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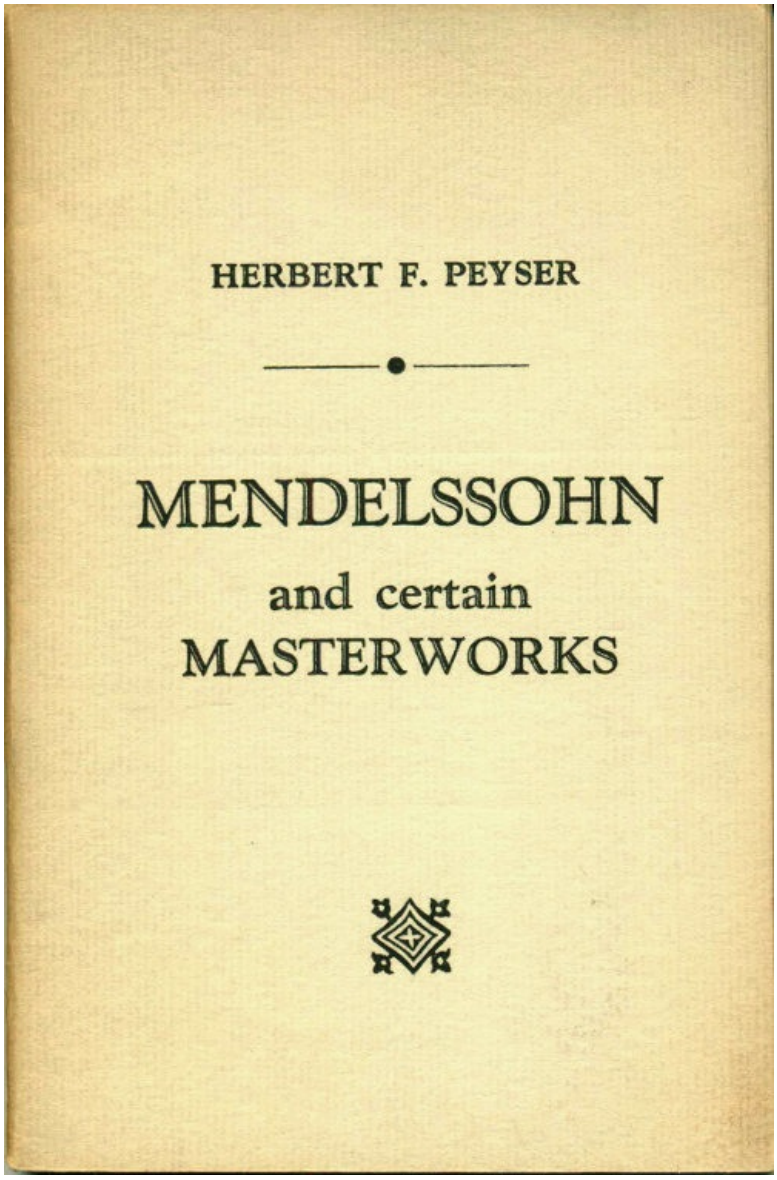

HERBERT F. PEYSER

MENDELSSOHN
and
Certain Masterworks

Written for and dedicated to
the
RADIO MEMBERS
of
THE PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY
SOCIETY
of NEW YORK

113 West 57th Street
New York 19, N. Y.

Mendelssohn.
Sketch by Carl Mueller, 1842.

FOREWORD

In the compass of the present pamphlet it is impossible to give more than a cursory survey of Mendelssohn's happy but extraordinarily crowded life. He was only slightly less prolific a composer than such masters as Bach, Mozart or Schubert, even if he did not reach the altitude of their supreme heights. But irrespective of the quality of much of his output, the sheer mass of it is astounding, the more so when we consider the extent of his travels and the unceasing continuity of his professional and social activities, which immensely exceeded anything of the kind in the career of Schubert or Bach. In these few pages it has not been feasible to mention more than a handful of his more familiar compositions which happen, incidentally, to rank among his best. The reader will find here neither a detailed record of Mendelssohn's endless comings and goings nor any originality of approach or appraisal in the necessarily casual comments on a few works. If the booklet encourages him to listen with perhaps a fresh interest to certain long familiar scores, now that a full century has passed since the composer's death, its object will have been achieved.

