

In Praise of Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Introduction - Rick Ruecking

Lighting the Chalice --- for Felix Mendelssohn and his Fanny Hensel, devoted brother and sister and splendid musicians

Joys and Sorrows - Rick

1. Song without Words, Op. 30, Nr. 3 - Doleta and Rosemarie on accordions

A. Felix Mendelssohn was born in Germany, in 1809, four years after his sister Fanny. His mother started teaching him the piano when he was six years old, he started giving public concerts when he was nine, he started composing music before he was ten, and he was a famous composer by the time he was twenty. He spent most of his life in Berlin. Rosemarie Lester also grew up in Berlin, and she got a good musical education there. Did you play much Mendelssohn when you were a girl, Rosemarie?

. . . . People lose a great deal from racial prejudice, not only those who are the objects of prejudice but those who hold the prejudices.

Felix wrote lots of what he called "Songs without Words," something that might seem to be self-contradictory but really was not. Doleta and Rosemarie just played one. Felix wrote them for the piano, and I think he would not like to have them played on the accordion. Emily Owens will now play one on the piano, as Felix intended.

2. Emily Owens, Song Without Words, Op. 102, Nr. 3

B. Felix wrote only one violin concerto, but it is one of the best every written. It is written in the key of E minor. Sad music is often written in a minor key, but Mendelssohn and the other great composers knew that it was possible to express great joy in the minor key. Allison Owens will now play a passage from that great concerto.

3. Allison Owens, theme from the Violin Concerto.

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Children can now leave for RE classes

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C. Felix' grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, was an important figure in the German Enlightenment. He was born in 1729 in Dessau, about 50 miles from Berlin, and moved to Berlin in 1742 to seek a Jewish education. Berlin was then a walled city, and Jews were permitted to enter only two of the gates --- and then only if they had a satisfactory reason. Moses' native tongue was Hebrew, and he knew little German, although he went on to become a famous stylist in German. Moses wanted to be a philosopher. He was a follower of Leibniz, the rationalist, and a friend of important philosophers such as Immanuel Kant. Moses represented

part of the first phase of Jewish assimilation in Germany. He became German without abandoning Judaism. He wrote about Judaism as a kind of Enlightenment religion, stressing its ethics. His friend Ferdinand Lessing portrayed him in a famous play titled "Nathan the Wise," in which Lessing expressed his doctrine of the equal value of all of the religions of civilized people. Moses published books that I am unlikely ever to read on such topics as the existence of god and the immortality of the soul.

Moses couldn't make a living as a scholar. He became manager of a silk factory and was relatively prosperous. He had some political influence, and on occasion he used his influence to protect Jewish communities in various parts of Germany. Some Jews were suspicious of his orthodoxy. His reputation might have saved him from being excommunicated from the Jewish community, as Spinoza had been about a century earlier.

Abraham, Felix' father, was the seventh child of Moses and his wife Fromet. He went into banking in Hamburg with his brother. At some risk to themselves, they helped the Prussian state against the French on the Napoleonic wars; the state was grateful, and this gratitude helped make the Mendelssohns rich. Abraham moved to Berlin shortly after Felix was born. He had Felix and Fanny baptized as Christians in 1816, and he himself converted six years later. (Only two of Moses' children remained Jewish in religion.) I think Abraham converted partly as an expression of German patriotism. And partly it was taking Lessing to heart: if all religions are equally valuable, one might as well adhere to the dominant form. (Perhaps quote his letter in Jacob, p. 25.)

Our next piece appropriately celebrates the coming of Spring.

4. Choir, The First Day of Spring

F. Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy was rich, talented, and enormously successful. He was a great pianist and conductor as well as a composer. He was acquainted with all sorts of famous people. As a boy he visited and was a friend with the aging Goethe. He played music for, and had conversations with, the kings of Prussia as well as Queen Victoria and Prince Albert of England. He sat in on lectures given by the great philosopher Hegel and dined with him, and later in London dined with Charles Dickens. He was acquainted with most of the famous musicians of his day, and friends of most of them --- Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, Wager.

