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### Seascape in the mist

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# Seascape in the Mist: Lost in Mendelssohn's *Hebrides*

BENEDICT TAYLOR

One of the many paradoxes present in the Romantic aesthetics of music is that at the same time that music became perceived as the ideal subjective art owing to its supposed pure aurality, the idea of musical landscape first becomes pronounced. Such an apparent contradiction points to an aesthetic puzzle that requires untangling, for if instrumental music is conceived as sonically self-contained, through what means does the visual creep back in at all?

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I would like to thank Daniel Grimley and my former colleagues in the music and landscape group at Oxford for first setting me thinking about the problematics of music and landscape, Edward Jacobson for originally suggesting the idea of *The Hebrides* as constituting a personal "musical postcard," and Sebastian Wedler and the two reviewers for this journal for their kind comments and suggestions on the first draft of this article. A shorter version was presented at the third "Hearing Landscape Critically" Conference at Harvard University in January 2015, and I would similarly like to thank all those who offered comments there, as well as the University of Edinburgh for providing the means to attend the conference.

Mendelssohn's overture *The Hebrides* or *Fingal's Cave*, op. 26 (1829–35), is regularly considered the musical landscape (or seascape) painting *par excellence*. "It is difficult to imagine that this enchanting composition could ever be mistaken for anything but a sea-piece" declared George Grove over a century ago; "it would surely be impossible to interpret it otherwise."<sup>1</sup> Scarcely another work has such an unerring capacity to suggest the wide horizons, delicate nuances of changing color and flecks of light, the ceaseless rolling of the ocean breakers

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<sup>1</sup>George Grove, "Mendelssohn's 'Hebrides' Overture (Op. 26)," published posthumously in *Musical Times* 46/750 (1 August 1905): 531. He continues, "Those gusts which rise and fall, and sweep and whistle through the rocks; those descending notes, which seem to plumb the depths of ocean's deepest caves; and other effects, which in the hands of an inferior musician would sound like imitations, but which are here as native to the picture as the winds and waves are to Staffa itself—all seem naturally to be of the sea and the sea only."

and wild freedom of the sea. An “utterly original, evocative soundscape . . . with its masterful evocations of wind and wave, light and shade, and its play of subtly patterned textures,” “it is no accident that the *Hebrides* Overture became the paradigmatic Mendelssohnian ‘landscape’ piece,” adds Thomas Grey, for “this music succeeds brilliantly in conveying a host of apposite images by unobtrusive, eminently ‘musical’ means.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, these common impressions are trickier to support analytically or phenomenologically, at least beyond the level of obvious metaphor.

Such concerns are highlighted by the famous encomium of this piece by Richard Wagner—a figure who, for better or normally for worse, seems to have set the terms of musicological debate—as the “masterpiece” of “a landscape painter of the first order.”<sup>3</sup> Although this remark is still sometimes reeled out in order to laud Mendelssohn’s achievement, scholars from Tovey onwards have pointed out that it is decidedly equivocal praise, coming from a figure who could hardly bear to admit the true qualities of any rival.<sup>4</sup> The younger composer was implicitly seeking to marginalize his (now long deceased) compatriot’s work as picturesque, surface-based, removed from the “purely human”

that only his music drama could allegedly provide.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the debatable positioning of himself on the inward, spiritual side of a typically nineteenth-century German surface/depth dichotomy, Wagner’s veiled deprecation misses two crucial and closely related points. For a start, the idea of landscape in Romantic art is far from the older aesthetic of eighteenth-century, neoclassical mimesis, as the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge and the paintings of Friedrich and Turner clearly reveal.<sup>6</sup> The Romantic notion of landscape is intimately bound up with a subjective turn inwards and a critical rethinking of the troubled relationship between humans and nature. This leads inevitably to the second point, the fact that, as suggested before, it is far from clear how nonrepresentational music can paint a landscape: not it would appear by mimesis, by any direct representation. So if music is heard as landscape-like, presumably it must be achieving this through more subtle means. Not, one might suggest, through the outer eye or senses, but the inner; through the ear, the exemplary organ of subjectivity for the Romantics.

Thus, on two closely related points, the landscape model proves problematic, requiring at the very least further examination. How far may the visual elements that many listeners feel to be present in Mendelssohn’s work be analyzed and justified? And stemming from this, to what extent does *The Hebrides* go beyond the virtual picture-postcard, mimetic representation of place, and what new and surprising vistas may it correspondingly open up?

My account below explores Mendelssohn’s

<sup>2</sup>Thomas S. Grey, “*Tableaux vivants*: Landscape, History Painting, and the Visual Imagination in Mendelssohn’s Orchestral Music,” this journal 21 (1997): 69–70, and “The Orchestral Music,” in *The Mendelssohn Companion*, ed. Douglass Seaton (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 470 and 471.

<sup>3</sup>Frederick Niecks, *Programme Music in the Last Four Centuries: A Contribution to the History of Musical Expression* (London: Novello, 1906), 169, citing a conversation reported by Edward Dannreuther in 1877.

<sup>4</sup>“The *Hebrides* Overture far transcends the typical praises that Mendelssohn’s posterity has consented to assign him. It is indeed a masterpiece of delicate and polished orchestration, and, as Wagner said, an ‘aquarelle’ by a great landscape painter. Also it is perfect in form. But none of these phrases imply anything really . . . indeed, Wagner’s word ‘aquarelle’ was deliberately chosen by him to deprive his anti-Semitic diatribes of any remains of generosity that might lurk in them.” Donald Francis Tovey, “Mendelssohn: Overture, ‘The Hebrides,’ Op. 26,” in *Essays in Musical Analysis*, vol. IV, *Illustrative Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 90. Also see Michael P. Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 98–99; Grey, “*Tableaux vivants*,” 69; Benedict Taylor, *Mendelssohn, Time and Memory: The Romantic Conception of Cyclic Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 253.

<sup>5</sup>Equally, a long line of Wagner critics, from Hanslick and Nietzsche onwards, have insisted upon Wagner’s own artistic restriction to mimetic theatricality. The aesthetic difference between the two is probably closer to the reverse: Mendelssohn’s aesthetic outlook was not theatrical-mimetic but inward-spiritual, Protestant North German, being far more deeply invested in the idea of what (again after Wagner) is termed “absolute music” and the superior power of music over the word.

<sup>6</sup>See most pertinently, M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953). Thomas Grey makes the point that Wagner is unlikely to have really understood nineteenth-century landscape painting (“*Tableaux vivants*,” 69).

archetypal example of the musical seascape in order to unravel these intertwined concerns. The following musicological journey through *The Hebrides* stops off at a number of rocky intellectual outcrops. First, after charting the philosophical reefs that encircle this issue, it examines how the aural may nevertheless translate to the visual, and thus how music might create its own, virtual landscape. It then moves on to ask how *The Hebrides* manages to do this so well: what are its means for calling up a Scottish seascape so evocatively. Traveling beyond this, however, we reach the limits of mimesis and the visual for explaining Mendelssohn's overture, uncovering in turn his music's implications for mythic-historical and personal memory, synaesthesia, and the embodied subject. Ultimately I argue for a more ecomusicological understanding of Mendelssohn's work as embodying a critical reading of human subjectivity within nature, extending the interpretations by Jerrold Levinson and Michael Steinberg of the second subject as expressive of hope or subjectivity. Indeed, my article might be said to take its bearings from Daniel Grimley's recent assertion that what may be "commonly heard as exemplars of the picturesque, or as evocative local color, images of nature in Nordic music, invite more radical interpretations that pose questions about the relationship between humans, sound, and nature."<sup>7</sup>

#### MAPPING THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF MUSICAL LANDSCAPE

A common, everyday understanding of music (referring most specifically here to Western art music of the Classical-Romantic tradition) would hold that it is largely, if not entirely, an art of sound, of the ear, having at best merely an accidental relationship with the visual and,

more broadly, the spatial. Although a more nuanced account might be cautious about removing the spatial altogether, it is undoubtedly the case that music *was* at times considered in such terms in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as a purely temporal art of tones, shunning the spatial and visible in every essential respect.

From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, aestheticians distinguished between the visual and the sonic arts, the former being allocated a spatial existence, the latter temporal. Moses Mendelssohn, the composer's own grandfather, placed music as the art of hearing in his essay "On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences" (1757), in opposition to the other "natural" arts of sight, and his friend Gotthold Ephraim Lessing would go on to make the influential division between spatial and temporal arts in *Laokoon, oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766).<sup>8</sup> Lessing is concerned to distinguish only between the spatial nature of visual art and the temporal nature of poetry, but for others such as Rousseau and Herder, music quickly became designated as the art of time, categorically distinct from the spatial and visual.<sup>9</sup>

What this means for the notion of musical landscape is spelled out in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). The philosophical underpinnings of what could be called the classical understanding of the strict separation between music and space are given in Kant's categorical distinction that "time can no more be intuited externally than space can be intuited as something in us."<sup>10</sup> Granting Kant this

<sup>7</sup>Daniel M. Grimley, "Music, Landscape, Attunement: Listening to Sibelius's *Tapiola*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64 (2011): 396. See also the same author's "The Tone Poems: Genre, Landscape and Structural Perspective," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sibelius*, ed. Grimley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 95–116, and *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2006), for a broad background to the ideas of the northern musical landscape explored in this article.

<sup>8</sup>Moses Mendelssohn, "On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences," in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 179; Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon, oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766), §XVI, in *Werke*, ed. Herbert G. Göpfert et al., 8 vols. (Munich: Winkler, 1970–79), VI, 102–03.

<sup>9</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (ca. 1753–61, pub. 1781), chap. XVI (in *Œuvres complètes de J. J. Rousseau*, ed. Victor-Donatien Musset-Pathay, 22 vols. in 8 parts [Paris: Dupont, 1824], *Philosophie*, II, 483); Johann Gottfried Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1770) (Berlin: C. F. Voß, 1772).

<sup>10</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 157.

point in conjunction with the common understanding of musical experience at this time inescapably leaves us at a loss to explain how we might intuit space from a temporal experience. Unless we can demonstrate that musical experience is substantially spatial (or conversely, that our perception of landscape is substantially temporal), there appears to be no possibility of a connection between music and landscape.

It is such foundations as these that lead to Hegel's account of sound in the *Philosophy of Nature* and view of music as "sounding inwardness" or subjectivity in the *Aesthetics*. For Hegel, "in sight, the physical self manifests itself spatially, and in hearing, temporally."<sup>11</sup> Time is conceived as the negative of space, its *kenosis* or emptying out. Correspondingly, in music "a note wins its more ideal existence in time by reason of the negating of spatial matter." "The chief task of music consists in making resound, not the objective world itself, but, on the contrary, the manner in which the inmost self is moved to the depths of its personality and conscious soul."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, for the generation of Romantics including Jean Paul Richter, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, music's very removal from the visible and tangible makes it possible to be lauded as the most spiritual and inward art.<sup>13</sup> Possibly the most extreme formulation of all concerning music's total separation from the physical world may be found in Schopenhauer's famous claim of 1818 that music "is quite independent of the phenomenal world, positively ignores it, and, to a certain extent, could still exist even if there were no world at all, which cannot be said of the other arts."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature* (*Encyclopaedia*, Pt. II), Zusatz to §358, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 383.

<sup>12</sup>Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), II, 795 and 891.

<sup>13</sup>A good summary of the connection between music, sound, and subjective interiority in this period is given by Holly Watkins, *Metaphors of Depth in German Musical Thought: From E. T. A. Hoffmann to Arnold Schoenberg* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 29–36 and 69–79.

<sup>14</sup>Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1969), vol. I, §52, 257.

From this perspective, and in light of the fairly universal admission at this time that musical perception has nothing of the visual to it, it is hard to see how any logical connection could be established between music and landscape. I should emphasize that such a proposition is neither uncontroversial nor necessarily incontrovertible, but it is certainly one that is historically relevant and entreats us to be duly cautious about making overly casual assumptions about the relationship between the two terms. Hence at the very least, it serves a valuable function in compelling us to think more critically about the precise manner in which we speak of musical landscape. Yet, whether logical or arbitrary, in historical actuality such a connection between music and landscape has often been perceived. How might this be accomplished?

There are, of course, a host of possible objections to throw at the arguably extreme formulations expressed by the thinkers mentioned above. Music necessarily *does* take place in space. Sound requires space—extended physical matter—to exist at all. Romantic notions of an ineffable music issuing from some unseen source are all very well and poetic, but in reality there needs be a material cause and acoustic space in which sound waves are propagated.<sup>15</sup> Some composers even make an aesthetic point out of music's necessary spatial provenance and realization, playing with the listener's own position in relation to the musical source, as found in the antiphonal effects of Venetian church music and the divided violins of the Classical-Romantic orchestra, the back-desk or offstage effects of Berlioz, Elgar, and Mahler. One might also note that this aesthetic (particularly as formulated by philosophers or other nonpracticing musicians) arguably reduces music too quickly to passive experience, whereas music is also experienced from a composer's or performer's perspective, something physical inscribed onto paper and produced through bodily

<sup>15</sup>Social practices such as dimming lights at concerts, even closing one's eyes when listening to music, reinforce the Romantic notion of music's removal from the physical world, as does recording technology with its uncoupling of music from its instrumental source.

effort, not just sound waves passively entering the ear.