H. F. P.

Mendelssohn and Certain Masterworks

By
HERBERT F. PEYSER

In 1729—the year of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion"—a humble Jew of Dessau on the Elbe, Mendel by name, became the father of a boy whom he called Moses. Mendel was something of a scholar as the times went, but desperately poor. He kept body and soul together by running a small Hebrew day-school and transcribing the Pentateuch. His infant son might know the pangs of hunger but he should have the boon of a sound education. The training was begun almost before the child could walk. Mendel would rout him out of bed at three or four on winter mornings, fortify him with a cup of tea and carry him, wrapped in a shawl, to a public seminary where he was put in charge of the learned Rabbi David Frankel.

Moses showed himself an extraordinarily gifted pupil. For one thing, he was consumed by a restless spirit of inquiry. He set about making an exhaustive study of the Scriptures, read voraciously, acquired languages with uncanny facility and, before he was ten, composed Hebrew verses. Nothing influenced him so deeply as Maimonides' "The Guide of the Perplexed". But the intensity of his intellectual occupation was such that he fell prey to a nervous malady which deformed his spine for life. He bore his ailment with the patience of Job and was never heard to complain. "If Maimonides weakened my body", he had a habit of saying, "has he not made ample atonement by invigorating my soul with his sublime instructions?"

According to a traditional Jewish manner of forming a surname Moses called himself "Son of Mendel"—in German, "Mendels Sohn"—albeit he long alluded to himself as "Moses Dessauer". When Rabbi Frankel transferred his activities to Berlin his disciple, though only fourteen, followed him on foot. Hunger, sickness, deprivations, bitter antagonisms, far from breaking the youth's spirit, deepened his perceptions and broadened his vision. He wrote and studied with fanatic zeal and in the fullness of time developed into one of the greatest scholars and philosophers of the age. The poet Lessing was one of his intimates. His work, "Phaedon, or the Immortality of the Soul", gained such currency that it was translated into every language of Europe.

Moses Mendelssohn endured without a murmur the numberless hardships and disabilities to which the German Jews of the period of Frederick the Great and his tyrannical father were subjected. One of the most preposterous of these regulations obliged every Jew when he married to buy a certain amount of chinaware from the royal porcelain factory in Berlin, whether he needed it or not. Not even the choice of articles was left to him, so long as the factory manager decided the place was overstocked. In this way Moses Mendelssohn when in 1762 he took to wife Fromet, daughter of Abraham Gugenheim, of Hamburg, acquired twenty life-sized china apes which had been found unsaleable. Much later the apes became valued family heirlooms.

The domestic happiness and tranquility he had never known in his youth were at last to be the philosopher's portion. Moses and Fromet had a considerable family, though only six of the children—three sons and three daughters—survived to maturity. Moses himself died in Berlin at 57. Longevity, as it proved, was not to be a trait of the Mendelssohns.

Of the three sons the second, Abraham, was destined to play a role in musical history. True, he was not himself a trained musician although he had very sensitive artistic instincts; and he labored under a mild sense of inferiority, which used to find expression in his whimsical phrase: "Formerly I was the son of my father, now I am the father of my son". In any case he had not to endure anything like the paternal struggles and poverty. Of his boyhood not much is known. But in his twenties he was sent to Paris and worked for a time as cashier in the bank of M. Fould. When he returned to Germany he entered a banking business founded in Berlin and Hamburg by his brother, Joseph. It was possibly on his trip home that he met his future wife, Leah Salomon. If marriages are made in heaven this match assuredly could boast a celestial origin! Leah Salomon was an wholly unusual

woman. She came of a Berlin family of wealth and position, she was exquisitely sensitive and cultured and, although she strictly limited her singing and playing to the home circle, was a musician of gifts quite out of the ordinary. Moreover, she drew, was an accomplished linguist (she even read Homer in Greek, though only in the privacy of her boudoir, lest anyone suspect her of “immodesty”), and dressed with studied simplicity. Among Leah’s elaborate virtues was her tireless devotion to her mother. She kept house for her and granted her a substantial income.

