FRIDAY 12 MARCH 2021, 7pm
National Concert Hall

DEIRDRE McKAY	*Meltwater*
MENDELSSOHN	Symphony No. 3, 'Scottish'

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra
Jaime Martín conductor
Presented by **Paul Herriott**, RTÉ lyric fm

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PROGRAMME NOTES

DEIRDRE McKAY b. 1972
Meltwater (string orchestra, c.12')

The desolate beauty of our planet's most extreme and inhospitable landscapes, like a winter freeze, took captivity of this piece.

In turn, it answers to the invocation of the ice world, as pared and fragile as its pulsing meltwater edge: diaphanous shards, floating, in its cathedral spaces.

Meltwater was commissioned by the Irish Chamber Orchestra, with the support of the Arts Council of Ireland, An Chomhairle Ealaíon, and premiered by the orchestra in 2009, conducted by Jaime Martín.

Programme note © Deirdre McKay

FELIX MENDELSSOHN 1809–1847
Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Op. 56 'Scottish' (1842)

i.   *Andante con moto – Allegro un poco agitato –*
ii. *Vivace non troppo –*
iii. *Adagio –*
iv. *Allegro vivacissimo – Allegro maestoso*

Mendelssohn's experiences on his tour of Scotland in July 1829 provided the direct inspiration for both the Hebrides Overture, also known as *Fingal's Cave,* and the 'Scottish' Symphony. The 'Scottish' is now known as Mendelssohn's Third Symphony, but was in fact the last completed of his five symphonies for full orchestra. It had a long period of gestation beginning with his visit to Holyrood Castle in Edinburgh, the former palace of Mary Queen of Scots. The dark brooding scene and historical resonance left an indelible impression on the young composer's imagination. Describing the scene he writes: 'This evening at twilight we

went today to the palace, where Queen Mary lived and loved...The chapel below is now roofless. Grass and ivy thrive there and at the broken altar Mary was crowned Queen of Scots. Everything is ruined, decayed, and the clear heavens pour in. I believe I have found today in that old chapel the beginning of my Scotch Symphony.'

Despite this inspiration, his trip to Italy in the winter of 1830–1831 dispelled the Scottish gloom and Mendelssohn concentrated instead on composing his bright and exuberant 'Italian' Symphony, now known as No. 4. In a letter of March 1831 he refers to the fact that he has been 'compelled to put aside the Scotch Symphony, as I am unable to return to the Scottish mists.' It was to take a further ten years before he turned his attention to the completion of the Symphony. The first performance took place in Leipzig in 1842 with Mendelssohn himself conducting. The first London performance later that year was so successful that Mendelssohn dedicated the work to Queen Victoria, who was a great admirer of his music.

One of the unusual characteristics of the Symphony is that while it is in the standard four movements, they are intended to follow each other without a break, creating a sense of unity and continuity. While the music never directly quotes Scottish folk melodies, it is nonetheless imbued with the character of both the music and the dramatic landscape.

The first movement opens with a long expansive introduction, the main theme of which Mendelssohn devised at Holyrood. This theme, heard initially in the winds and violas, occurs in varied form throughout the movement. The main theme of the *Allegro* is introduced by the strings and first clarinet and its dance-like rhythmic contour plays a major role in the development of the movement. A second subsidiary theme is given to the clarinet, as a counterpoint to the main theme in the strings. All these musical ideas are treated to an elaborate development and recapitulation before the movement returns to the slow opening theme, following which a few quiet chords act as a link to the second movement.

With its light-hearted themes and vigorous rhythmic impetus, the second movement has the character of a scherzo. The first of the two main themes sounds like a Scottish folktune due to its use of the pentatonic scale and snappy rhythm. Once again, the melody is entrusted to the principal clarinettist. It is soon taken up by the flutes and oboes, before a vigorous version from the full orchestra leads to the second theme. This consists principally of a downward staccato passage in the strings. The elaborate working out of this material follows and once more leads directly to the *Adagio*.

The third movement, *Adagio,* alternates between two contrasting themes, both of which are anticipated in the brief introduction. Here, the first violins present fragmentary phrases of a melancholy song-like melody. Each phrase is answered by a quiet fanfare in the horns and woodwinds. In its juxtaposition of these two contrasting ideas and orchestral colours, the introduction presents the entire movement in miniature. The cantabile theme is immediately presented in full by the first violins, its mournful demeanour somewhat offset by the pizzicato of the remaining strings. The return of the fanfare figure has the quality of a stately procession and reaches a dramatic climax on full orchestra. Both themes recur with varied treatment before dissolving in the coda; fragments of the song-like melody now in the clarinets, while the rhythm of the march is gently intoned on the timpani.

The robust and energetic finale bursts on the scene without a break, its main theme introduced on violins suggestive of the rugged landscape. A somewhat quieter second subject on oboes and clarinets nonetheless retains the rhythmic impetus that is such a marked feature of the movement. The coda shifts into the major key with a new theme, which displays a close affinity with the opening hymn-like theme of the entire Symphony and brings the work to a truly majestic conclusion.

Programme note by John Buckley © RTÉ