However, I think none of these points really mitigate the fundamental problem. Even if space is physically necessary for the propagation of sound—if it is in an ontological sense, essential—it still appears very often as phenomenologically accidental.<sup>16</sup> We can *almost* invariably discount these factors without fundamentally altering our musical experience; the Idealist and Romantic thinkers perhaps overdrew the distinction, but they were onto a crucial point. It remains a mystery as to how music can so powerfully evoke landscape.

Excluding these more trivial factors, a few other possibilities come to mind. A literal, albeit often still trivial, manner of conveying landscape may be realized by reproducing sonic signs connotative or suggestive of sounds typically encountered in landscapes (the rustling of trees, murmuring of brooks, bird-song, sheep, cow-bells, horn-calls): music may not be able to imitate the space of landscape, but it may offer a mimesis of its sound. However, not only is such musical onomatopoeia castigated by many contemporaneous theorists (Schopenhauer and Hegel actually both agree on this point—the communal *bête noire* being apparently Haydn's depiction of frogs in *The Seasons*) but its signifying potential is more limited and indirect in its semiotics. When we speak of musical landscape we are normally referring to something broader and more unmediated and also—bizarrely—more “purely musical.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>For a strict Kantian, the ontological stage reached here is anyway inadmissible from the epistemic conditions set on our cognition of the unknowable external world, the *Ding an sich*.

<sup>17</sup>To this extent the signifying potential of musical *topoi* (especially as relating to the pastoral) in connoting musical landscape is of limited relevance to my discussion here. Though pastoral topics persist throughout the nineteenth century—if arguably to a lesser degree than in previous eras—and can overlap with Romantic constructions of musical landscape, the typical musical markers of the former that are found consistently up to the end of the eighteenth century (sonic allusions to the reeds and pipes of shepherds, drones, the rhythms and  $\frac{6}{8}$  time of the *siciliano* or other rustic dances) need not, and often do not, appear in nineteenth-century musical landscapes. Reasons may include a changing attitude to landscape often testified to by commentators as less an idealized backdrop for human figures conveying a lost Golden Age than a primal mani-

Alternatively, music may suggest a spatial environment by alluding to the acoustic properties of sonic diffusion across space, even if the latter differs completely from the actual space in which the music is realized. The Romantics loved the idea of distance (whether spatial or temporal),<sup>18</sup> and a highly poetic effect may be created by suggesting the musical sound is emanating from a far more distant source than in reality, thus implicating an imaginary space. This may be achieved by the use of such techniques as *pianissimo* dynamic, harmonic blurring or timbral weakening, or by the use of echolike effects, all implying the auditor is located at a distance from the musical source, within some virtual auditory environment. Moreover, such effects may be combined with the naturalistic sounds discussed previously to evoke the sense of hearing a landscape at remove, the sounds of nature and rural inhabitants, of shepherds playing to their flock or the pealing of bells being wafted in the breeze from afar (Berlioz's “*Scène aux Champs*” from the *Symphonie fantastique* is a classic example), which is where the Romantic musical landscape often draws on familiar pastoral *topoi* of an earlier age.

Most fundamentally, however, we should admit straight off that much of the basis for musical landscape is simply culturally constructed: we associate particular types of music with landscape because of ingrained conventions governing its use in various forms of multimedia (within opera, dramatic or program music in an earlier age; in films, television and advertisements in the twentieth and twenty-

festation of nature, often as a spiritualized realm lying outside or beyond its human inhabitants. The sense of musical landscape I am concerned with commonly places less emphasis on the sounds of human actors and is seemingly less mediated by linguistic networks of reference in its musical expression (an admittedly slippery distinction). On the pastoral as a topos, see further Robert S. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 97–99, and Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military, and Pastoral* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 185–271, esp. in regards to the nineteenth century, 242ff.

<sup>18</sup>See, for instance, Berthold Hoeckner's insightful account in “Schumann and Romantic Distance,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 50/1 (1997): 55–132.

first centuries).<sup>19</sup> In a familiar hermeneutic pattern, the discourses surrounding such works eventually become an inextricable part of the musical experience. Even if instrumental music is conceived as “pure” and absolute, unshuffled by the visual and tangible, gestural similarities with the music fallen to the status of visual adjunct may create a sufficient code for interpreting the quality of landscape. Although this arbitrary foundation might seem highly unsatisfactory, one should remember that just as in language or other semiotic codes the relationship between signifier and signified need not be necessary to be meaningful—a relationship that Roland Barthes aptly designates as “arbitrary a priori but non-arbitrary a posteriori.”<sup>20</sup> From the connections often drawn, it is furthermore clear that the musical qualities that regularly connote landscape are normally quite distinct and recognizable. Such music is slow moving, often involving widely spaced sonorities, pedals or other relatively static, sustained elements, emphasizing the interplay of timbral or harmonic color often by using repetitive figurations (perhaps analogous to natural processes).

One might suggest there is probably a reasonable *affordance* between the two domains, shared structural similarities between the world’s visible landscape and music’s aural landscape that enable the metaphorical transition

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<sup>19</sup>Equally, at this time attempts were made to give the static arts a temporal quality, such as in the *tableaux vivants* popular among the well-to-do of Europe, a comparable mixing of temporal and spatial aspects (also compare Goethe’s discussion of the temporality of perception, even when of the “frozen moment” contained in a statue, in his essay “Über Laokoön” [1798]). Much recent literature has been devoted to the *tableau vivant*: see especially in this context Grey’s “*Tableaux vivants*.”

<sup>20</sup>Roland Barthes (after a formulation of Lévi-Strauss), *Elements of Semiology*, trans. A. Lavers and C. Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 51, quoted in Eric Clarke, *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 40. As Clarke elaborates, “the theoretically arbitrary nature of linguistic and other semiotic codes is largely irrelevant to the way in which they function once a system and community are established: once embedded in a system, they are subject to enormous systematic inertia and cannot simply be overturned at a moment’s notice. Although arbitrary in principle, they take on a fixed character in practice.”

from one to the other.<sup>21</sup> Thus we arrive at common musical metaphors of high and low, of chords being “built up” or inverted, of tessitura range and registral space, which easily afford the comparison with visual space. And these metaphors become mutually supporting. Do we think of pitches with “high” frequency as “high” in spatial terms because they are written “above” lower ones on staves, or is this due to a deeper metaphorical association that seems inextricable now? Moreover, there is also a purely visual impression stemming from the look of music on the page (what Robert Morgan describes as music’s “notational space”), which often corresponds with properties easily projected onto sound: high and low, the empty space between wide-spaced sonorities marking out its registral “horizon” that may be filled with “figures.”<sup>22</sup>

In fact (as numerous commentators have observed before) pretty much all the language used to describe music might be interpreted as metaphorical and spatial.<sup>23</sup> And although musical meaning is not entirely reducible to the terms used to describe it, the mutual implication of musical language and verbal metalanguage is so strong as to make any clean separation somewhat artificial. The musical signifiers of landscape become so culturally ingrained that after a while they are accepted without any further thought as a connotative language. Thus by the twentieth century the swelling seascapes of Delius and Debussy, Ravel’s classical dawn in *Daphné*, the rolling expanses of Nielsen’s *Sinfonia expansiva*, the flat fenlands of Vaughan Williams’s first *Norfolk Rhapsody*, and grey,

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<sup>21</sup>The term *affordance* was introduced in the 1970s by psychologist James Gibson (see *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979]) and modified subsequently by Donald Norman. In more recent years it has been taken up in ecological accounts of music (see Clarke, *Ways of Listening*, and Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998]).

<sup>22</sup>Robert P. Morgan, “Musical Time/Musical Space,” *Critical Inquiry* 6 (1980): 537.

<sup>23</sup>For instance, Roger Scruton argues that “spatial metaphors permeate our experience of music, and the organization which produces music out of sound prompts us, almost inexorably, to think of sound in spatial terms.” These metaphors, understood literally, are false, though nonetheless integral to the experience of music. Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 15.

shingle-strewn Suffolk coastline of Britten's first *Sea Interlude*, the icy landscapes of Sibelius's or Shostakovich's later symphonies, and the wide pandiatonic spaces of Copland's *Appalachian Spring* seem irresistibly to conjure up a visual experience in tones without any conscious mediation in the minds of listeners.

However, what I find particularly crucial for this discussion is the idea of *movement* or *motion*. For since Aristotle, the category of movement is traditionally that which connects the categories of space and time (the Aristotelian definition of time in the *Physics* is bound up with space through the intermediary of movement).<sup>24</sup> The point is particularly explicit in Hegel's discussion from the *Philosophy of Nature*, where motion is held to connect and actualize the abstract categories of time and space as the third term in a dialectical triad. "Motion is the process, the transition of Time into Space and of Space into Time." Indeed, "it is in motion that Space and Time first acquire actuality."<sup>25</sup>

Here I believe we have found the most potent means for music to translate the visual and spatial into the audible and temporal in the creation of musical landscapes, for music has an immensely powerful ability to create the illusion of movement. The idea of musical motion may be substantially metaphorical, but it is nonetheless an extremely powerful metaphor—much stronger and more naturalized than the familiar spatial ones outlined above—one that for most listeners seems a reality.<sup>26</sup> Hence

<sup>24</sup>Indeed, at the broadest level, it is actually extremely hard to conceive of time and the temporal without resorting to spatial metaphors, as philosophers of time have often noted, even though this seemingly brings in an extraneous element. One of the most prominent critical voices arguing for this view is Henri Bergson (who believes it a misrepresentation, albeit one that is unavoidable; see *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson [London: George Allen and Co., 1910], chap. 2).

<sup>25</sup>Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, Zusatz to §261, 44 and 43.

<sup>26</sup>This connection between music and motion was already well established in the nineteenth century. We might recall at this point Eduard Hanslick's insistence that music can convey emotion only insofar as it parallels its dynamic quality (*Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, chap. 2), and his famous and still provocative assertion that music's content consists of "tonally moving forms" (*tönend bewegten Formen*). Despite his protestations, Hanslick was far from the first to underscore the significance of this

we might propose that music can successfully model a landscape to the extent that it implicates its moving, dynamic aspects, its temporal processes.<sup>27</sup> It is no wonder that some of the most typical landscape music from the nineteenth century involves allusion to moving nature—the babbling of brooks, the soft susurrus of the sea, the forest murmurs of rustling trees, the rumble of thunderstorms, and howling of tempest winds. Even with descriptions of a relatively static musical landscape in which nothing much happens, there may be a sense of a subject *moving* through the landscape (as in Schubert) or a changing subject-position in relation to it.<sup>28</sup>

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notion of *Bewegung* for understanding music (see Rafael Köhler, *Natur und Geist: Energetische Form in der Musiktheorie* [Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1996], 65–80, and Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2014], 164–67 and 193–95). Taken literally, movement is again necessary to music just as space is, since sound waves consist of moving matter. However, there is no logical connection between the physical motion of sound and the intentional idea of musical motion that results from it. Scruton, again, insists that the metaphors of movement and a virtual musical space are essential preconditions for music's very understanding *qua* music. Musical movement is "an irreducible metaphor," "a metaphor we hear by": "Whenever we hear music, we hear movement" (*The Aesthetics of Music*, 353, 52, and 55).

<sup>27</sup>Thomas Grey makes a comparable point in relation to Mendelssohn's overture ("The Orchestral Music," 471).

<sup>28</sup>See Mark Johnson and Steve Larson, "'Something in the Way She Moves'—Metaphors of Musical Motion," *Metaphor and Symbol* 18 (2003): 63–84, who contend that musical time is almost invariably described in terms of landscape or motion—either as space that moves past us, or landscape through which we move. On the notion of changing subject position in relation to music, see Clarke, *Ways of Listening*, chap. 4. As an addendum, to continue this line of inquiry to its logical conclusion, one may well think that by introducing motion—and therefore, of necessity, time—into landscape, we are slightly cheating, sidestepping the most crucial part of the philosophical problem just as it was getting interesting. Surely, while landscape undoubtedly persists through time and has its own scale (perhaps a very slow scale) of temporality, we are guilty of focusing on an inessential aspect of it by referring to its temporal quality. Landscape, we could hold, is essentially spatial and only accidentally temporal, just as music is essentially temporal and only accidentally spatial. In virtually all the above examples, the attempt to translate between a temporal and a spatial medium is only ever remotely plausible in those borderline areas where such practical, if occasionally dubious, Aristotelian ontological distinctions sit slightly uneasily.