He liked all of the arts, including drama. Shakespeare had been translated into German by Johann von Schlegel, the brother-in-law of one of his aunts. One can imagine Felix composing the Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream, sitting in the garden of his parents' Berlin home in the summer of 1826. Susan will play a piano version of part of that work.

5. Susan, Nocturne from a Midsummer Night's Dream.

[6. Bar Park, "On Wings of Song"]

References: Heinrich Eduard Jacob, **Felix Mendelssohn and His Times** (1963) --- most useful.
R. Larry Todd, ed., **Mendelssohn and His World** (1991), esp. the essay by Leon Botstein.
Alexander Altmann, **Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study** (1973) (dreadfully boring)
Rudolf Elvers, ed., **Felix Mendelssohn: A Life in Letters** (1990) (not very useful)

G. Richard Wagner was one of Mendelssohn's musical acquaintances who turned out to be anything but a friend. In 1850, two years after Mendelssohn's death, Wagner, writing under an assumed name (Karl Freigedank), published a tract on JUDAISM IN MUSIC. He argued that the penetration of Jews into German musical life had done immense harm, that the real enemy was the assimilated, not the ghetto Jew. The Jews took a superficial approach to German art; they were impotent, not creators but imitators and frauds. They could entertain us by novelties and acrobatic tricks. Let me quote a couple of passages from the essay:

Jacob, p. 331

Botstein, p. 16

The problem is in the very nature of the Jews: they are a wandering people, and have an incapacity for real, organic, rooted life.

There is something obviously true about the wandering Jew. Jews, including Mendelssohn, have often been quite cosmopolitan. Felix could combine knowledge of this with his own German nationalism. Here is from a letter written to his father after having travelled through the countries of Europe for several years:

Thinking of what you proposed to me before my departure, and commanded me to keep in mind --- that I ought to look carefully at different countries in order to choose the one in which I would like to live and work....it gives me a joyful feeling to be able to say to you now that I have done so. THE COUNTRY IS GERMANY; I am quite sure about that now within myself. (Jacob, pp. 127f)

Mendelssohn consciously sought to put music in the service of German nationalism. Partly this meant recovering Germany's past. He ~~was~~ was very important in recovering Bach's music for his Germany. In 1829 he conducted a performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion in Leipzig and Berlin, ~~the~~ the first time such music had been performed in more than 50 years. It was difficult to get permission to use the music, the hall, and the performers, but it turned out to be triumphant. Mendelssohn went on to be an important conductor and organizer of musical life in Germany. As a composer he tried to ~~revivify~~ revivify the oratorio form of Bach and Handel. But his ~~nationalism~~ nationalism was an inclusive nationalism. His first great oratorio was one on St. Paul. That is, a convert to Christianity, one who universalized Christianity by removing the boundaries separating gentile and Jew.

Richard Wagner's German nationalism was of a different kind. His musical career was to recover old German myths and present them in a new and musically revolutionary form--- in operas like Tristan und Isolde, the Ring series, and Parsifal. The difference shows up in his regard for Bach. ~~While for Max~~ Schumann wrote that Bach provided him with a grammar and moral framework, and Mendelssohn would have agreed. Bach disagreed:
 quote Jacob, p. 223.

There was a personal element in ~~Wagner~~ Wagner's attack on the music of Mendelssohn. Wagner had a lifelong obsession with Mendelssohn that included strong elements of envy and resentment. Unlike Mendelssohn, Wagner lost his father early and had little family --- he once professed delight in this. Wagner had no early success as performer or composer, he was poor in his early career.

