

Happy Birthday, Felix

Every year Santa Barbara Music Club picks a single composer to honor during one of its semi-monthly free concerts at the Public Library. The obvious choice for 2008 was Felix Mendelssohn, the German musician who is now one of the most popular of the Romantic era, 200 years after he was born.

Being that it's Mendelssohn's bicentennial, the birthday boy has received tributes all over town, from the nearly 3,000 people who took in Santa Barbara Symphony's time-to-coincide with Valentine's Day concerts last weekend at the Granada, to the Santa Barbara Chamber Orchestra (it focused on Mendelssohn last October) and Camerata Pacifica, which played the composer's String Quintet in B Flat Major the first weekend of the month.

But the most intimate, by far the least expensive (it's absolutely free!) and we dare say the most personal approach to the great composer is still to come. Veteran Santa Barbara pianist **Betty Oberacker** has put together a multifaceted program featuring unusual selections from the Mendelssohn repertoire, which will be performed this Monday afternoon at the Faulkner Gallery under the auspices of SBMC.

"Mendelssohn is one of my absolute favorites," Oberacker said earlier this week. "He's very popular but he's also highly underestimated. He's not given credit for the astonishing things he did in

musical innovations as well as for supporting the modern composers of his day—Schumann, Chopin and Liszt; he was actually largely responsible for their success."

Winning personality aside, it's Mendelssohn's music that captures the ear, and Oberacker—professor emeritus at both UCSB and Ohio State—has arranged to play on all three pieces that will be performed, which range from the commonly heard to the obscure.

The concert concludes with Trio No. 1 in D minor, Op. 44, where the pianist will be joined by Westmont College music professor **Philip Ficsor** on violin and UCSB's **Geoffrey Rutkowski** on cello. ("They're calling us 'The Three Professors,'" Oberacker joked, referring to a take-off on The Three Tenors.) "It's his most famous chamber music work, a substantial piece of music that is very popular."

Preceding the trio is a group of six songs that are rather unfamiliar to most listeners, Oberacker said. She and baritone **Andre Shillo**, who have sung with Opera Santa Barbara since 1996, culled through the catalogue and selected the half-dozen that will be performed.

"Even I, as a vocal accompanist, only knew one of the songs, 'On Wings of Song,' which is by far the most well-known. But they are just gorgeous. No wonder Brahms loved them and in fact quoted from those utterances in his own music."

The opening work of the concert—four selections from "A Midsummer Night's Dream,"

including the overture, plus the scherzo, nocturne and wedding march—will be familiar to nearly everyone, but not in its current guise, Oberacker said.

"It's very, very famous as an orchestral work. But we're doing it as a Piano Four-Hands piece, which is how Felix originally wrote it at 17, for himself and his sister Fanny to play. It's unlikely you'll ever hear it that way again. I've played the trio a few million times, but I've never even heard this done this way before."

Although Oberacker clearly has lots of book smarts to back up her approach to the music, her enthusiasm is even more apparent. Which is why the pianist and so many other talented professional musicians in the area who make a living toiling in the pit at the opera or other paying gigs leap at the chance to play for free for the SBMC.

"All of us should try to give back to the community," she said. "But the bigger thing is I just love to play. My earliest memory at three years old is that I went right to piano and I've been doing it ever since."

Her love for the upcoming Mendelssohn program could hardly be contained.

"Mendelssohn is so melodious," she said. "I think this concert will appeal to people who don't even normally go to hear classical music. It's going to be glorious. We can hardly wait."