Perhaps revealingly, the notion of a truly static landscape seems largely absent from musical depictions. As a thought-experiment, one may try to conceive what one would be like.



The aptness of this category of movement to Mendelssohn's overture is telling—far more than with most other instances of musical landscape—as *The Hebrides* is primarily a *seascape*. By being conceived of as denotative of the sea, Mendelssohn's work immediately invokes far more extensive possibilities for motion, and therefore for conveying the sense of visual and physical space. The dynamic sense of movement conveyed by music is capable of offering a powerful affordance with the dynamic qualities of water. Like the sea's waves, music suggests movement without something really moving, presence without solidity (it is hardly accidental that ever since antiquity time has similarly been likened to fluvial metaphors, as flow and change).<sup>29</sup> As we will see, this is one of the primary reasons why Mendelssohn's piece is the quintessential example of landscape music, for seascapes are simply better suited to music's temporally based powers of metaphorical suggestion.

Reverting back a stage in the argument, one further possibility for translating metaphorically from the visual to aural domains is the idea of color. Chromaticism, as a term, has shed much of its potential visual connotations for music, but we still speak of tone color, of the color of musical timbres or a particular harmonic sonority. Although any direct connection between visual and sonic color is hard to demonstrate, the two have long been considered analogous—a connection that was certainly perceived in Mendelssohn's day.<sup>30</sup> Just as with

visual perception, color in music is commonly seen as a secondary quality, subservient in importance to pitch and duration (although the distinction between such primary and secondary qualities is similarly hard to substantiate). In practice, musical "color" can often be found in conjunction with the impression of musical movement just described, especially in order to articulate the subtly variegated nuances of moving nature (a phenomenon well illustrated by Carl Dahlhaus in taking up Ernst Kurth's idea of the natural *Klangfläche*).<sup>31</sup>

Crucially, the idea of color links to one final point that must be mentioned here: the observed psychological fact of synaesthesia. Some people simply do perceive colors when they hear sounds (and thus, perhaps, the idea of hearing sounds when observing colors is not such an extreme step). In fact, it seems very likely that Mendelssohn possessed some form of synaesthesia. His onetime friend Adolf Bernhard Marx recalled a conversation with the young composer concerning instrumentation:

MARX: Here pure purple would have to be used; the horns were dampening the splendor of the trumpets. MENDELSSOHN: No! No! That shouts too loudly; I want violet.<sup>32</sup>

Mendelssohn is well known for being among the "most visual of composers" (in the words of Leon Botstein); his desire for artistic expression in music was complemented in the visual realm by his skills as an amateur watercolorist and draughtsman.<sup>33</sup> Mendelssohn's leading bi-

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Removing as much animating movement from the virtual landscape as possible, even discounting as extraneous a putative human subject and the inherent temporality of the observer's perception of space, what are we left with? I would imagine pretty much a sustained chord, perhaps very slowly changing over time in harmony or tone color. Intriguingly, one obvious instance of such a design would be Schoenberg's *Farben*, op. 16, no. 3—a work which to my knowledge has never been considered an example of musical landscape (despite its manifest visual attributions).

<sup>29</sup>Sound, of course, consists likewise of waves: in one sense the connection between music and the sea is not merely metaphorical but literal. Nonetheless, the wave figures and phrasal swells in music are of a higher—and more figurative—order than simple sound waves that could arise from a single pitch of unchanging volume.

<sup>30</sup>Edward Lockspeiser cites a comment of Carl Maria von Weber concerning music's capacity, through timbral combinations, to form analogues of painters' use of color (*Music and Painting: A Study in Comparative Ideas from*

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*Turner to Schoenberg* [London: Cassell, 1973], 16–17). Indeed, in his unfinished novel *Tonkünstlers Leben*, Weber holds that "a landscape is a type of musical performance" (see Carl Maria von Weber, *Writings on Music*, trans. Martin Cooper, ed. John Warrack [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 323–24).

<sup>31</sup>See Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 307–09.

<sup>32</sup>A. B. Marx, *Erinnerung aus meinem Leben*, trans. Susan Gillespie as "From the Memoirs of Adolf Bernhard Marx," in *Mendelssohn and His World*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 212.

<sup>33</sup>Leon Botstein, "The Aesthetics of Assimilation and Affirmation: Reconstructing the Career of Felix Mendelssohn," in *Mendelssohn and His World*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 26. Grey speaks similarly of the "pronounced visual orientation" of Mendelssohn's cultural background ("*Tableaux vivants*," 84).

ographer, R. Larry Todd, has indeed often referred to the matter of synaesthesia, as have a number of other commentators specifically concerning *The Hebrides*.<sup>34</sup> However, the implications of this condition for this philosophical issue of musical landscape have rarely been spelled out.<sup>35</sup>

Synaesthesia would seem to point already to a possible overcoming of distinctions between spatial and temporal senses. Such an approach would seem supported by a larger range of thought since the mid-twentieth century that to some extent rejects the strict Kantian separation between space and time and their relation to our sensory modes of perception. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological exploration of the "embodied subject" seeks to overcome the implicit dualism between mind and matter, time and space, a viewpoint that has found proponents in modern cognitive psychology, metaphor theory, and musicological ecology.<sup>36</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, "music is not in visible space, but it besieges, undermines and displaces that space." The visible space of the concert hall is quite distinct from "that other space through which . . . music is unfolded."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Todd remarks on Mendelssohn's "synaesthetic experiences" in the genesis of *The Hebrides*: "the images of [his] Oban drawing became sonorous; the orchestra a palette of softly mottled hues and shades, to capture the unforgettable Scottish sea- and landscapes" (*Mendelssohn: A Life in Music* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2003], 215). Todd's views on the composer's visual imagination are summarized in the essay "On the Visual in Mendelssohn's Music," *Mendelssohn Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 81–92. A broader perspective of Mendelssohn's relation to landscape (especially as articulated through his letters) is given in Juliette Appold's 2006 doctoral thesis, published as *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Landschaften in Briefen, Bildern und Musik* (Essen: Blaue Eule, 2007).

<sup>35</sup>Todd indeed leaves this question almost as soon as having raised it: "Image became sound, and we can perhaps attribute this remarkable masterpiece to an ultimately unfathomable process of synaesthetic transformation" (*Mendelssohn: The Hebrides and Other Overtures* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 78).

<sup>36</sup>See Eric Clarke's recent discussion of musical ecology in *Ways of Listening*. Such claims are taken to great lengths in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

<sup>37</sup>Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, rpt. (London: Routledge, 2002), 258 and 262. For a fine and detailed account of the idea of musical space following Merleau-Ponty, see Thomas Clifton, *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenol-*

ogizing the argument that I will pursue later, this potential overcoming of the separation between the senses will have useful implications for interpreting Mendelssohn's overture, both in terms of its conception and its possible wider ecological message. But for now, we step onto firmer analytical land for a more detailed account of how *The Hebrides* constructs its distinctive, albeit largely metaphorical, sense of musical seascape.

MUSIC, MOVEMENT, MIMESIS:  
SOUNDING *The Hebrides's* SEASCAPE

On the evening of 7 August 1829, Felix Mendelssohn wrote back to his family in Berlin from Tobermory, a small fishing village on the north east corner of the Isle of Mull. He and his friend Karl Klingemann had just arrived that day from Oban, a town on the west coast of Scotland abutting the central islands in the inner Hebridean chain; the tiny island of Staffa, famous for the natural wonder of Fingal's Cave with its hexagonal basalt columns rising out of the sea, lies almost due west, behind Mull. The twenty-year-old composer enclosed a drawing he had just made of the view from Oban northwest across the bay, out past Dunollie Castle and Lismore toward the peninsula of Morven beyond (plate 1a). Famously, he also included another type of sketch, this time on some musical staves (plate 1b). The music outlined is nearly identical to what would end up published six years later as the Overture *Fingal's Cave (The Hebrides)*, op. 26 (ex. 1). How did the visual impression become transmuted into sound?

Needless to say I am not intending to retrace Mendelssohn's cognitive process here, nor am I strictly attempting to match the lines of his elegant though hasty pencil sketch to those of his overture, but rather, seeking to uncover how the finished overture seems to evoke so powerfully the sense of seascape in listeners

*ogy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); earlier treatments of potential interest include those by Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Scribner, 1953), and Victor Zuckerkindl, *Sound and Symbol: Music and the External World*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956).



Plate 1a. Mendelssohn, sketch "Ein Blick auf die Hebriden und Morven," letter to family, Tobermory, 7 August 1829 (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. M. Deneke Mendelssohn D.2, Fol. 28, reproduced by kind permission). It is rarely noted that Mendelssohn's "View of the Hebrides" is in fact almost entirely of the Scottish mainland.



Plate 1b. "In order to make you understand how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me, the following came to my mind there": Mendelssohn, musical sketch [start of future *Hebrides* Overture], letter to family, Tobermory, 7 August 1829 (New York Public Library, psnypl\_mus\_737 Mendelssohn, Felix; image courtesy of Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, public domain).

from the composer's own time to the present day—its ability to distill a poetic immediacy and call up metaphors that fluidly traverse visual, musical, and discursive realms. *The Hebrides* may serve as an exemplary illustration of the philosophical problem of translating the visual into music, drawing on the theoretical categories discussed in the previous section. The following analysis of the methods used in Mendelssohn's construction of seascape examines primarily the music's sense of movement suggestive of the sea, its fluidity of motivic and formal elements, and the use of tone-color.

"From the opening measures," claims Greg Vitercik, "this work creates a new musical world."<sup>38</sup> It would be hard to dispute this claim, for even the first page of the score provides an unrivalled illustration of the potential for musical seascape in its interplay of metaphorical space, movement, and color (ex. 1). The initial sonority of an empty fifth, spread across the two-and-a-half-octave gap separating the double bass (B<sup>1</sup>) and second violins (f<sup>#1</sup>), creates a sonic space, a type of virtual "visual field" immediately filled in by the descending figure in quicker note values (motive *a*) played in bassoon, violas, and cellos. We hear (and see) the sustained background of the pedal merging into a fluid, though nevertheless not entirely distinct, foreground (the medium-low register, *legato* articulation, and *piano* dynamic to some extent muffle the descending figure occupying that foreground). A floating, buoyant quality is further created by confining the double bass notes to half notes, a sense that even the bass is just part of the wavelike undulations they support, unmoored, without firm grounding. There is no solid bedrock to Mendelssohn's orchestra here.<sup>39</sup> Only the "horizon" formed by the upper pedal is sustained the whole way across the visual field. Even without the stimulus of Mendelssohn's title one could well call to mind an expanse of sea and sky (a grey or mono-

chrome tincture might be imputed from the absence of any warming third in the pedal). Todd remarks that the open spacing seems "designed to convey musically the vast stretches of sea and land depicted visually by Mendelssohn in his drawing of 1829," and the effect of landscape works as much through Mendelssohn's musical powers of evocation as through the score's evident qualities of *Augenmusik*.<sup>40</sup>

The registral space opened up in the first two measures is gradually expanded across the following measures by shifting the entire model up by successive thirds through the pitches of the B-minor triad, effecting a series of common-tone modulations. Todd has again commented on the self-consciously "primitive," "rough-hewn" harmonic progression here, an attempt at conveying the rugged grandeur of the Scottish coastline and nature's freedom from human artifice (although Mendelssohn's realization avoids making them overt, there are nonetheless implicit parallel fifths between the stages of the progression).<sup>41</sup> While the wave oscillations in the lower voices are shifted upwards, new pedal tones are simply added to those of the preceding measures creating the gradual imposition of timbral color, superimposing fresh layers on top of the previous ones that nonetheless remain perceptible below. It is as if the registral and instrumental expansion casts an increasing source of light on the texture that continues in essence unchanged—the dull brown-grey of the opening measures

<sup>38</sup>Greg Vitercik, *The Early Works of Felix Mendelssohn: A Study in the Romantic Sonata Style* (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992), 190. I can't resist observing here that the name "Staffa," in Norse, means "Stave" island, creating a completely fortuitous link between musical notation and Fingal's Cave (a conceptual *Augenmusik*?).

<sup>39</sup>The sonority is also more translucent; sustained whole notes would create a heavier and more cumbersome effect.

<sup>40</sup>R. Larry Todd, "Of Sea Gulls and Counterpoint: The Early Versions of Mendelssohn's *Hebrides* Overture," this journal 2 (1979): 200.

<sup>41</sup>Mendelssohn was seeking "to capture a primitive, rough-hewn quality, to grasp musically something of the desolate, uninhabited scenes he recorded in his album with Klingemann during the 1829 walking tour" (*The Hebrides and Other Overtures*, 47). See also the author's earlier "Mendelssohn's Ossianic Manner, with a New Source: *On Lena's gloomy heath*," in *Mendelssohn and Schumann: Essays on Their Music and Its Context*, ed. Jon Finson and R. Larry Todd (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1984), 142. Two insightful recent approaches to a supposed Scottish character in Mendelssohn's music, focusing on the distinctive use of modal harmonic progressions, are given by Balázs Mikusi, "Mendelssohn's 'Scottish' Tonality?," this journal 29 (2006): 240–60, and Matthew Gelbart, "Once More to Mendelssohn's Scotland: The Laws of Music, the Double Tonic, and the Sublimation of Modality," this journal 37 (2013): 3–36.