Small wonder that such a union was blessed with exceptional offspring. Of the four children of Abraham and Leah Mendelssohn, Fanny Cäcilie, Jakob Ludwig Felix and Rebecka saw the light at Hamburg, in the order named. The youngest, Paul, came not long after the family had removed to Berlin. It may not be inappropriate to call briefly into the picture at this point Leah’s brother, Jacob Salomon Bartholdy, if for no other reason than to account for a surname which formed an adjunct to part of the Mendelssohn family, including the composer. Salomon, a distinguished art critic who spent his later years in Rome as Prussian consul-general, had embraced Protestantism (despite a traditional curse launched by his mother) and adopted the name “Bartholdy” after “the former proprietor of a garden belonging to the family”—a garden which subsequently passed into the hands of Abraham Mendelssohn. It was Salomon Bartholdy who at length persuaded his brother-in-law to procure for his children what Heinrich Heine had called “a ticket of admission to European culture”—in short, conversion to the Christian faith. To distinguish between the converted members of the family and those who clung to their old belief “Bartholdy” was henceforth affixed to “Mendelssohn”. In time, Abraham and Leah followed their children into the Lutheran faith, Leah adding to her own name those of Felicia and Paulina, in allusion to her sons.

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Felix was born on Friday, Feb. 3, 1809, at 14 Grosse Michaelisstrasse, Hamburg. Long afterwards the place was marked by a commemorative tablet above the entrance, a tribute from Jenny Lind and her husband. Curiously enough, the violinist Ferdinand David, Felix’s friend and associate of later days, was born under the same roof scarcely a year after. Hamburg became an unpleasant place during the occupation by Napoleon’s troops and in 1811, soon after the birth of Rebecka, the family escaped in disguise to Berlin where Abraham, at his own expense, outfitted a company of volunteers. The Mendelssohns took up residence in a house belonging to the widow Fromet. It was situated in what was then an attractive quarter of north-eastern Berlin, on a street called the Neue Promenade that had houses on one side and a tree-bordered canal on the other. It offered a spacious playground for the children and the singer, Eduard Devrient, recalled seeing Felix play marbles or touch-and-run with his comrades.

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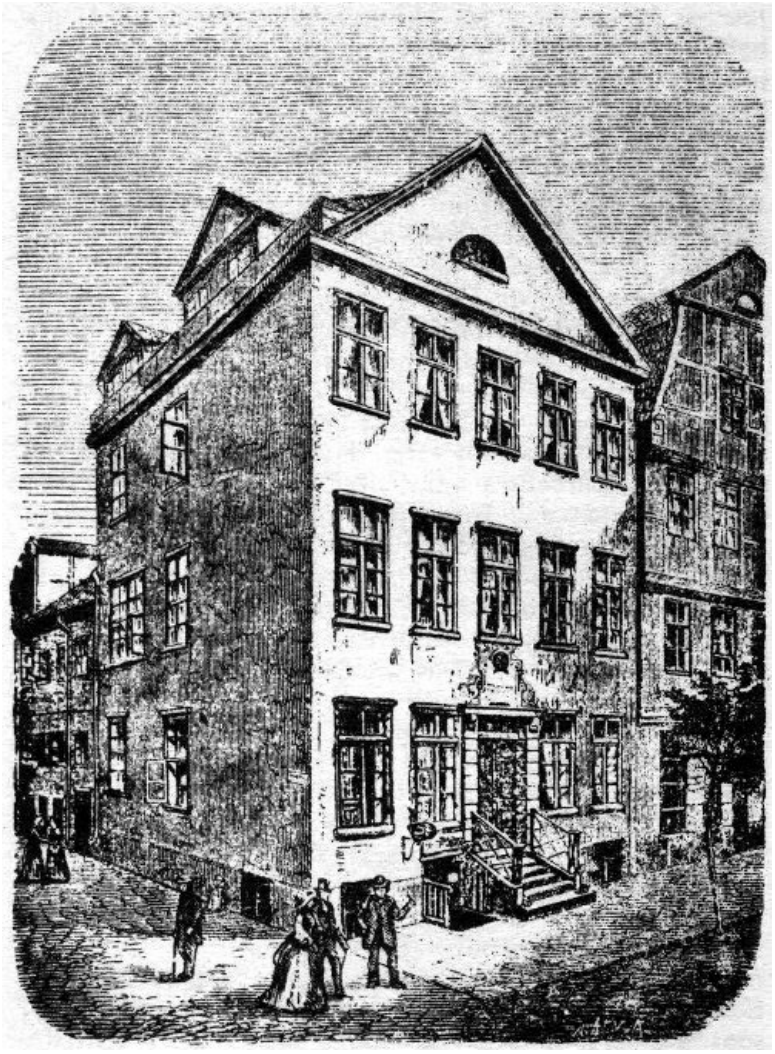

