



Sunday 20 June, 6pm & 8pm

St Mary's House, Bramber

## A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

### Pocket Sinfonia

Rosie Bowker *flute*

Eleanor Corr *violin*

Thomas Isaac *cello*

Emil Duncumb *fortepiano*

with

Thomas Guthrie *baritone, actor/director*

### The music

**Felix Mendelssohn** 1809–1847 transcribed by Eleanor Corr

Incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Op. 61:

Overture

Scherzo

L'istesso tempo

Fairies' March

Lied mit Chor

The Spells

Nocturne

Melodram

Finale

Mendelssohn was 17 when he wrote the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He'd had an extraordinary childhood, with private tutors, beautiful houses, and a very close and formative relationship with his sister Fanny. He loved improvising and sports; was educated in the classics, wrote poetry and was a consummate draftsman and painter. When he was 12, he was taken to play to Goethe. The poet immediately wrote to the boy's piano and composition teacher Karl Friedrich Zelter in bold terms:

'what your pupil already accomplishes bears the same relation to Mozart at the same age, that the cultivated talk of a grown-up person bears to the prattle of a child'.

It was a particularly golden summer in Berlin when Mendelssohn, as a precocious teenager, wrote the Overture. But it wasn't until 1842, by now famous across the world, that he would have the opportunity to complete what he had so audaciously and auspiciously begun. It was premiered in 1843. Robert Schumann felt he stayed a little too close, in compositional terms, to the overture, and in so doing concentrated too much on the fairy world: he thought he'd missed an opportunity to do something new. But Eduard Devrient, a prominent writer, performer, director and critic, understood that Mendelssohn was re-entering the world of his childhood. 'The originality of his portrayal of fairy life has become typical; all later composers have, in similar subjects, followed in his footsteps.' And there can be little doubt that the inspirations of the adolescent composer as he discovered Shakespeare for the first time in 1826 were gloriously fulfilled as he set about completing the task 16 years later. Themes from the overture are developed and sprinkled through the incidental music like drops of Puck's magical flower-juice. But why take it from me? See and hear for yourselves as we immerse ourselves in the magical world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through the eyes of the man himself. But be ready to help! It turns out English was not one of the subjects his parents insisted on him learning...

**Thomas Guthrie**

## The transcriptions

Mendelssohn's concert overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was hailed as 'the greatest marvel of early maturity the world has ever seen in music' by music scholar George Grove. It opens with four chords in the winds, supposedly jotted down after Mendelssohn heard the evening breeze rustle the leaves in the garden of his family home. The overture proceeds to depict the dancing of fairies, a lover's theme, and even the crude braying of Bottom – a weaver who is unfortunate enough to have had his head turned into that of a donkey.

A whole 16 years later, Mendelssohn wrote the incidental music, on commission from King Frederick William IV of Prussia after a successful presentation of Sophocles' *Antigone* led to the King asking for more incidental music to plays he particularly enjoyed. The incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* consists of 14 numbers, a selection of which we will be playing today.

A fair number of transcriptions of the incidental music have already been made, most notably Mendelssohn's own version of five movements including the Overture, Nocturne and Scherzo for four hands piano, and Rachmaninov's notoriously tricky version of the Scherzo for solo piano. No doubt the famous Wedding March has also been enjoyed around the world on instruments ranging from harp to the bagpipes.

Mendelssohn's own transcriptions have been a particularly interesting resource for Eleanor's arrangement of the works, giving a fascinating insight into how Mendelssohn himself may have imagined the music working on the fortepiano in combination with other instruments.

**Emil Duncumb**

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## The performers

**Pocket Sinfonia** is reinterpreting orchestral masterpieces with the fresh spontaneity and intimacy of a chamber group. Using both modern and period instruments, Pocket Sinfonia was formed to recreate the atmosphere of wonderful 19th-century living room parties, where the intimacy of chamber music performance could be applied to orchestral-scale pieces usually heard in a much larger setting. This was made possible via various transcriptions by composers of the 19th century, including Hummel and Clementi. Pocket Sinfonia has since also made their own arrangements, applying spontaneity and vigour to creations that are not merely smaller versions of great pieces, but are new and artistic in their own right, and expanding the repertoire to include both earlier and later repertoire.

Pocket Sinfonia was a REMA (European Early Music Network) Showcase Artist in 2020. They won the Audience Prize in 2019's St Martin-in-the-Fields Chamber Music Competition and were a selected group for the 2018/19 BREMF Live! scheme. They have performed across the UK and Europe including at Oslo Chamber Music Festival, Norway's *Mozartfestivalen*, Universitetets Aula in Oslo, Asker Kulturhus, and festivals including Petworth, Halesworth, Sherborne Abbey, Powderham Castle and the East Devon Music Festival. Their performance at the London International Exhibition of Early Music was broadcast on BBC Radio 3's The Early Music Show.

Pocket Sinfonia's 2021 season includes a debut performance at the National Centre for Early Music in York, and performances of the 'Fate' and 'Inspired by Shakespeare' programmes for concert series in the UK. The 2020 'Pocket Opera' tour of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, in collaboration with Opera on the Move, will be rescheduled for 2022.

[pocketsinfonia.com](http://pocketsinfonia.com)

**Thomas Guthrie** is an innovative and award-winning British director and musician working in theatre and music to tell stories in vivid, new and direct ways.

A former Jette Parker Young Artist Stage Director at the Royal Opera House in London, his revival of David McVicar's *Die Zauberflöte* there won What's On Stage Best Revival 2018. His own critically acclaimed productions of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Die Zauberflöte* at Longborough Festival Opera led to an invitation to direct Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* there in 2018 (subsequently called 'one of the best productions at this venue I have seen', Rupert Christiansen, *Telegraph*). He directed Verdi's *Aida* at the Liceu in 2020, and his production of Marco da Gagliano's rare 1608 opera *La Dafne* – created in a week with young singers at Brighton Early Music Festival – was nominated for a 2020 RPS Award.

Thomas also works with non-professionals of all ages and backgrounds. Some of his most thrilling projects have been in this field, including work with Streetwise Opera, the Prison Choir Project, the National Youth Choir of Great Britain, and the Royal Opera House, through whom he has inspired hundreds to connect with their inner Caruso and raise the roof. His production of *Ludd and Isis*, a new opera commissioned to launch the ROH's new Production Park in Thurrock, involving a cast of hundreds, including professionals and amateurs of all ages, was acclaimed as 'one of the Royal Opera House's grandest achievements' (*Opera*).

Thomas is the founder and artistic director of the charity Music and Theatre for All, former Guest Artistic Advisor to the York Early Music Festival, was Belknap Fellow at Princeton University, New Jersey in 2017, and is proud to sing and play with Bjarte Eike's Alehouse Boys.

[thomasguthrie.com](http://thomasguthrie.com)