Allegro moderato

Example 1: Mendelssohn: *The Hebrides*, opening (mm. 1–7).

(with their lugubrious bassoons and viola and bare violin fifth) taking on more variegated, aquamarine hues, first by adding the velvet softness of the clarinets above, then the clearer, more bracing timbre of the oboes, and finally the translucent F# of the flutes, a touch of white spray on the crests of the waves (to indulge in mild synaesthetic characterization). A visual

analogy might suggest the rays of the sun shedding a growing light on the sea's surface, enabling ever new colors and tonal nuances to be perceived.

By shifting the chord roots up a third while maintaining the previous pedal in the upper voices, Mendelssohn is moreover able imperceptibly to change the pedals' harmonic func-

tion throughout the opening phrase, even though the pitches remain the same. The violins' F# is held for six measures, but as the harmony changes from B minor to D major to F# minor the note, from initially functioning as degree  $\hat{5}$ , becomes reinterpreted as  $\hat{3}$  and finally  $\hat{1}$  (as the oboes' subsequent A likewise changes from  $\hat{5}$  to  $\hat{3}$ ). Although the instrumental timbre remains in itself the same, the successively changing tonal context in which it is heard imparts a new functional meaning (one might say "color" in another, looser sense). Vitercik has perceptively pointed here to how Mendelssohn's treatment of the common-tone linkage creates a delicate sense of acoustic blurring with the previous harmony, a technique that allows Mendelssohn to create "a sense of immense spatial depth that is almost unique in music of this period."<sup>42</sup>

Skipping forward briefly in our account, this same effect of spatial distance achieved through the contrast of tone color and common-tone modulation is taken to an extreme in the passage from m. 93 commencing the development section. Here Mendelssohn focuses entirely on these parameters in a passage Todd aptly labels "a model experiment in coloristic orchestration."<sup>43</sup> For nineteen measures the music alternates between loud fanfare figures left over from the closing theme and the overture's opening motive played *piano* or *pianissimo*, passed between different instrumental combinations in the winds and strings. Each statement is linked harmonically to the next by at least one tone in common. However, as befitting the depiction of nature, the progressions are never uniform, settling into an exactly recurring pattern (they alternate variously between upward and downward shifts of diatonic thirds, fourths, and fifths). Beyond the routine fact of the orchestra's differentiated spatial layout, the dynamic and timbral alternation gives the suggestion of distance, of different elements in a virtual spatial field echoing or answering each other (see ex. 1). Passages such as this or the opening of the overture offer ready corroboration to Botstein's claim that Mendelssohn "was able to depict

the sense of distance, color, light, and three-dimensional space through orchestration."<sup>44</sup>

The fact that the overture's opening appears to be little more than simply texture, tone-color, and harmony, without a distinct theme or "subject" in either musical or figurative senses, seems to support the reading of an empty, de-populated land- or seascape. However, the apparently minimal motivic content present is in fact the start of a fluid and flexible process of thematic derivation as motivic fragments from the opening figure prove to be all-pervasive throughout the rest of the piece. Mendelssohn's work is often held to be monothematic, in the sense of deriving all its material in appropriately "organic" manner from the opening motive, and close examination reveals this to be substantially the case. Without encumbering the reader with a laborious analysis of every stage of this process, some outline of the work's motivic working is nevertheless worth giving here.

Most significant is undoubtedly the alteration to the texture heard in m. 3: in contrast to the pattern in mm. 1–2 and 5–6, while the violas and first bassoon continue with motive *a*, the cellos are given instead a new ascending figure, *b*. A loose inversion of the filled-in arpeggiation (or gapped scale) of *a* that introduces a gentle rising swell into the fluid texture, it also unmistakably prepares what will become the second subject (m. 47). Not only when taken with the preceding F# of m. 2<sup>4</sup> is the contour identical, but the third to sixth notes are the same and the rhythm corresponds with the augmented values of the later theme (ex. 2). By coinciding this foretaste of the second subject with the coloristic shift to D major Mendelssohn is able to sound its notes already at the same pitch; in the time-honored traditions of organicism what appears coloristic at the opening becomes larger and form-defining later (more naturalistically, one might speak of smaller begetting larger harmonic waves). The momentary dropping out of the double bass at this point both gives gentle emphasis to the

<sup>42</sup>Vitercik, *The Early Works of Felix Mendelssohn*, 192–93, quotation from 190.

<sup>43</sup>Todd, "Of Sea Gulls and Counterpoint," 202.

<sup>44</sup>Botstein, "The Aesthetics of Assimilation and Affirmation," 27 (referring specifically to Mendelssohn's earlier *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*).

cello's new idea as it simultaneously avoids creating explicit parallel fifths with the A that is added in the clarinets and sequential ascent of the primary motive.<sup>45</sup>

As early as the seventh measure a figure is introduced in the bassoon, violas, and cellos that clearly draws on both *b* and *a* in pitch content and rhythm, introducing quicker rate of movement that persists in a further variant found in the sixteenth-note accompaniment to the consequent phrase of mm. 9–16 (*c*, 1.1<sup>cons</sup>). The original motive *a*, now in the violins, is correspondingly heard alongside the eddying accompanimental figuration (*c*) that has been derived from it. A further variant of the opening motive emerges at m. 13, being taken up as the primary material of the following phrase (1.1<sup>3</sup>, mm. 17–26). The new idea at m. 26 (1.2<sup>i</sup>) is derived from aspects of *a*, *b*, and the preceding 1.1<sup>3</sup> theme; its own tail (1.2<sup>ii</sup>, m. 29, manifesting a close similarity with motive *a*) is elaborated upon in the continuation of mm. 35–38. In the brief transition that follows, even quarter-note arpeggiations (rhythmic augmentations of the figuration *c*, as realized most clearly in the shimmering diminished seventh prolonged across mm. 21–22) provide an inversion of the contour of *b* and the impending second theme. Crucially, by starting on the unaccented second beat of the measure this figure metrically shifts the implicit anacrusis of *b*, preparing the distinctive rhythmic profile of the second subject.

The closing theme (mm. 77–93) is transparently formed from a transformation of motive *a*, being preceded by clear references back to motive *a* (into which the final phrase of the second subject links, m. 69) and triplets heard in the accompaniment at m. 33 that were derived from 1.2<sup>i</sup> (mm. 70–76). This meticulous development of motivic material continues throughout the rest of the work: new variants of these motives are heard in mm. 112–13 (mixing aspects of 1.1<sup>3</sup> and 1.2<sup>ii</sup>), mm. 131–33 (motive *a*, augmented, legato), mm. 149ff. (staccato

transformation), and mm. 182–83/186–87 in the recapitulation (a modified 1.2<sup>ii</sup> from m. 29). Though already reasonably detailed, the account above reveals only a fraction of the intricacy of Mendelssohn's compositional technique in *The Hebrides*. The sheer prevalence of material from the opening figure throughout his overture supports the aqueous impression. Like water, the opening wavelike motive permeates everywhere; the whole is constructed out of it, in different, subtly ever-changing forms.<sup>46</sup>

Growing out from the continual fluid modification of motives, at larger phrasal levels themes similarly never return in the exact same form. Tovey praises the fact that “almost without parallel [in other music] the continuation of the [first] theme is different every time it recurs.” In fact one might add that even the initial part of the first theme is different every time it is heard—and the continuation of the second theme too.<sup>47</sup> Although the opening theme has been characterized by its ascending third progression, this is only really present on its first presentation in the antecedent phrase of mm. 1–8. Even in the consequent phrase (mm. 9–16) the third progression supporting the theme is inverted into descending sixths in the upper voice, creating a pairing of phrases unobtrusively asymmetrical in their voices' register and contour. While the recapitulation does revert to the ascending thirds of the antecedent phrase, it expands the first two steps of the progression by introducing new two-measure interpolations from the first subject's second idea of m. 29 (the variant of 1.2<sup>ii</sup> discussed above), and the third harmonic stage on F# is elided with the freer continuation of the consequent phrase that breaks away from the model. Thus the recapitulated first subject is neither antecedent nor consequent nor subsidiary theme, but merges elements of all three, telescoping their thirty-eight measures into a radi-

<sup>45</sup>Parallel fifths remain implicit here, however: the cellos' D on the downbeat of m. 3 fills in for the pitch expected had the double basses ascended, although it is now approached in the part-writing from above.

<sup>46</sup>Wulf Konold has also remarked on how a sense of something constantly the same yet ever-changing in detail is akin to the sea's surface (*Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy und seine Zeit* [Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 1984], 181).

<sup>47</sup>Tovey, “The Hebrides,” 92. Tovey sees this as an indication of art rather than the mechanical, but equally one could suggest the idea of “nature” (with a nod to eighteenth-century aesthetics and Kant).

First Subject

[concluding phrase]

Second Subject

[Development]

Closing Theme

Development

Recapitulation

Example 2: Mendelssohn: *The Hebrides*, motivic working.

cally more concise fourteen-measure form. In this way, Mendelssohn is able to lead almost immediately to the second subject via a new and highly curtailed transition; initial expansion serves ultimately to the end of drastic concision. Lastly in the coda, the pattern is changed again: now rather than rising by thirds (i-III-v) the phrase *descends* by thirds (i-VI-iv), imparting a subdominant emphasis that corre-

sponds neatly to the formal-harmonic implications of this stage of a sonata design.

However, one of the most prominent ways in which Mendelssohn's music is able to suggest the shifting seascape is through the dynamic sense of movement, a property found conspicuously at both small-scale and broader phrase levels. Beyond the use of wave-like figures long considered unmistakably akin to the



actual flowing of water (the oscillating semiquavers of motive *c* being a case in point), the use of small-scale repetition imparts a curious sense of undulation. The first subject in particular is marked by a reiterative syntax where each one-measure unit is immediately repeated without change. Rather than appearing mechanical the effect (perhaps perceived bodily as much as aurally) is of a constant rocking back and forth. But at the broader phrase level, too, Mendelssohn is most adept at marshalling his different musical parameters—tessitura, dynamics, and not least harmony—to create larger dynamic swells and resulting wave-forms.

The opening period is formed of paired antecedent-consequent phrases, both of which may be characterized as forming a gradual intensification of sonority (all the while maintaining the initial *piano* dynamic) followed by brief though dynamic swell in the penultimate measure over subdominant harmony that drops quickly back to *piano*. Although the antecedent expands in register, the consequent in fact contracts from the five-octave span just attained, creating an asymmetric larger wave shape that cuts across the periodic rhyme. A continuation phrase expands the plagal swell of mm. 7 and 15 (mm. 19–20), followed by a further two measures of diminished-seventh harmony that plays a similar, albeit intensified, harmonic function to the subdominant. Every time these swells have been heard their dynamic has grown (at first simply marked as a crescendo from *p*, secondly as crescendo to *f*, finally to *ff* and diminuendo dramatically down to *pp*), and they now come more frequently and last longer. A brief calm comes upon the surface as diminished-seventh harmony alternates more functionally with the dominant in the continuation theme (mm. 27 and 31), but the interlude is short lived as the squally diminished-seventh swells return with the full power of the *fortissimo* orchestral tutti, used here for the first time (mm. 37–38 and 41–42). Only now is the temporary haven of the second subject reached.

What especially adds to the feeling of dynamic flow is Mendelssohn's evident concern with creating a sense of continuity by blurring hypermetric, phrasal and larger sectional bound-

aries through the fluid permeation of motivic material and the anticipation or prolongation of textural elements across phrases. The piece abounds in delicate nuances of orchestral texture that contribute to the musical continuity as they do to the wider poetic effect of fluidity. Whether at the smallest level internal to the phrase (such as the inconspicuous entry of the second bassoon at m. 6, a measure early), across phrases (as in the oboe's anticipatory entry at m. 152 in the development's sequential core), or at the largest structural joins (the oscillating trills marking the retransition's climax, m. 178, that persist some measures into the recapitulation [ex. 3]), such subtle desynchronizing of textural elements smooth over the articulatory "seams" of the music. Often such touches of metric or rhythmic dissonance have both a distinctly mimetic and expressive effect, such as the momentary delay in m. 23 between the accented onsets of the first and second violins, evocative of the staggered spray following the initial shock of a breaking wave, an effect both visceral and emotive, or the rhythmic distortion of the descending scale running off between first and second violins at m. 138, a tiny detail that imparts the faintest blurring or dragging of the figure's outline (see exs. 4 and 5).