MENDELSSOHN’S BIRTHPLACE IN HAMBURG

Abraham Mendelssohn, having severed the partnership with his brother, started a banking business of his own which soon prospered famously. Somehow even the myriad cares of running a bank did not prevent the

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father from scrupulously overseeing the education of his sons and daughters. If the young people were virtually bedded on roses, Abraham was of too strong a character and, indeed, too much of a martinet not to subject them to the discipline of a carefully ordered routine. Wealth and ease did not cause him to forget the privations and the conflicts which helped to forge the greatness of his own father's soul. His children need not hunger, they need not be denied opportunities to develop what talents nature had bestowed on them. But given such opportunities they must labor unremittingly to make the most of them. They had to be up and about at five in the morning and, shortly after, repair to their lessons. Felix always looked forward to Sundays when he could sleep late! In some ways one is reminded of the manner Leopold Mozart supervised the training of Wolfgang and Nannerl. If Abraham Mendelssohn was not, like Father Mozart, a practising musician, he had an artistic insight which nobody valued higher than Felix himself. "I am often unable to understand", he wrote his father when he was already a world celebrity, "how it is possible to have so accurate a judgment about music without being a technical musician and if I could only say what I feel in the same clear and intelligent manner that you always do, I should certainly never make another confused speech as long as I live". It is easy to believe that some of the adoration Felix felt for his father above all others grew out of his unbounded respect for the older man's intellectual superiority.

Business connected with war indemnities associated with the Napoleonic conflicts obliged Abraham in 1816 to go to Paris and on this journey he took his family with him. Felix and Fanny were placed for piano instruction under a Madame Marie Bigot de Morogues and both appear to have profited. Their first piano lessons had been given them at home by their mother who, in the beginning restricted them to five minute periods so that they ran no risk of growing weary or restive. Fanny no less than her brother disclosed an unusual feeling for the keyboard at an early age and even when she was born Leah noted that the infant seemed to have "Bach fugue fingers".

When the Mendelssohns returned to Berlin the young people's education was begun systematically. General tuition was administered by Karl Heyse, father of the novelist; the painter, Rösel, taught drawing, for which Felix exhibited a natural aptitude from the first; Ludwig Berger, a pupil of Clementi's, developed the boy's piano talents, Carl Wilhelm Henning gave him violin lessons and Goethe's friend, Carl Zelter, taught thorough-bass and composition. Nor were the social graces neglected. Felix learned to swim, to ride, to fence, to dance. Dancing, indeed, was one of his passions all his life. Father Mendelssohn always found time to supervise his children's studies and to guide their accomplishments. For that matter he never considered his sons and daughters—even when they grew up—too old for his discipline; and, certainly, Felix welcomed rather than resented it. 10