This personal resentment could be combined with classical antisemitism. After the defeat of the French revolution, ~~German~~ the ~~nationalists~~ German's found it difficult to link liberalism with nationalism. While it was difficult for nationalists to directly attack the royalty, their hostility could be displaced on the Jews, who were often supported by the royalty. While Germany industrialized late, ~~capitalism~~ national and world markets had deeply penetrated into Germany by 1848. The workers most strongly affect by this national and international competition were most likely to participate in the revolutions of that year, a revolution in which Richard Wagner participated. The Jews, who were heavily involved in banking, could be attacked as emblematic of capitalism.

Felix Mendelssohn was aware of these antisemitic currents. He never disavowed his ~~and~~ his Jewish heritage and his Jewish ancestry. He chose to sign his works Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Bartholdy being a name his father added when converting to Christianity. But, as his father once wrote to Felix, anyone using the name 'Mendelssohn' made his ethnic background fairly clear.

Felix saw no inherent antagonism between his Jewish origins and his German nationalism. He loved the German language and ~~was~~ set many of the German romantic poets to music. ~~The recorder group will now play one of those settings,~~
~~the recorder group will now play one of those settings,~~
 The recorder group will now play one of those settings, Abschiedslied der Zugvogel. After we play it once, you are welcome to join in singing the German verses. (It turns out that the English version on the back of your program prepared by Doleta and I don't quite fit

the meter.)

7. Recorder group and congregation, Abschiedslied der Zugvogel...

H. Fanny Hensel (only if there's time)

Felix was very close to his sister Fanny, who deserves a program of her own. As children they studied music together. Throughout his life he would submit his compositions to her before publishing them or having them performed. And he did the same for her compositions.

She married Wilhelm Hensel in 1821. He was an artist, and the family initially disapproved of the proposed marriage, sending him off to Rome for a year or so. But it was a happy marriage. Felix married Cecile, of Huguenot origins, in 1836, and he became a devoted family man. Cecile and he had 5 children in their 11 years of marriage.

It wasn't easy for Wilhelm Hensel and Cecile to marry into such a tightly knit family. I think there were elements of jealousy: Felix and Fanny could communicate in ways that would exclude Wilhelm and Cecile. But in general they got along famously.

I think Fanny was probably as talented a performer and composer as Felix. But this accomplished pianist gave only one public performance in her life, a benefit concert in 1836. The gifted composer lived to see the publication of only 42 of some 400 works. ~~Wxxxx~~ Her first six songs were published in early collections of Felix, coming out under his name. (When people complemented Felix on them, he wasn't shy about saying they were written by his sister.)

Fanny was a victim of her times. The men in the Mendelssohn family felt it was inappropriate for a woman of her station to be a professional musician. They belonged in the household as wife, mother, and hostess. This is the way Felix put it in a letter to Mme. Bigot, their childhood music teacher:

quote Reich, p. 93 top.

(It was different if a woman really had to work. They knew Clara Schumann and felt it was all right for her to pursue a career as performer and composer. Clara had to, first having a husband who was insane, then being a widow with a large family.)

~~xxxxxx~~ But, despite these patriarchal sentiments, Felix really respected and loved his sister. Just as she was contemplating a public career, Fanny died of a stroke in May of 1847. Felix collapsed on hearing of this and never recovered his own health. He died of a stroke in the following November.

There was a big funeral and widespread public mourning after his death.

But Richard Wagner was victorious in his later attacks on the music of Mendelssohn, and it lost favor in the later 19th century. Later critics tended to agree with Wagner. Even George Bernard Shaw, a really important critic, argued that at its best his music was merely touching, tender, and refined. Shaw decried Mendelssohn's "kig-glove gentility, his conventional sentimentality, and his despicable oratorio mongering." (Botstein, p. 6)

Then, when the Nazis came to power in Germany, his music was banned. It is only after 1945 that there has been more general recognition of the greatness of his music.....although those old prejudices die hard.

Let me give the last words to the program to Mendelssohn himself. They are words about words and music. (letter of 1842)
quote Jacob, p. 185.

8. Doleta, Song without Words, Op. 30, nr. 3

Rick: Introduction of visitors, etc.