All these techniques reveal Mendelssohn's remarkable creation of a music without roots or earthy foundations, one that seems constantly floating, continuous and fluid, the creation of the type of orchestral pedal that Sibelius long after would aspire to as an ideal. Conjoined with Mendelssohn's fluid process of motivic working, this wavelike shaping of phrases and the larger dynamic formed across their succession generates an irresistible musical expression of the power of the sea.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>The suggestive potential of wave forms would be taken up in the early twentieth century by energetic theorists of musical form such as Ernst Kurth. Also see Stephen Downes, "Modern Maritime Pastoral: Wave Deformations in the Music of Frank Bridge," in *British Music and Modernism, 1895–1960*, ed. Matthew Riley (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 93–94, who, taking bearings from Mendelssohn's *Hebrides*, discusses how apparently picturesque waves on the musical "surface" may become larger, structure-forming waves, articulating the work's entire form.



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Fl. I

Fl. II

Ob. I

Ob. II

Cl. I in A

Cl. II in A

Bsn. I

Bsn. II

Hn. in D

Trb. in D

Timp. in B, F

Vn. I

Vn. II

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

*dim.*

*pp*

*p*

*pp*

*pp*

*pp*

*pp*

Example 3 (*continued*)

Romantic gesture in its engagement of the natural world as a metaphoric landscape of inner life." Rather than mimesis, an objective depiction of external nature as presented to the musical "eye," it turns its eye inward, disclosing instead the truth of the subject's interior experience. Following M. H. Abrams's account of the Romantic revolution in poetry, Mendelssohn "replaces the mirror of nature with the

lamp of existential truth."<sup>50</sup> In his disingenuous remark, Wagner "failed to hear—or perhaps was threatened by the hearing of—the power of the *Hebrides's* second theme as an articulation of the emancipation from mimesis and the instantiation of musical subjectivity."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 98–99.

Example 4: Mendelssohn: *The Hebrides*, mm. 23–26 (strings).

Example 5: Mendelssohn: *The Hebrides*, mm. 137–40 (strings).

Steinberg is building on a reading offered by the philosopher Jerrold Levinson, which seeks to demonstrate how the second subject of Mendelssohn's overture may be held to express "hope"—in other words, predicating an emotion of it, a distinctly subjective quality (music's "persona" as Levinson terms it).<sup>52</sup> They are not alone: other scholars have likewise discerned a greater sense of subjective agency, of human

presence to this passage.<sup>53</sup> Although (in distinction to several of Mendelssohn's other poetic overtures) it has proven extremely difficult to read any distinct narrative into the course of *The Hebrides*, one may nevertheless detect what could be termed a gradual change of subject position across the exposition of this work. At first presenting simply a vacant backdrop without a (musical) subject, a lyric presence emerges from the rolling wash of the first subject's material through the gradual expan-

<sup>52</sup>Jerrold Levinson, "Hope in the *Hebrides*," in *Music, Art, and Metaphysics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 336–75. Steinberg's reading was set out earlier in briefer form within his essay "Schumann's Homelessness," in *Schumann and His World*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 47–79.

<sup>53</sup>See Grey, "The Orchestral Music," 472: "there may be some sense in which the second theme introduces a lyrical, reflecting subject into this natural landscape—a lyric voice or 'I' who observes and experiences it."

sion of "subjective," expressive elements, most importantly the growth of an increasingly lyrical *cantabile* line in the violins.<sup>54</sup>

The musical texture of the opening measures had been formed from the impersonal elements of the repeated one-measure wave figure and the pedals sustained over them, but already by m. 13 a variant of the wave figure in the first violins surfaces, which grows in mm. 14–16 into a more sustained melodic phrase that begins to suggest a newly lyrical mode of utterance. This idea is taken up and extended in the continuation phrase (mm. 16*ff.*), and from m. 26 a further variant (relating in part to the embryonic second-subject motive from m. 3) forms now an unmistakably melodically orientated phrase, spread out over four measures. Gradually and imperceptibly the waves have coalesced into a lyrical melody, a true "song of the spirits over the waters." Following the brief harmonic transition the second subject enters in the warm bass-baritone of the cellos and bassoons (m. 47). There is something here in the way in which the theme emerges not, as before, on the surface of the upper voices, but from within the orchestral sonority, that suggests the perception of it as something "felt" rather than just "seen," as part of the self, the very manifold on which these various perceptions are constructed, is not inapt. The register used might also imply (perhaps inevitably in the historical context) that the Romantic onlooker here, the "self," is male.

This second subject has often been considered a highpoint of Mendelssohn's overture (numerous subsequent commentators have quoted approvingly Tovey's commendation as "quite the greatest melody Mendelssohn ever wrote").<sup>55</sup> But to my ears if Tovey, Levinson, and Steinberg locate the right theme, they locate the wrong moment. This is not what Tovey so carefully designates as its "first and complete" appearance in the exposition, but rather that seemingly timeless moment in the recapitulation, where its "halcyon lyricism" finally

shines through most movingly.<sup>56</sup> Reflecting a general characteristic of sonata-form analyses, most accounts tend to pass over the rest of the work following the development rather hastily. But Mendelssohn's sonata recapitulations are nearly always quite markedly changed and often require more adequate consideration than a cursory acknowledgment of their tonal resolution. This is above all true of *The Hebrides*.

Though bearing in mind the appropriate caution expressed in their different ways by Grey and Levinson concerning the music's capacity for any strong narrative, there does seem to be, if not a "narrative," some distinct (inner) emotional progression, a trajectory closely bound up with the radiant quality of the second subject, that leads out from the naturalistic seascape of the opening to more human concerns and back again at the work's close. Without needing to overstate the precise attribution of "hope" to the second subject there is nonetheless something aspirational about the course of the exposition, an increasing sense of subjective presence that is not entirely dissipated by the turbulently triumphant measures of the more impersonal closing theme. But the initial calm of the development section (the passage of G major that briefly settles like the tranquil eye of a storm) becomes quickly clouded, and a powerful, stormy sequence builds up to the reprise. The recapitulation is given in an almost weary, resigned manner under the continuing  $\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$  oscillations of the retransition's climax (see ex. 3; a particularly lovely touch is the etiolated, watery sound of the flute's new figure in mm. 182–83). As seen, the first subject group proves to be highly truncated by enfolding the continuation phrases of the exposition into a single composite phrase. A highly expressive new transition in the strings follows directly out of it, an anguished Romantic gesture with its *cantabile* strings, its yearning octaves and appoggiatura ninths, and the plangent

<sup>54</sup>A point also made by Grey: *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>Tovey, "The Hebrides," 92; it would be hard to demure that this melody is not marvelously inspired, though there are plenty of other examples of comparable quality across Mendelssohn's oeuvre.

<sup>56</sup>The apt phrase is Lawrence Kramer's, "*Felix culpa*: Goethe and the Image of Mendelssohn," in *Mendelssohn Studies*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 67. Levinson simply comments that "it is often noted how transfigured in character this theme is in its last guise: it seems to come to us as from a distance, consoled and free of urgency" ("Hope in the *Hebrides*," 370).

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Fl. I

Fl. II

Ob. I

Ob. II

Cl. I in A

Cl. II in A

Bsn. I

Bsn. II

Hn. in D

Trb. in D

Timp. in B, F

Vn. I

Vn. II

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

*sf* *cresc.* *f* *dim.* *p* *dim.*

*sf* *cresc.* *f* *dim.* *p* *dim.*

*sf* *cresc.* *f* *dim.* *p* *dim.*

*sf* *cresc.* *f* *dim.* *p* *dim.*

*sf* *cresc.* *f* *dim.* *p* *dim.*

*sf* *cresc.* *f* *dim.* *p* *dim.*

Example 6: Mendelssohn: *The Hebrides*, recapitulation: new transition passage, second subject, and start of coda (mm. 191–218).

tones of the oboe rising above, as if crying out for something (ex. 6).

Surely the most beautiful, poignant moment in the whole overture is the recapitulation of the second subject in the clarinet—first played by one alone, then joined in thirds by its partner. “The whole thing is to be played pianissimo, with the softest possible rise and fall, as

if from an extreme distance [*aus der äußersten Ferne*]” Mendelssohn asks.<sup>57</sup> Again—as with every time this theme has been heard—the

<sup>57</sup>Letter from Mendelssohn to Franz Hauser, 14 May 1834, quoted in Thomas Schmidt-Beste, “Preventive and Cautionary Dynamics in the Symphonies of Mendelssohn and His Time,” *Journal of Musicology* 31 (2014): 88.

200

Fl. I

Fl. II

Ob. I

Ob. II

Cl. I in A

Cl. II in A

Bsn. I

Bsn. II

Hn. in D

Trb. in D

Timp. in B, F

Vn. I

Vn. II

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

*tranquillo assai*

*pp*

*p*

*pp*

*pp*

*pp*

*pp*

*pp*

*pp*

Example 6 (*continued*)

theme is changed, its phrase structure altered internally through both contraction and expansion, and with the most magical extension to its closing phrase that seems loathe to take its leave. Again, the theme is not closed but merely left uncompleted: the violins pick up the anacrusis to the *a tempo* coda of m. 217 even as the violas are softly trailing away onto their open-ended six-three, and the winds (nature, cruel, if it were not so objective and imper-

sonal) blow us away again into the stormy coda. We are offered a glimpse of happiness—a halcyon patch of calm descends on the waters, briefly warmed by the sun's descending rays—before we are blown away from this scene and place, this site of hopes and prospective happiness, forever.

In the final measures, as the *fortissimo* tutti strokes that had seemingly already ended the piece in a stern B minor continue unrelenting,

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Fl. I  
Fl. II  
Ob. I  
Ob. II  
Cl. I in A  
Cl. II in A  
Bsn. I  
Bsn. II  
Hn. in D  
Trb. in D  
Timp. in B, F  
Vn. I  
Vn. II  
Vla.  
Vc.  
Cb.

*Animato in tempo*  
*Animato*  
*p stacc.*  
*p dol.*  
*dim. un poco rit. dim.*  
*in tempo*  
*pp*  
*pp*  
*div.*  
*un poco rit. dim.*  
*sf p*  
*in tempo*  
*stacc.*  
*Animato*  
*pp un poco rit. dim. in tempo*

Example 6 (continued)

the opening wave figure filters down two octaves in the clarinet, and (in what Tovey described as “perhaps the most surprising stroke of genius”) there emerges over it a remnant of the second subject in the flute, now in the eighth-note rhythm that recalls once more its original source in mm. 3–4 (ex. 7).<sup>58</sup> Like a lone

seagull soaring up, off into the distance, the subjective “hope” of the second theme vanishes away in the flute, flown off into the moist, salt-spattered sea breeze and the grey horizon, already turning back toward the watery form from which it had grown. Laconic, understated, deeply affecting, these final measures are decidedly dark. It is as if the human, fragile subjectivity that has emerged from the opening seascape is swallowed up again inside the *per-*

<sup>58</sup>Tovey, “The Hebrides,” 93.





ture we should take into consideration not just the apparent qualities of the object of perception—the musical landscape—but also those attributable to the subject perceiving—the composer himself as well as the musical persona envisaged by Levinson. And what subjects undeniably have, which music likewise strongly relates to, is a sense of time. As much as *The Hebrides* distils an experience of place, it also implicates an experience of time, namely *memory*.

Landscape, ostensibly a spatial category, is in fact often used in nineteenth-century art to reflect on memory, on the traces of the past that the viewing subject discerns persisting in nature or the melancholy reality of the absence of what was once “there.”<sup>60</sup> The bard in Walter Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* laments:

Still as I view each well-known scene,  
Think what is now, and what hath been  
. . . that the stream, the wood, the gale,  
is vocal with the plaintive wail  
Of those, who, else forgotten long,  
Liv'd in the poet's faithful song.<sup>61</sup>

Since the Ossian craze of the later eighteenth century the Scottish landscape has in particular proved a favored site for musing on the sense of historical or mythical memory inculcated by the sense of place—a manner of translating the spatial into the temporal rather apposite in considering how the temporal art of music may, conversely, be heard to invoke the visual. Mendelssohn's famous account of the genesis of his “Scottish” Symphony inside the ruins of Holyrood Chapel just a week prior to his visit to the west coast is a perfect example of this well-established trend.<sup>62</sup> Thomas Grey

has discussed insightfully the phantasmagorical character of parts of Mendelssohn's overture, the suggestive blend of visual and mythic-Ossianic imagery arising from the warlike fanfares of the exposition's closing theme, where, in place of the natural depiction or subjective expression of the first two themes, an imagined, mythic history appears to enter the scene. Grey makes the further persuasive point that music's relative resistance to diegesis but converse aptitude for evoking atmosphere and mood is in fact perfectly suited to alliance with the Ossianic poems of Macpherson, rich as they are in atmosphere and fantastic imagery but lacking often in narrative coherence.<sup>63</sup> For the impressionable Romantic listener brought up on Ossian, the seascape becomes momentarily populated by the ghostly images of past heroes as the sounds of battle and clash of arms reverberate faintly across the virtual musical space.<sup>64</sup> In turn, Todd notes how the process of the development's opening is to “negate the brilliant, brassy sound of the fanfares, rendering them nothing more than a fleeting memory.”<sup>65</sup> Landscape falls back inward to the perceiving

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much that was and so much that is” (letter from Edinburgh, 28 July 1829, in Sebastian Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family (1729–1847): From Letters and Journals*, trans. Carl Klingemann [d.J.], 2 vols. [London: Sampson Low, 1882], I, 196).

