Austrian government went bankrupt, and the financial collapse took Heinrich's business down with it. He was penniless. He had just met and married a young woman from New York, too. In 1813 they conceived a child, so Heinrich and his wife traveled back to Bohemia, looking for some support from his family back in the Old Country. Bohemia was a province of the Austrian Empire under the Habsburg emperors in those days. It covered the territory just north of Vienna that today is the western half of the Czech Republic. Just after they arrived they had a daughter, Antonia. But Heinrich's wife fell ill and became desperately homesick, so they left Antonia in the care of relatives in Austria, and returned to Boston. Mrs. Heinrich died soon after they arrived, and after another failed business venture, Heinrich was left penniless and completely alone in the world.

In the course of just a few years, then, Heinrich had lost his business, his livelihood, and his wife. The Atlantic Ocean and half the continent of Europe separated him from his infant daughter, and he had no means to return to her. Heinrich had to start over again in America from nothing, in his mid-thirties. During his days as a wealthy businessman he'd bought a fine Cremona violin, and he was capable enough a player to win an audition for a paid position as violinist at the same Philadelphia theater where he'd served as music director a few years before.

In 1817, Heinrich was hired as music director at a theater in Pittsburgh. He made the 300-mile trip from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh on foot, but he arrived only to find the Pittsburgh theater in financial trouble and unable to hire him after all. Alone on the early American frontier, he decided to follow the Ohio River even farther into the interior, to Lexington, Kentucky. Lexington in those days was the largest town west of the Alleghenies, but still essentially just an outpost in the wilderness. You'd think that someone trying to earn a living as a freelance violinist would have gone back to the East Coast, where almost all the people and almost all the work were to be found. Then again, as someone trying to establish himself as a professional musician in his mid-thirties, he might have wanted to get started where there wouldn't be much competition, somewhere he'd have an easier time winning auditions. He must have seen opportunity on the frontier. "Go West, young man, and

grow up with the country.” That’s the advice Horace Greeley would give Josiah Grinnell in 1833, so Heinrich was fifteen years ahead of his time.

In 1818, the summer after he arrived in Kentucky, the story goes that Heinrich looked over at his cherished Cremona violin, leaned against the wall in the log cabin where he was staying, and made up his mind all at once to become a professional composer. He had never been trained in harmony or counterpoint, but he put his own haphazard system together and started writing. It was a quintessential Romantic story: the majesty of nature on the American frontier putting Heinrich in touch with his muse. He worked tirelessly at his new calling. You certainly have to give him credit for that, if nothing else: for the rest of his life he wrote music constantly. He produced a huge catalog of compositions. Within two or three years he had compiled almost 300 pages of music in an anthology he called *The Dawning of Music in Kentucky*, much of it complicated and difficult to play.

When I say that Heinrich’s music was complicated and difficult, I don’t mean to say that it was sophisticated. Heinrich didn’t start studying composition in 1818, he just threw himself headlong into writing it, connecting the dots, so to speak, in the most obvious ways apparent to him. He didn’t have the slightest idea how to write a fugue, for example. The fluency with counterpoint that a composer has to learn to write fugues has long made them a litmus test of compositional skill and sophistication. Richard Wagner told student composers to learn to compose fugues, because even if you never use fugal passages in your compositions, everything else becomes easy once you’re fluent in the art of the fugue.