On Oct. 28, 1818, the boy made his first public appearance as pianist. The occasion was a concert given by a horn virtuoso, Joseph Gugel. Felix collaborated in a trio for piano and two horns, by Joseph Wölfl. He earned, we are told, "much applause". But Abraham, though pleased, was not the man to have his head turned by displays of precocity, shallow compliments or noisy acclamations. Neither did Zelter flatter his pupil on his never-failing facility. No problem seemed excessive for the boy, who could read orchestral scores, transpose, improvise—what you will. "Come, come", Zelter would grumble contemptuously, as if these feats were the most natural thing in the world, "genius ought to be able to dress the hair of a sow and make curls of it!" Yet to Goethe he made no effort to conceal his satisfaction. "Felix is a good and handsome boy, merry and obedient", he confided in a letter; "his father has brought him up the proper way.... He plays piano like a real devil and is not in the least backward on string instruments...". And the crusty contrapuntist saw to it that the ten-year-old genius entered the Singakademie and sang among the altos where he could learn to know, inside and out, works by Palestrina, Bach, Handel and lesser masters, distinguish between styles and observe the minutest technicalities of fugal construction.

It was only natural that Felix should, at this stage, have tried his own hand at composition. He wrote to his father, in Paris, asking for music paper. Abraham took the request as the text for a mild sermon: "You, my dear Felix", he admonished his son, "must state exactly what kind of music paper you wish to have—ruled or not ruled; and if the former you must say distinctly *how* it is to be ruled. When I went into the shop the other day to buy some, I found that I did not know myself what I wanted to have. Read over your letter before you send it off and ascertain whether, if addressed to yourself, you could execute the commission contained in it". Sooner or later he must have gotten his music paper for in 1820, when Felix began to compose, it is figured that he wrote fifty or sixty movements of one sort or another, solo and part songs, a cantata and a comedy. In every instance his methodical training caused him to inscribe the work with the exact date and place of its composition—a practice which saved no end of doubt and conjecture in later years, the more so as Felix remained quite as systematic his life long. These scores (of which he kept a painstaking catalogue) are headed in many cases with the mysterious formula "L.v.g.G." or "H.d.m.", which though never satisfactorily deciphered, reappears again and again in his output. 11

Some of these compositions, together with several by Fanny were dispatched to Abraham in Paris. The father was particularly pleased with a fugue and wrote home: "I like it well; it is a great thing. I should not have expected him to set to work in such good earnest so soon, for such a fugue requires reflection and perseverance". He was perturbed over his daughter's composing, though he appreciated her talent. It was well enough, he declared, for Felix to take up music as a profession but Fanny must bear in mind that a woman's place is in the home. As a warning example he points to the sad end of Madame Bigot, who busied herself professionally with music and now is dead of consumption!

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Mendelssohn at the age of eleven.
Sketch by an unknown artist.

In 1821 there took place in Berlin an event which stirred the musical world of Germany to its depths—the first performance of Weber's "Der Freischütz". The composer, who supervised the rehearsals, was generally accompanied by his young friend and pupil, Julius Benedict. One day while escorting his master to the theatre, Benedict noticed a boy of about eleven or twelve running toward them with gestures of hearty greeting. "'Tis Felix Mendelssohn!" exclaimed Weber delightedly, and he at once introduced the lad to Benedict, who had heard of the remarkable talents of the little musician even before coming to Berlin. "I shall never forget the impression of that day on beholding that beautiful youth, with the auburn hair clustering in ringlets round his shoulders, the look of his brilliant, clear eyes and the smile of innocence and candour on his lips", wrote Benedict much later in his "Sketch of the Life and Works of the late Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy". Felix wanted the pair to visit the Mendelssohn home at once, but as Weber was expected at the opera house he asked Benedict to go in his stead. "Felix took me by the hand and made me run a race till we reached his house. Up he went briskly to the drawing-room where, finding his mother, he exclaimed: 'Here is a pupil of Weber's, who knows a great deal of his music of the new opera. Pray, mamma, ask him to play it for us'; and so, with an irresistible impetuosity, he pushed me to the pianoforte and made me remain there until I had exhausted all the store of my recollections". 13