<sup>63</sup>Grey remarks “it is generally difficult or even impossible to distinguish clearly between the ontological status of ‘picture’ (or image) and ‘story’ in this music.” “There is a story of sort encoded here,” he explains, “but, like most musical stories, it thwarts the discursive logic of narrative prose. . . . Musically, it is above all a story about the experience of viewing landscape: a progression from the objective viewing of natural phenomena (Fingal's Cave, or the Hebrides) through the imaginary projection of fragments of mythic history onto these, and back again to ‘nature’ at the end.” “*Fingal's Cave* and Ossian's Dream: Music, Image, and Phantasmagoric Audition,” in *The Arts Entwined: Music and Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Marsha L. Morton and Peter L. Schmunk (New York: Garland, 2000), 90. Levinson, earlier, had coined the term “quasi-narrational” (as opposed to “fully narrational”) to describe the diegetic qualities of Mendelssohn's overture (“Hope in the *Hebrides*,” 370–71). Todd notes that the work “has more or less successfully resisted attempts at a detailed programmatic interpretation” (*The Hebrides and Other Overtures*, 78).

<sup>64</sup>A phantasmagorical vision witnessed as early as Julius Benedict's 1850 memoir of the composer (*Sketch of the Life and Works of the Late Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy* [London: John Murray, 1850], 20).

<sup>65</sup>Todd, *The Hebrides and Other Overtures*, 82.

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<sup>60</sup>The musical signifiers of both memory and distance are based on similar musical qualities (see my discussion of the phenomenology of musical memory in *The Melody of Time: Music and Temporality in the Romantic Era* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2015], 147–53 and 222–23).

<sup>61</sup>Sir Walter Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, Canto VI: ii and V: ii, in *Poetical Works (Oxford Standard Authors)* (London: Oxford University Press, 1904), 39 and 31.

<sup>62</sup>See for instance Todd, “Mendelssohn's Ossianic Manner,” 152–53; Taylor, *Mendelssohn, Time and Memory*, 254–57. Mendelssohn had already noted two days earlier (on the sight of the ruins at Holyrood from afar) “I feel as if time went at a very rapid pace when I have before me so

subject, from thence to the imagined past, as myth, which in turn dissipates before our eyes (and ears) back into the rolling seascape.

But the notion of memory also reveals the potential for being understood as a personal memory. As with many of Mendelssohn's works, the composition of the overture was protracted across several years following the initial inspiration on the Hebridean coast. By the time he came to complete it the work could well have served as a reminder of the composer's experiences in Scotland.<sup>66</sup> More to the point, even as he conceived it he might have reflected forward on his sketch's ultimate status as a memento of the experience he was then living (in typical fashion for the historically conscious nineteenth century).<sup>67</sup> Just as a postcard or photo may serve a dual function by not only depicting a visual scene but preserving it and its associated time for the viewer's memory, Mendelssohn's overture might be thought of seeking to capture a *time* as much as a *place*. In fact one might extend this insight by interrogating further this idea of the "musical postcard." Earlier, I resisted the notion that *The Hebrides* was "merely" the equivalent of a picturesque picture-postcard as a superficially minded glossing over of the deeper meanings and ramifications of Mendelssohn's work. But a postcard, after all, does not only capture a visual image, but further serves as a memento for the subject, an aid to memory, implicating

both a specific place and a temporal location to the object depicted.<sup>68</sup>

A curious feature of the overture for those who know the slightly more obscure corners of Mendelssohn's oeuvre is the apparent echo—or foretaste, depending on exact compositional chronology—of a small figure from his Singspiel *Die Heimkehr aus der Fremde* in the recapitulation of the first subject (the variant of 1.2<sup>1</sup> interpolated within the first subject at mm. 186–87, which might already sound like a gentle memory of the fanfares of the latter stages of the exposition). This unassuming, small-scale opera was written later in 1829 as a musical gift for the marriage of Mendelssohn's sister, Fanny, with the painter Wilhelm Hensel, though in a letter from London that autumn the composer relates how he and Klingemann (the work's librettist) were working on the idea during their trip across Scotland. Larry Todd has pointed to the hermeneutic link between the two, in that the fanfare figure more familiar later in the *Hebrides* occurs when the newly returned hero, Hermann, is recounting his adventures far away during his long absence. The autobiographical connection with the composer, just returned from abroad, is obvious (although Mendelssohn, for one, was not serving on sentry duty), as is the link with memory and distance.<sup>69</sup>

At the start of his trip to the British Isles, Mendelssohn wrote to his family from London: "It is fearful! It is maddening! . . . I hardly remember the chief events and yet I must not keep a diary, for then I should see less of life, and that must not be. On the contrary, I want to catch hold of whatever offers itself to me. Things roll and whirl round me and carry me along in a vortex."<sup>70</sup> Although it is true that the composer did not keep a diary during his travels, the detailed descriptions of the countryside

<sup>66</sup>Robert Schumann picked up a similar idea concerning the even more lengthy composition history of the Third Symphony (though he famously mistook the work for an Italian and not a Scottish landscape) in his suggestive characterization: "just as when an old, yellowed page suddenly slips from an old and neglected volume, recalling to us times long past, and those times rise again to their full brilliance, so that we forget the present, so might well the master's imagination have been flooded by happy memories when he happened upon these old melodies he had once sung" (quoted in Taylor, *Mendelssohn, Time and Memory*, 259).

<sup>67</sup>Mendelssohn, of course, was one of the most historically conscious of all composers, but he was not alone in his time. "A monument is a ruin facing forwards (just as a ruin is a monument facing backwards)," Schumann noted enigmatically in 1836 (cited in John Daverio, *Crossing Paths: Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2002], 53). See also Charles Rosen's discussion in *The Romantic Generation* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 92–94.

<sup>68</sup>I am indebted to Edward Jacobson for first suggesting this idea of the musical postcard and its implications for memory in an essay on *The Hebrides*. On this idea of memory in relation to Mendelssohn's visual art, see Margaret Crum, "Mendelssohn's Drawing and the Doubled Life of Memory," in *Festschrift Albi Rosenthal*, ed. Rudolf Elvers (Tutzing, 1984), 87–103.

<sup>69</sup>Todd, "Mendelssohn's Ossianic Manner," 145–47.

<sup>70</sup>Mendelssohn, letter from London, 25 April 1829, in Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family*, I, 178.

in the letters back to his family (“musicians have seldom left us with literary descriptions of this order” observes Edward Lockspeiser),<sup>71</sup> the numerous drawings, and not least the musical ideas he briefly sketched, suggest an artist adept at moving between different realms in order to capture his lived experiences. It is here that the question of synaesthesia becomes especially instructive, for if Mendelssohn was able to perceive colors when hearing sounds (and thus presumably translate visual impressions back to sound with ease), might he not have connected other sensory modes of perception to each other? This state of affairs is already hinted at in a letter he wrote that spring before setting foot in Britain: “Next August I am going to Scotland with a rake for folksongs, *an ear for the lovely fragrant countryside*, and a heart for the bare legs of the natives.”<sup>72</sup> Notable is the apparent incongruity—if a tendency toward synaesthesia is not recognized—of hearing fragrances. Indeed throughout his letters Mendelssohn shows himself relating to music and other stimuli with multiple, often unexpected senses. Most revealing with regard to the work in question is the apparently innocuous wording of a letter a couple of years later complaining at the excessive culturation of the 1832 version—how “the so-called development *tastes* too much of counterpoint rather than of whale-oil and sea-gulls and salt-cod, and yet it should be the other way around.”<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup>Lockspeiser, *Music and Painting*, 10.

<sup>72</sup>“Nächsten August reise ich nach Schottland mit einer Harke für Volksmelodien, *einem Ohr für die schönen duftigen Gegenden*, und einem Herz für die nackten Beinieder Bewohner.” Mendelssohn, letter to Carl Klingemann from Berlin, 26 March 1829, in *Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdys Briefwechsel mit Legationsrat Karl Klingemann in London*, ed. Karl Klingemann [d.J.] (Essen: Baedeker, 1909), 51, my emphasis.

<sup>73</sup>“Die ganze sogenannte Durchführung *schmeckt* mehr nach Contrapunkt, als nach Thran und Möven und Laberdan, und es sollte doch umgekehrt sein.” Mendelssohn, letter from Paris, 21 January 1832, in *Reise-briefe von Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy aus den Jahren 1830 bis 1832*, ed. Paul Mendelssohn Bartholdy (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1861), 313, my emphasis. As with the English “taste,” “schmecken” can designate more loosely a general sensory impression—“it smacks of counterpoint” would be an alternative translation—but the literal meaning of such metaphorical use seems nonetheless revealing, especially given Mendelssohn’s apparent synaesthetic tendencies.

If music is commonly translated from the auditory to the visual, might not other sensory metaphors work equally well (the affordance is surely no more strained than that with visual landscape)? What are the implications for understanding music not only through spatial metaphors of sight but through those drawn from other senses? We might pass over taste and smell here as befitting another investigation (Mendelssohn might have tasted unsavory counterpoint in his music, but I am not acquainted with the flavor of sea-gull to make the comparison), but the idea of touch or feeling seems just as apt as sight for music. After all, music may often have an effect through its attunement to bodily qualities. Many common musical terms suggest just this: we speak for instance of musical texture—even though we don’t *touch* music. Even descriptions of tone color (the clarinets as “velvety,” for instance) seem to suggest that the preeminent concern of the sensory metaphor is in fact to convey a quality more tactile than visual. Sonorities can be piercing or soft, hard or supple, warming or cold. A number of passages in *The Hebrides* may be attributed such qualities. Think of the entry of the flutes at mm. 135–36, which seems to introduce a fresher breeze into the momentary G-major stillness at the heart of the development, the temperature suddenly cooling through the new timbre and unexpected turn to diminished harmony, or those repeated low notes in the flute at the start of the recapitulation (mm. 182–83), like the tactile sensation of softness and moistness, something tangible, textured.

What the preceding section has been driving at is the overcoming of the sharp distinction between body and mind, matter and spirit in favor of the idea of the *embodied subject*. In the first section I touched upon the rejection by phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty of the strict Kantian separation between space and time (what I termed the “classical understanding” of musical landscape), preferring instead to see the self as already a part of the world, situated bodily in an environment.<sup>74</sup> Whether

<sup>74</sup>Closer to Mendelssohn’s own world, one might likewise think of the memorable line penned by Goethe in the fifth *Roman Elegy*, “*sehe mit fühlendem Aug, fühle mit*

the term “subject” is understood here in terms of the biographical subject Mendelssohn, the listening subject experiencing his music, or the virtual aesthetic subject we are wont to read into his music (and given voice in the second subject), we might gain greater insight from considering how all three can be understood (literally and figuratively) to transcend the separation traditionally imposed between our different senses, how all are already an embodied part of the world around them, their ecology.

I would like to make the claim here that, over and above its evident aural quality and apparently more metaphorical visual properties, this music is *bodily*.<sup>75</sup> It works on its audience through a mixture of senses and intellectual modes of apprehension that may not be entirely reduced to the passive cognition of sound. Equally, landscape and our surrounding environment are not merely seen, but heard, smelt, sometimes tasted, and above all inhabited by a corporeal being that is in contact with it.

As is well known, it was not until 8 August, the day following his initial sketch for the opening of the overture, that Mendelssohn actually visited Fingal’s Cave, the location from which the final version of the overture takes its title. I have so far refrained from relating Mendelssohn’s own account of his experience of the cave. This is because there isn’t one—this overture possibly excepted. The reason we may glean from the accomplished account of his friend Klingemann: Mendelssohn was badly seasick. Although still not accustomed to sea-travel (he was similarly ill during the crossing to London that May, and cursed his earlier depiction of placid waters in *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*), Mendelssohn was nevertheless healthily athletic and a strong swimmer (he recounted

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schender Hand.” For both travelers artistic response to their new surroundings was not passive observation but tactile *experience* (in Goethe’s case possessing a new erotic dimension).