We need to take a step back here, and address the issue of compositional technique. I know that lot of people will hear me criticize Heinrich for not studying traditional compositional technique and say, good for him, he was being creative, he wasn’t letting anyone restrict his self-expression with a bunch of arbitrary rules. What’s the problem with that? Well, here’s the issue. Anyone can write a series of chords, and play them on a piano or a guitar or even write them onto a score for an orchestra to play. It’s easy to do, you can come up with some interesting sounds that way, and there’s nothing wrong with it. One thing that’s not so easy to do, by contrast, is to write effective polyphony. Polyphony is the craft of writing multiple melodies that can be sung or played simultaneously, in harmony with each other. Counterpoint is another word for it. It took European composers hundreds of years of trial and error to figure out how to write effective polyphony, or counterpoint. It’s not easy, not something that a composer can figure out on his own, no matter how talented he is. Even Beethoven, genius that he was, studied composition with Salieri, Haydn, and Albrechtsberger until he was well into his thirties. To write effective counterpoint a composer works to master techniques that took European musicians around 700 years to develop, from the 10th century through the 16th century. So it’s not an issue of arbitrary rules; the issue is that you have to maintain a delicate balance, keeping all the voices independent of each other as distinct melodies, on the one hand, and keeping them in harmony with each other, on the other hand. In student counterpoint, the typical error is called parallelism: instead of giving your listeners the perception of multiple melodies, you give them the perception of a single melody, echoed on the other notes of each chord. Here’s another thing that isn’t so easy to do in musical composition, that requires study and years of technical development: to learn to hear relationships between different tonalities. Why do pieces of classical music tend to last so long? One reason why is that composers need time to show you the relationships they hear between different tonalities, different keys. For example, Mozart wrote four piano concertos in the key of C major. Those

concertos aren't actually in C major for much of the time, though. Mozart is always modulating around, changing keys, presenting you with a whole palette of tonal and harmonic color heard in the context of that C major tonic chord. You realize when you start listening to a lot of classical music that Mozart's notion of the key of C major was uniquely his. Buy some CD's or subscribe to Spotify and listen to Mozart's four piano concertos in C major. Then find four symphonies by Haydn in that same key. You'll realize that Mozart and Haydn heard the key of C differently. A composer with a well-developed ear will like the sound of certain tonal relationships relative to the key of C, where another composer will prefer different tonal relationships. Mozart colored his C major differently than Haydn, or Mendelssohn, or Chopin did, and that whole world of tonal color is, among other things, a function of good counterpoint. One more example of the finer points of compositional technique that were lost on Heinrich is the development of relationships between the different melodies you put into a composition. It's another reason why classical pieces tend to last a lot longer than most other kinds of music: a composer needs time to develop and transform the melodies in a symphony or sonata, to compare and contrast them, set them against each other in counterpoint. Just like characters in a good play or movie develop and change through the course of the plot, the themes and melodies in a classical composition develop and change in relationship to the others, so that by the time you hear them stated at the end of the piece, you hear relationships between them that weren't apparent when they were first played at the beginning.

So, back to Anthony Philip Heinrich. Yes, he was a genuine original, a maverick. He played by his own set of rules and was the first example of zealous American individualism in classical music; but the fact is Heinrich's individualism limited him as a composer more than it liberated him. In their strict classical discipline, Heinrich's European contemporaries possessed more artistic freedom than he did. They could do all the things that he could, but Heinrich had only a handful of the compositional tools available to the European masters at his disposal. To be fair, there is evidence that Heinrich studied his craft as he went along. In the works for orchestra from his later years we do find passages that demonstrate at least a rudimentary understanding of counterpoint, for example. It's only fair to point out that very little of Heinrich's work has ever been performed or analyzed. It is possible that he eventually developed into a skilled musical craftsman. If the compositions that are available on record give us a good idea of the music from his later years, though, to say it bluntly Heinrich has never much more than a hack, an overambitious amateur who was in over his head. Don't misunderstand me; the world is a better place with Heinrich's music in it than it would be without, and I've enjoyed listening to it. I don't criticize him to put him down. I do it to explain why his music sounds the way it does, and how American culture in its early years influenced Heinrich as a composer. Here's the thing: if Heinrich had really wanted to learn classical technique, he could have. He could have studied *Gradus ad Parnassum*, the Bach fugues, all the standard reference texts, even if he would have needed to have them shipped to Kentucky from Prague or London. I think Heinrich simply wasn't interested in the style and technique of the Old Country. Heinrich loved America. He embraced The New World and all that it represented: a truly radical break from Europe and the old ways.

So Heinrich's music was conceptually simple, especially at first. He started with melodies drawn from dancing tunes, patriotic American songs, and his own efforts to depict native Americans and the vast frontier wilderness through music. He ornamented those simple ideas with lots of fast passagework, leaps up to high notes,

and chromaticism. He mostly wrote songs, violin and piano pieces, and musical theater scenes in his early years as a composer, but he wrote as though singers could do all the same things with the voice that violinists can do with strings and bow. Performers found his songs enormously difficult if not literally impossible to play. Heinrich wrote a violin piece dedicated to Paganini, that ends on a D, thirteen ledger lines above the treble staff – a pitch that’s too high for most adults to hear. In another piece, he asks for 4,096th notes: think of 16th notes, which have two beams attached and are usually played pretty quickly. 4,096th notes have ten beams attached. They’re played eight times faster than 16th notes.

