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Bob Aaron
Illinois Wesleyan University

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April 29, 1999

Contact: Bob Aaron, 309/556-3181

World Premiere Recording of "Lost" Works . . .

"Mendelssohn Rediscovered": CD Produced by IWU

"This recording is of historical value. I hope the music connoisseur will have the desire to listen to these revised works by Mendelssohn . . . I want the audience to listen and question this version . . . and hear the remarkable difference."

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Steven Eggleston
Professor of Music
Illinois Wesleyan University

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--It was a case of mistaken identity . . . that led to losing two orchestral compositions for 150 years by famed 19th century Romantic composer Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-47).

Now, the two works?premiered at a 1997 Illinois Wesleyan University concert?have been recorded for the first time with Steven Eggleston, IWU professor of music, as artistic director and conductor.

The CD, "Mendelssohn Rediscovered," includes the world premiere recording of Mendelssohn's "Symphony in A Major" ("Italian"), 1833-34 Revision, and "Infelice!/ Ah, ritorna, età dell' oro," with soprano Francine van der Heijden.

"As a conductor," Eggleston said, "bringing me these works to do for the first time?especially works by a composer of Mendelssohn's stature?was like a child finding himself in a candy shop. It was too good to be true?and then we found out that these works are terrific."

They were discovered by John Michael Cooper, formerly an IWU assistant professor of music, who now is on the faculty at the University of North Texas, when he was working on his dissertation. Eggleston characterized such as discovery as "rare."

Performing these works, Eggleston said, is knowing you're hearing a symphony the way Mendelssohn intended, adding that it's akin to communicating with someone who has been dead for 150 years.

Recalling IWU's festival two years ago, when the works were initially performed by the Illinois Wesleyan Civic Orchestra, Eggleston said: "I worked with the students to tell them the history of these pieces. They weren't just playing another work. I wanted them to know how important this was?that they were taking part in an historical event, measure by measure, and once they knew that they became excited."

The CD, recorded in August, 1997, at Illinois State University's Braden Auditorium features The Ensemble Tactus, a 36-member orchestra of musicians that includes IWU faculty and students.

Recording the CD presented Eggleston with several challenges.

"I had to make sure the performance was clean," Eggleston explained, a process involving recording technology and musical interpretation, including tempos and balances.

Two Cases of Mistaken Identity

The program notes for "Mendelssohn Rediscovered" recount an interesting mystery story. Cooper is the detective who leads readers through the compelling history of the "Italian" symphony and "Infelice." Here is a synopsis of Cooper's tale.

The concert aria "Infelice," composed in 1834 for the Philharmonic Society of London, was assumed to be an early version of another Mendelssohn work, which was published after the composer's death in 1851.

"But the latter carries a substantially different text," Cooper wrote, "and was composed in 1843 . . . Mendelssohn made no secret of the fact that the two were independent compositions, but several similarities . . . have led to the assumption that the 1843 aria was a revision or reworking of the 1834 piece.

"Closer examination," Cooper adds, "reveals that the 1834 composition is not only independent, but also in almost every sense superior to its posthumously published counterpart."

The 1834 "Infelice" was last performed during Mendelssohn's lifetime in 1836. It received its first 20th-century performance on March 8, 1997, at a four-day international Mendelssohn festival at IWU.

The just-published revised version of Mendelssohn's "Italian" symphony also involved a case of mistaken identity.

Mendelssohn completed the first version of the work in March, 1833, according to Cooper. He conducted its premiere performance on May 13, 1833, with the Philharmonic Society of London.

Cooper explains the "case of mistaken identity" this way: "Because the work, according to the terms of the commission, was the property of the Philharmonic Society, [Mendelssohn] left the score behind in London as he left to assume his position as Municipal Music Director in the Rhineland city of Dusseldorf.

"There," Cooper continued, "he received word of a second performance given by London's Philharmonic Society in June of 1834, and decided to write out the second movement (from memory) to show to a composition student?but he reported in several letters that while writing it out he stumbled upon so many 'errata' that he decided to introduce 'many very necessary changes and improvements.' Ultimately, he reported that the last three movements had 'become much better,' and that the first movement would have to be rewritten from the fourth bar on?perhaps becoming 'completely new.'"

However, Mendelssohn's busy schedule barred him from completing the reported revision of the first movement and he decided to leave the A-major symphony unpublished. At his death, the work was largely unknown, according to Cooper.

After Mendelssohn's death, the original parts were discovered in London and a new score was constructed from them. That version?the original 1833 version?was performed again on March 13, 1848. Because of Mendelssohn's popularity, the first version of the masterpiece was revived, according to Cooper, to become a staple of the symphonic repertoire.

"Publication of this version," Cooper wrote in the CD's program notes, "occurred in 1851, while the version of the last three movements that Mendelssohn considered manifestly superior languished in the composer's estate.

"The revised version of the 'Italian' Symphony," Cooper explained, "was first recognized as such in the early 1990s. The first performance was given by the Santa Fe chamber orchestra . . . in October 1992 . . . With the first publication of the score for the revised version . . . in December 1998, chances for the version that the composer considered superior to take hold in public concert life have at last become a reality; hopefully, this recording will enhance those chances."

Eggleston Profiled

Eggleston, a native of Royal Oak, Mich., has been a member of IWU's music faculty for 20 years.

His interest in music was sparked as a third grader, when his mother took him to a Dixieland band concert.

"I heard the trumpet and the trombone," Eggleston recalled, "and that's all it took. I was excited."

He began to study the trumpet as a fourth grader since his arms were too short to handle a trombone at the time.

Eggleston is an advocate of music as part of a strong liberal arts education.

"So many students," Eggleston said, "are involved in music in high school. Then, when they come to college they give it up to pursue other careers."

"But students can participate in music in college as non-majors," Eggleston advises, "and they can take advantage of music as concert goes throughout their lives."

A native of Royal Oak, Mich., Eggleston graduated from Kimball High school in Royal Oak in 1970. Eggleston received a bachelor's degree in music education from Butler University in 1974 and a master's degree in conducting from the University of Michigan in 1976.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing.

Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium.

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Editor's Note: "Mendelssohn Rediscovered," priced at \$10.99, plus \$4.50 shipping and handling, is available after May 1 through the IWU Bookstore, 1207 1/2 N. Main St., Bloomington, Ill. 61702-2900, or telephone: 309/556-3059.