<sup>75</sup>Of course this point connects to a much larger discourse prominent in the eighteenth century concerning the body and its close relation with musical affect. What is perhaps most novel about Mendelssohn’s piece is how this bodily quality extends beyond the immediately emotional level, suggesting a greater sense of subjectivity, a self placed in critical relation to the surrounding environment.

earlier from Edinburgh that he had swum “in the deep Scotch ocean [the Firth of Forth at least], that tastes very briny”).<sup>76</sup> But nonetheless, the Atlantic swells around Staffa can cause many to feel a touch queasy, and Mendelssohn was one of their numerous victims.

*The Hebrides* overture is not just a delicate aquarelle, a disembodied postcard-painting, the work of a passive, external observer. Mendelssohn was *part* of this seascape, caught up in a vortex more literally than he might have conceived when writing his letter home from the security of Great Portland Street a few months earlier. He experienced a bodily *immersion* in the environment, in the Hebridean ecology, as he had earlier voluntarily immersed himself in the “deep Scottish ocean” by Edinburgh. Picking up on the existential quality Steinberg perceives in the overture, from a Sartrean perspective his being (“For-itself”) was so much in contact with this other (“in-itself”) that he became nauseous. In his raw experience with nature, the biographical subject Mendelssohn was overwhelmed by the overpowering force of *Being*. It is hardly surprising that the erstwhile subjectivity of the second subject of the overture is exposed to a similar, albeit more drastic, fate, swallowed up ultimately within the rolling sea.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>Mendelssohn, letter from Edinburgh, 28 July 1829, in Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family*, I, 196. He goes on to note that the sea by the small Baltic resort of Doberan “is lemonade” compared to the sea off Scotland. Presumably his sense of taste was also being used as part of this sensory tour around Scotland. (Klingemann notes in a later report the receptivity they developed for the distinctive smell of the Highlands: “Ever-memorable country! The mnemonic powers of the nose are well known, and in the same way as Walt [a character from Jean Paul’s *Flegeljahre*] could not forget auriculas, so the Highland smell will be remembered by us, a certain smoky atmosphere which every Highlander has about him. I once, while going along, closed my eyes and then correctly stated that five Highlanders had passed—my nose had seen them.” Letter from Glasgow, 15 August 1829, *ibid.*, 210.)

<sup>77</sup>It appears, however, as if Mendelssohn did once come close to drowning, suffering an attack of cramp a few years later when swimming across the Rhine at Bingen and being saved only by a passing boatman (George Grove, “Mendelssohn,” *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 4 vols. [London: Macmillan, 1879–80], II, 273; see also *The Mendelssohns on Honeymoon: The 1837 Diary of Felix and Cécile Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, together with Letters to Their Families*, ed. and trans. Peter Ward Jones [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997], 65).

Mendelssohn's work captures brilliantly, beautifully, and with great expressiveness a complex interaction between spatial qualities (place, the visual effect of light and shadow), temporal qualities (the historical and mythical past, Mendelssohn's own remembered past), and their conjunction in movement (the restless motion of the sea), implicating not only the senses of sight and sound but a wider range of impressions such as the taste and smell of salt-cod and whale-oil and the bodily sensations of a physical immersion within this environment. To the extent that Mendelssohn's overture can be seen to form a type of "musical postcard," then, it is one that does not just rely on image, not even the temporal, moving image of a musical *tableau vivant*, but one that encapsulates a wealth of dynamic, sensory, and subjective responses to place, time, myth, history, and memory. A memento that, in its very overloading of sensory impressions, threatens to overwhelm the virtual subject it constructs inside.<sup>78</sup> In short *The Hebrides*, despite its beauties, is not merely picturesque, but sublime, in the manner the diverse senses overwhelm the initial restriction to the purely visual.<sup>79</sup>

FINGAL'S CAVE: THE NORTHERN SUBLIME  
AND MENDELSSOHN'S MUSICAL ECOLOGY

It is a question that has often been asked before, but why did Mendelssohn finally grant the overture the name *Fingal's Cave*? (It has been suggested that this title was made at the instigation of his publishers Breitkopf and Härtel, but irrespective of publisher's demands it is hard to imagine Mendelssohn would have allowed the title if it had truly seemed inappropriate. However, his continued ambivalence—the work appeared in full score under the composite title *Die Fingals-Höhle (Die Hebriden)*—

suggests Mendelssohn was still not persuaded this was the perfect solution.) As mentioned, the work's initial inspiration was before he ever saw the cave, and all we know of Mendelssohn's experience that day of 8 August is that he was none too well from the Atlantic sea-swells. He seems not to have left any written account after the event about the impression the cave had made on him (the best we have is a brief note from 11 August assuring his family "what I can best tell you is contained in the above music"—the sketch of the overture he had already written).<sup>80</sup> And for the next few years he toyed with a succession of titles for the piece—*The Hebrides* (1829–30), *The Lonely Isle* (1830), *The Isles of Fingal* (1832)—none of which implicate the basalt sea cavern on Staffa. The fact that many people persist with using the *Hebrides* title (instead of simply *Fingal's Cave*) suggests that the piece is highly evocative of this general geographical area and seascape, but hardly uniquely suited to the cave on Staffa. Just like Mendelssohn's original drawing, like the various titles he considered for five years, like the final parenthetical title he retained, the music evokes a generic, grey, northern seascape dotted with lonely islands, salt sea-spray, fish, and wheeling gulls, but no specific attributes of this grotto.<sup>81</sup> So why *Fingal's Cave*?

The answer, I think, may be glimpsed through the status this cave had for the Romantics, in the poetry of Scott, Keats, and Wordsworth, in the painting of Turner. For Romantic thinkers and artists, *Fingal's Cave* was a site of the sublime, a work of nature (often explicitly revealing the presence of God), which dwarfs the puny attempts of man. This much has often been recognized, though the full implications for the meaning of Mendelssohn's music have rarely been followed through.

The shores of Mull on the eastward lay,  
And Ulva dark and Colonsay,  
And all the group of islets gay  
That guard famed Staffa round.

<sup>78</sup>In a valuable paper that to some extent prompted my reflections on *The Hebrides*, Daniel Grimley provides a suggestive reading of Sibelius's *Tapiola* along similar, albeit more drastic, lines ("Music, Landscape, Attunement," 397).

<sup>79</sup>On the question of the sublime in Mendelssohn, and the various definitions of sublime available to the nineteenth century, see further Joshua Alton Waggener, *Mendelssohn and the Musical Sublime* (PhD diss., Durham University, 2014), esp. 120–26.

<sup>80</sup>Mendelssohn, letter from Glasgow, 11 August 1829, in Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family*, I, 209.

<sup>81</sup>The designation "The Isles of Fingal" also introduces a possible note of mythic history into what is otherwise a factual designation of the Hebrides chain, but does not link specifically with Staffa.

Then all unknown its columns rose,  
Where dark and undisturb'd repose  
The cormorant had found,  
And the shy seal had quiet home,  
And welter'd in that wondrous dome,  
Where, as to shame the temples deck'd  
By skill of earthy architect,  
Nature herself, it seemed, would raise  
A Minster to her Maker's praise!  
Not for a meaner use ascent  
Her columns, or her arches bend;  
Nor of a theme less solemn tells  
That mighty surge that ebbs and swells  
And still between each awful pause  
From the high vault an answer draws,  
In varied tone prolong'd and high,  
That mocks the organ's melody.  
Nor doth its entrance front in vain  
To old Iona's holy fane,  
That Nature's voice might seem to say,  
"Well hast thou done, frail Child of clay!  
Thy humble powers that stately shrine  
Task'd high and hard—but witness mine!"—

Sir Walter Scott,

*The Lord of the Isles* (1815), Canto IV/x

This was architecture'd thus  
By the great Oceanus!—  
Here his mighty waters play  
Hollow organs all the day;  
Here, by turns, his dolphins all,  
Finny palmers, great and small,  
Come and pay devotion due,  
Each a mouth of pearls must strew.  
Many a mortal of these days,  
Dares to pass our sacred ways,  
Dares to touch audaciously  
This Cathedral of the Sea!  
I have been the pontiff-priest  
Where the waters never rest,  
Where a fledgy sea-bird choir  
Soars for ever; holy fire  
I have hid from mortal man;  
Proteus is my Sacristan.

John Keats, "Fingal's Cave" (1818)

O, for those motions only that invite  
The Ghost of Fingals to his tuneful cave  
By the breeze entered, and wave after wave  
Softly embosoming the timid light!  
. . . who at will might stand  
Gazing and take into his mind and heart,  
With undistracted reverence, the effect  
Of those proportions where the almighty hand  
That made the worlds, the sovereign Architect,

Has deigned to work as if with human Art!  
William Wordsworth, "Cave of Staffa" (1833)

Fingal's Cave, out of all the places witnessed by Mendelssohn in the Highlands and Hebrides, is the quintessential symbol of the wild, northern sublime—the locus for a primeval encounter with raw, untamed nature. In his letters Mendelssohn had revealed how the bleak highland landscape and comparatively primitive living conditions of the inhabitants had made a deep impression upon him.<sup>82</sup> One might venture that he had arrived in Scotland already susceptible to these untamed "Northern" qualities, had been looking for them, and unsurprisingly was able to find them.<sup>83</sup> Thus he was already in the mood for this type of experience before arriving on the west coast of Scotland, and seeing the sea at Oban was just the final catalyst for setting his compositional synapses firing. In all likelihood Mendelssohn was impressed the next day by the visit to Fingal's Cave, but it is surely fair to say that this was not the leading inspiration for the completed overture that bears its name. However, when the composer came to publish the full score six years later, Fingal's Cave was (if perhaps unduly specific) a neat symbol for encapsulating the wider Hebridean location, the element of historic-mythic phantasmagoria personified in

<sup>82</sup>Mendelssohn's letter from Tummel Bridge on 3 August relates the gale howling outside, the basic living conditions in the highland inn he and Klingemann put up in (alleviated somewhat by a servant-girl's offering of whisky), the rain and water everywhere (Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family*, I, 201). Also see the letter from Glasgow on 15 August in which Mendelssohn looks back on his experiences in Scotland (ibid., 209–10).

<sup>83</sup>In a similar way, Thomas Schmidt proposes Mendelssohn's wording of his account of the genesis of the Symphony No. 3 in the ruins of Holyrood Chapel in Edinburgh—of having found the beginning of his "Scottish Symphony" there—as suggesting the composer might well have gone to Scotland with the hope of such visitation from the northern muse (Schmidt-Beste, "Just How 'Scottish' is the 'Scottish' Symphony? Thoughts on Form and Poetic Content in Mendelssohn's Opus 56," in *The Mendelssohns: Their Music in History*, ed. John Michael Cooper and Julie D. Prandi [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 158). (If with all your heart ye truly seek me, ye shall ever surely find me. . . .) In the letter from Tummel Bridge cited above, Mendelssohn also praises his friend Johann Gustav Droysen for having depicted Scotland so accurately in his "Hochlands": "it is just as you describe it."



Plate 2: “. . . like the inside of an immense organ, black and resounding”:  
Fingal's Cave, Staffa (image © author).



the reference to Fingal (father of Ossian), and for underscoring the confrontation with the sublime power of nature.

By allowing the designation *Fingal's Cave*—even while suggesting his ambivalence by retaining the (in many ways more appropriate) *Hebrides* title—Mendelssohn is pointing up this confrontation as part of the broader spiritual-philosophical import of his work. This was apparently recognized even in the absence of the overture's final title. The association with wildness and the idea of the North was accentuated in a review of the English premiere, 14 May 1832, in the *Harmonicon*: "The idea of this work was suggested to the author while he was in the most-northern part of Scotland, on a wild, desolate coast, where nothing is heard but the howling of the wind and roaring of the waves; and nothing seen, except the sea-bird, whose reign there is undisturbed by human intruder."<sup>84</sup> Of course Oban and the Isles of Mull and Staffa are hardly the "most-northern" part of Scotland: the rhetorical exaggeration (apparent to us now in light of the full biographical information) obviously identifies "north" with "wild," the wilder, more savage and untamed the expression of nature is, *ergo*, the more northerly.<sup>85</sup>

Here, the comparison that has often been made with his great contemporary, Joseph Mallord William Turner, brings out an important aspect of Mendelssohn's modernity heard by Steinberg as articulated in this piece.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>84</sup>Cited in Todd, *The Hebrides and Other Overtures*, 35.

<sup>85</sup>Though to be fair to the London reviewer, the title under which the overture was then performed—"Overture to the Isles of Fingal" (i.e., the Hebrides)—and presumable absence of direct testimony from the composer left the exact provenance undetermined. Mendelssohn never made it further north than Fort William on all his travels.

<sup>86</sup>See Steinberg, "Schumann's Homelessness," 64. The connection between the two artists has often been mentioned by commentators: see for instance Lockspeiser, *Music and Painting*, 9–12, and David Jenkins and Mark Visocchi, *Mendelssohn in Scotland* (London: Chappell, 1978), 75–76. More recently, this topic has been taken up by Annett Richter with notable implications for the reading of an imperiled human subject pursued by me here ("The Visual Imagination of a Romantic Seascape: Mendelssohn's *Hebrides* Overture Revisited," paper presented at the Seventeenth Biennial Conference on Nineteenth-Century Music, University of Edinburgh, 29 June 2012). Todd notes, however, that Mendelssohn's reaction to viewing some of Turner's work in London earlier that year was distinctly negative (*Mendelssohn: A Life in Music*, 206).