As the 1820’s progressed, then, Heinrich grew increasingly frustrated as few American musicians were even willing to try to play his music, and he wasn’t getting any closer to reuniting with his daughter. In 1826 he moved to London, to see if he’d have any more success having his work produced and published there. London was by far the largest city in Europe at the time: more than a million people lived in London, compared to half a million in Paris, 200,000 in New York, and just 60,000 in Boston. London had more theaters, more musicians, and a larger audience for music than any other city. It was the best place for Heinrich to try to have his music performed. Like he had in the United States, he lived from gig to gig playing the violin, this time as a member of the orchestra that played at the Drury Lane Theatre, the Vauxhall Gardens, and the Covent Garden opera house. He spent most of what little money he earned on music paper, a rental piano, and some advertising to promote his compositions. He lived on bread and milk while he tried to raise enough money selling his compositions and having them performed to travel back to Bohemia to see his daughter, who by then was 12 or 13 years old. He hadn’t seen her since she was an infant. He was writing her letters by then, but what he wouldn’t find out until ten years later was that, for some unknown reason, his letters weren’t reaching her.

In 1829 Felix Mendelssohn visited England. Heinrich met him while he was in London, and they got along well immediately. Heinrich was known for his charming, outgoing way with people, and both he and Mendelssohn were native German speakers, so it’s easy to image them making fast friends in an English-speaking country. In fact, it appears that Mendelssohn went so far as to visit Heinrich at his home. Mendelssohn had just visited Scotland before he returned to London and visited Heinrich’s apartment. His visit to Scotland had inspired him to start writing his *Hebrides* overture. The *Hebrides* was a landmark piece for early Romanticism. Most classical music fans know it. It was one of the first great demonstrations of music used to describe a scene in nature: in this case, the wind and waves along the rocky Scottish shoreline. Mendelssohn might well have told Heinrich about this new piece he was working on, and played some of it for him on the piano. Whatever the exact details, Heinrich’s meeting with Mendelssohn marked a turning point in his own work as composer. From that time forward Heinrich stopped writing songs and piano pieces, and turned his attention all but exclusively to elaborate scores for large orchestra.

1837, our current “year in classical music,” saw two of the most important events of Heinrich’s life: he finished the first version of the composition he considered to be his masterpiece, and he finally reunited with his daughter. He hadn’t seen Toni since she was an infant; by now she was twenty years old, and he’d never so much as seen a picture of her. In 1835 Heinrich arrived on the continent and began making his way towards the Bohemian village of Görkau, northwest of Prague near the German border, where Toni had been living with a relative who was a schoolteacher there. (So that’s why, after almost a decade spent living at London, Heinrich wasn’t there in

1837 to see Queen Victoria's coronation that year. Even so, it's certainly worth mentioning that watershed in British social history: 1837 marked the dawn of Victorian England.) Heinrich finally arrived at Görkau in 1836, only to learn that Toni hadn't been receiving his letters, that she'd had no idea he'd been relatively close by in England for the past ten years, and that she'd just left for Boston looking for him!

Heinrich would have immediately gone after Toni to track her down in America, but he'd entered the first movement of the work he would eventually consider his masterpiece in a composition competition at Vienna. He didn't win the competition, but the score attracted enough attention in the musical circles around Vienna and Prague that he was offered a public concert of his work in the Austrian town of Graz. After so many years of working in anonymity, Heinrich had finally won some important public exposure. Graz is south-southwest of Vienna. It's about halfway in-between Vienna and Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. Graz is where Arnold Schwarzenegger would be born 110 years later, in 1947 – but that's another story. Heinrich had finished the first movement of his masterpiece, and he heard it performed for the first time there at Graz in 1837, in a concert conducted by Anselm von Hüttenbrenner, who'd been a classmate of Franz Schubert's. Hüttenbrenner and Schubert had studied music together under Antonio Salieri, and Hüttenbrenner had been a close friend of Ludwig van Beethoven, as well. Hüttenbrenner had been there with Beethoven in his room when he died, ten years before all this, in 1827. It's from Hüttenbrenner that we get the apocryphal story of Beethoven shaking his fist at the heavens just before he breathed his last. But... back to Heinrich.