Turner's oil painting of Fingal's Cave (plate 3a) was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1832—the same year as the version of Mendelssohn's work known as "Overture to the Isles of Fingal" was given its premiere in the city. Edward Lockspeiser has commented on how the indistinctiveness of Turner's painting—from an artist who famously claimed "indistinctiveness is my forte"—finds a corollary in Mendelssohn's daring proto-impressionism. In Lockspeiser's opinion, both composer and painter demonstrate "a certain vagueness or lack of precision deliberately cultivated for its own sake."<sup>87</sup> In fact the idea of indistinctiveness reveals a further point in common, in that without the title "Fingal's Cave" Turner's viewer might well not recognize that submerged behind the banks of cloud, mist, sea-spray and light there even stands this great natural wonder (compare plate 3a with plate 3b). Turner's seascape could almost be anywhere. Just as with Mendelssohn's overture, the geographic location is underdetermined within the actual artwork, having instead to be provided by the title. And just as with Mendelssohn, the fact that the artwork is supposed to be perceived in some manner as a depiction or expression of this particular site calls up the sublime import that the idea of this cave communicated to its contemporaries (a feature underscored for the Turner by printing four of the lines just cited from Scott's *Lord of the Isles* in the exhibition catalogue).<sup>88</sup>

The title "Fingal's Cave," in Turner as in Mendelssohn, calls attention to the sublime confrontation between the human and the power of the natural elements. Distinctive in both is not just the fascination with effects of color and light but also the dynamic qualities of movement. Obviously the latter is one element in which music, for so long the poor relation of visual art in conveying optical effect and color, becomes for once predominant. Turner attempts to project the sense of movement, of raw physical forces, through the dynamic power of the wind, waves, and the

<sup>87</sup>Lockspeiser, *Music and Painting*, 12.

<sup>88</sup>The passage is that spanning "Nor of a theme less solemn tells. . . . From the high vault an answer draws."



Plate 3a. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* (1831–32).  
(Oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection,  
image courtesy of the Center's website, public domain.)

streaming dirty smoke-stack of the boat battling within, attempting to capture dynamic quality of nature (*natura naturans*) in a “moving painting” (an even more dramatic and celebrated example is given in his later “Rain, Steam and Speed: The Great Western Railway” of 1844). This small, rather dirty steamship (depicted disproportionately small in relation to the true size of the landmass, seemingly dwarfed by the natural elements around) is caught amid the overpowering sweep of the elements, a fragile sign of humankind within the might of natural sublime. Water permeates almost everywhere in various forms, as sea, cloud, or mist. The lurid yellow disk of the sun (rising or setting in unlikely fashion almost due north) offers a brief suggestion of warmth, but (like the

second subject of Mendelssohn's overture) proves too weak to affect decisively the more immediate and threatening power of nature around the viewer. In the foreground some stray birds can just be made out—most conspicuous among them the lone white seagull, irresistibly calling to mind the characterization offered before of Mendelssohn's closing measures.

Just as certain aspects of Mendelssohn's music exhibit traits of color that bring it closer to painting (albeit more multifaceted than merely this), so conversely Turner's painting becomes less narrowly representational—less mimetic—and more concerned with temporal qualities of movement and subjective impression—more “musical” one might almost say. Both painting and overture are impressionistic rather than



Plate 3b. Staffa: Fingal's Cave, viewed from the south (image © author).

purely mimetic, capturing dynamic and sensory qualities as conveyed to a subject rather than focusing on any referential verisimilitude to distinct material objects; not narrative so much as symbolic of the ecology between man and nature. Obviously, over and above the inevitable distinctions between music and visual art (most clearly the fact that Mendelssohn's seascape is able to move in the same piece between calm and storm, tranquil beauty and rough violence), there are differences between the two artistic visions. Mendelssohn's work is manifestly more "beautiful" in places, and the forces of modernity glimpsed (heroically?) in Turner's rather ugly steamboat have no parallel in the composer's piece, but important for each is the larger vision of conflicting forces, of the sign of the human swallowed up within nature.

Such an interpretation underscores even better the reading offered earlier of an elemental encounter with nature, of a threatened subjectivity. In fact, we can go further, by looking at the one source of information concerning Mendelssohn's experience in Fingal's Cave, the account left by Karl Klingemann. "We were put out in boats and lifted by the hissing sea up the pillar stumps to the celebrated Fingal's Cave. A greener roar of waves surely never rushed into a stranger cavern—its many pillars making it look like the inside of an immense organ, black and resounding, and absolutely without purpose, lying there for itself alone—the wide grey sea within and without."<sup>89</sup> What stands

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<sup>89</sup>Karl Klingemann, letter of 10 August 1829, Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family*, I, 204, translation slightly altered.

out for those readers versed in Kantian aesthetics is the phrase “absolutely without purpose [*ganz, ganz zwecklos für sich allein daliegend*].” On the one hand, Klingemann’s apt characterization highlights the sublime indifference of nature: the limitation of man, who with all his efforts cannot even begin to achieve what the sea has done entirely capriciously. But nature is not supposed to be without purpose. “Nature does nothing in vain” as the old adage has it. Only art, not nature, is supposed to be without purpose (“ohne Zweck”).<sup>90</sup> For nature, it was normally assumed, reveals the work of the “sovereign Architect,” “the almighty hand / That made the worlds.”

Perhaps there is just an element here, as implicit in Klingemann’s wording as it is in the bleak close of Mendelssohn’s overture, of a more doubtful, pessimistic vision of nature without a benevolent creator underpinning it, one that offers a subtly altered perspective from the pantheistic paeans offered by the Romantic poets at this time. I don’t think for a moment Mendelssohn or Klingemann were insinuating such a worldview (even Spinoza might have hesitated on this point).<sup>91</sup> But given the stern, laconic end, with the subjective hope disappearing into the musical picture’s vanishing point, there seems nonetheless an element of this quality to the work that some audiences might pick up—an element of pessimism that could become doubt for others, a potential existential statement that later audiences might discover for themselves.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>90</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §15: the work of art is purposeful but without purpose [exhibits a “Zweckmäßigkeit aber ohne Zweck”]; *Immanuel Kant: Werke*, 12 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), X, 144.

<sup>91</sup>For instance, Mendelssohn’s account of the view from Arthur’s Seat (the large hill overlooking Edinburgh, the Firth of Forth and the sea beyond) barely a week earlier still clearly implicates a divine presence: “when God takes to panorama painting, it turns out strangely beautiful” (letter from Edinburgh, 28 July 1829, in Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family*, I, 195).

<sup>92</sup>There is clearly not the religious and spiritual affirmation of a work such as the *Lobgesang*. This is surely one of the reasons why Mendelssohn’s overture, though no more popular in the nineteenth-century Protestant heartlands of England and Germany, has never been reviled by superior twentieth-century critics in the same manner as the later piece. See further my argument in “Beyond the Ethical and Aesthetic: On Reconciling Religious Art with Secular

Everything comes from water, to which it will return, confides the most ancient philosophy. Modern science has tended to agree with the first idea, at least in terms of life on this planet. In its own way, Mendelssohn’s overture would seem to resonate with this long-held wisdom.

*The Hebrides* works on multiple levels through complex, multifaceted modes of poetic suggestion. Todd rightly calls it “the most elusive of Mendelssohn’s overtures,” a work which “remains protected by its shadowy sonorities, and yet it arouses a variety of impressions . . . in which various elements, now visual, now literary, freely co-mingle.”<sup>93</sup> This overture is at once a scene painting, a phantasmagoric reflection on the mythic past, an emotional journey of the inner life, and a critical piece of musical ecology concerning the relation of humanity within nature. It engages not only with the external world, or with the external world as reflected through the senses to the perceiving subject, but tells of the fragile status of the latter within the former. In fact, what makes the work both Romantic and singularly modern is due in part to its uncompromising portrayal of the interaction between these two elements, external nature and the perceiving subject. Mendelssohn creates an immersive projection of the wild, northern sublime, containing a message of sublime import within the ostensibly beautiful-mimetic depiction of the sea. And last but not least, as Donald Tovey and Hans Keller have insisted, the work is also a perfectly formed piece of instrumental music.<sup>94</sup>

Yet all the elements suggested above continuously flow into each other, fluidly underpinned by the almost constant presence of the

Art-Religion in Mendelssohn’s *Lobgesang*,” in *Mendelssohn, the Organ, and the Music of the Past: Constructing Historical Legacies*, ed. Jürgen Thym (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014), 288–310.

<sup>93</sup>Todd, *The Hebrides and Other Overtures*, 83.

<sup>94</sup>Keller famously avers that “all the sea-gulls and salt-fish in the Hebrides did not prevent Mendelssohn from designing a complex sonata structure such as many a fantastically ‘absolute’ musician would have been proud of, and if the sea-gulls helped, so much the better” (“The Classical Romantics: Schumann and Mendelssohn,” in *Of German Music: A Symposium*, ed. H. H. Schönzeler [London: Oswald Wolff, 1976], 207); Tovey, “The Hebrides,” 90.

work's opening figure or some derived oscillating figuration. It was argued before that *The Hebrides* is perhaps *the* quintessential landscape piece owing to the fact that it is predominantly a seascape. Water, as this mutable, shapeless thing that may assume many forms, corresponds perfectly to the art of music with its amorphous substance and dynamic sense of flow. We might even say that Mendelssohn's overture, in its various meanings, reflects the protean nature of the sea itself. The sea is a typical symbolic boundary in the nineteenth century, between life and death, the known and unknown, as in Caspar David Friedrich's depictions of figures gazing out over the twilight into the dim unknown in "Mondaufgang am Meer," Arnold's "sea of faith," the poetry of Longfellow, Whitman, and Tennyson's "crossing the bar." Water also forms a perfect symbol of the century's restless modernity, a quality reflected in the "haunted restlessness" of Mendelssohn's first subject and personified in Mendelssohn's life, which similarly would exhaust itself through overwork and be extinguished within a few short decades.<sup>95</sup>


In the end, what remains of Levinson's "Hope in the Hebrides"? Does the second subject soaring off in the flute offer some distant glimmer of possibility, or is this just a case of our anthropomorphizing the music, projecting the desire for hope onto this nonhuman object, like the seagull in Turner's painting, like the haunting image of a tree at the end of Angelopoulos's film *Landscape in the Mist* alluded to in my title?

Karl Klingemann leaves us with an eloquent description of the two young friends journeying south on the return leg of their Scottish tour, leaving the Hebrides, Oban, Mull, Staffa, and the Highlands behind them.

At last we issued from the Highlands, longing for the warm sun, which we had not seen for days . . . driving through level country and cheerful villages.

<sup>95</sup>The term is again Kramer's, "*Felix culpa*," 67.

. . . The sun did really shine out here from the blue sky, only over the Highlands black clouds were hanging; but the longer and oftener we looked back, the bluer and more misty grew the mountains . . . and we might have become Highland-sick and wished ourselves back had we not known that the reality within that mountain land was gray, cold, and majestic.<sup>96</sup>

The human subject can sometimes perceive what he or she wants to perceive, in nature as in art. Both Klingemann and his companion knew better than to believe this. Mendelssohn would never return to the Hebrides. 

<sup>96</sup>Klingemann, letter from Glasgow, 15 August 1829, in Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family*, I, 211.

### **Abstract.**

Mendelssohn's overture *The Hebrides* or *Fingal's Cave* is regularly considered the musical landscape (or seascape) painting *par excellence*. Scarcely another work has such an unerring capacity to suggest the wide horizons, delicate nuances of changing color and light, the ceaseless rolling of the ocean breakers and freedom of the sea. Nevertheless, despite the popularity of this idea of musical landscape since the early nineteenth century, it is far from clear analytically or phenomenologically how the predominantly aural and temporal experience of music might convey a sense of visual space that would appear central to the perception of landscape. This article explores Mendelssohn's archetypal example of the musical seascape in order to unravel these concerns. After briefly charting the philosophical reefs that encircle this issue, I examine how the aural may nevertheless translate to the visual, and thus how music might create its own, virtual landscape. Traveling beyond this, however, we reach the limits of mimesis and the visual for explaining Mendelssohn's overture, uncovering his music's implications for mythic-historical and personal memory, synaesthesia, and the embodied subject. Ultimately I argue for a more ecomusicological understanding of Mendelssohn's work as embodying a critical reading of a fragile human subjectivity within nature, an immersive projection of the wild, northern sublime. Keywords: Mendelssohn, *Hebrides* Overture, musical landscape, embodied subject, musical ecology, northern sublime