In 1837, Hüttenbrenner conducted the Styrian Musik-Verein in a concert that featured the first movement of Heinrich's masterpiece, which is entitled *The Ornithological Combat of Kings, or The Condor of the Andes and the Eagle of the Cordilleras*. After he heard the first movement performed at Graz, and before he left for America to find Antonia, Heinrich finished the three following movements of the piece that same year. Now, the 1837 version of *The Ornithological Combat of Kings* is an oratorio; it's for choir and orchestra. The final version of the piece, which Heinrich would finish revising in 1856, is for orchestra alone. Heinrich decided in the end that the piece worked best as an elaborate Romantic symphony, in the vein of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* or *Harold en Italie*.

It's that final, orchestral version of Anthony Philip Heinrich's *The Ornithological Combat of Kings, or The Condor of the Andes and the Eagle of the Cordilleras* that we have a single recording of today. It's on a 1978 album by the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra under conductor Christopher Keene, the short-lived opera conductor and champion of American classical music. Heinrich's symphony sounds like a blend of equal parts Berlioz, Schumann, and John Philip Sousa. It's certainly a one-of-a-kind experience for the classical music listener. It's a bustling, ambitious, disorganized piece of music, aspiring to the lofty achievements of the great European composers but lacking the foundation of compositional technique that might have allowed Heinrich to attain to them. For those reasons, you might say it's the perfect depiction of early America in classical music. *The Ornithological Combat of Kings* isn't great music. It doesn't belong alongside the work of Heinrich's great European contemporaries in 1837: Chopin, Liszt, Berlioz, Donizetti, Mendelssohn. But it's worth hearing at least on occasion, as the most important piece of American classical music composed before the Civil War.

Heinrich did manage to track down his daughter Antonia in New York City, soon after he arrived there in the fall of 1837. A major economic depression had just struck the United States when Heinrich finally met up with her that year, so it was a

difficult time to make the young country his home again. But Heinrich would call New York home until his death, just a month after the start of the Civil War. Despite the depression, New York's theaters stayed busy. Entertainers have often continued to do well in times of economic hardship; people have a greater need for distraction when times are hard. One New York performer who was doing very well at the time was named Thomas Dartmouth Rice. He put on blackface and did a minstrel show at New York's Bowery Theater. The songs he sang portrayed dimwitted Southern slaves, and were enormously popular with the Yankees. The stage name Rice used for these minstrel shows was Jim Crow. There were some respectable American cultural figures on the scene in those days, too. Hawthorne and Longfellow were in their thirties. Edgar Allan Poe was 28 in 1837. Walt Whitman was 18. Ralph Waldo Emerson had published his *Essay on Nature* the year before, and in 1837 he gave his famous Phi Beta Kappa speech at Harvard.

There's one more story about Heinrich's life in America that I have to mention before we leave him. He was once invited to the White House, to play some of his music on the piano for President John Tyler. Tyler was our 10th president; he was elected the vice-president of William Henry Harrison, who took office in 1841 but died thirty days later, so Tyler held the presidency from 1841 to 1845. Heinrich played one of his piano tone poems for the president, and was so caught up in the emotion of his music – writhing back and forth there at the keyboard, hunched down with his face close to the keys in the soft passages, pounding on them with his head flung high in the climaxes – that he looked to be a maniac to his astonished audience. Before long President Tyler walked up behind Heinrich, put his hand on his shoulder, and said, "That may all be very fine, sir, but can't you play us a good old Virginia reel?" Heinrich said, "No, sir, I never play dance music," and with that, he rolled up his score, grabbed his hat and cane, and stormed out onto Pennsylvania Avenue, with Tyler and his family enjoying a good laugh over Heinrich's embarrassment. Heinrich certainly deserved more respect than that, but it was part of the price he paid for making himself an experimental, avant-garde composer in culturally unsophisticated, antebellum America.