A more spectacular event in Felix's young life was his first visit to Goethe, in Weimar, the same year. It was Zelter who, anxious to acquaint the poet with his prodigious young pupil, had engineered the meeting. Felix had never gone anywhere without his parents and the family was not a little concerned about this expedition. He was plied with no end of advice before setting out, told how to behave at table, how to eat, how to talk, how to listen. "When you are with Goethe, I advise you to open your eyes and ears wide", admonished Fanny; "and after you come home, if you can't repeat every word that fell from his mouth, I will have nothing more to do with you!" His mother, for her part, wrote to Aunt Henrietta (the celebrated family spinster, "Tante Jette"): "Just fancy that the little wretch is to have the good luck of going to Weimar with Zelter for a short time. You can imagine what it costs me to part from the dear child even for a few weeks. But I consider it such an advantage for him to be introduced to Goethe, to live under the same roof with him and receive the blessing of so great a man! I am also glad of this little journey as a change for him; for his impulsiveness sometimes makes him work harder than he ought to at his age." 14

The Mendelssohns need not have worried. The old poet took the boy to his heart from the first. Nor was Felix remiss about communicating his impressions. "Now, stop and listen, all of you", he writes home in an early missive which forms part of one of the finest series of letters any of the great composers has left posterity. "Today is Tuesday. On Saturday the Sun of Weimar, Goethe, arrived. We went to church in the morning and heard half of Handel's 100th Psalm. After this I went to the 'Elephant', where I sketched the house of Lucas Cranach. Two hours afterwards, Professor Zelter came and said: 'Goethe has come—the old gentleman's come!' and in a minute

we were down the steps and in Goethe's house. He was in the garden and was just coming around a corner. Isn't it strange, dear father, that was exactly how you met him! He is very kind, but I don't think any of the pictures are like him....

"Every morning I get a kiss from the author of 'Faust' and 'Werther' and every afternoon two kisses from my friend and father Goethe. Think of that! It does not strike me that his figure is imposing; he is not much taller than father; but his look, his language, his name—they are imposing. The amount of sound in his voice is wonderful and he can shout like ten thousand warriors. His hair is not yet white, his step is firm, his way of speaking mild...."

Felix made much music for the poet's enjoyment. Every day he played him something of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven or compositions of his own (he had even brought some of Fanny's songs for Goethe's daughter-in-law, who had a pretty voice). "Every afternoon", wrote Felix, "Goethe opens the Streicher piano with the words: 'I haven't heard you at all today; make a little noise for me'; then he sits beside me and when I am finished (I usually improvise), I beg him for a kiss or else I just take it!" Once Felix played a Bach fugue and suffered a slip of memory. Nothing daunted he went on improvising at considering length. The poet noticed nothing! At other times he would sit by the window listening, the image of a Jupiter Tonans, his old eyes flashing. And when the boy finally left Weimar Goethe missed him sorely. "Since your departure", he lamented, "my piano is silent. A solitary attempt to waken it to life was a failure. I hear, indeed, much talk about music but that is only a sorry diversion". A certain classical symmetry and a halcyon beauty in the boy's music and in his performances seem to have appealed to a deep-seated element of the poet's nature. When some time afterwards Felix dedicated a quartet to him, Goethe accepted it with a letter of fulsome praise. Yet when poor Schubert about the same period sent him a number of his finest Goethe settings the Olympian did not even deign to acknowledge them! 15

Leah Mendelssohn, delighted with the letters Felix was writing from Weimar, proudly forwarded them to Aunt Jette, in Paris. "If God spare him", replied that worthy person, "his letters will in long years to come create the deepest interest. Take care of them as of a holy relic; indeed, they are already sacred as the effusion of so pure and child-like a mind. You are a happy mother and you must thank Providence for giving you such a son. He is an artist in the highest sense, rare talents combined with the noblest, tenderest heart...." The good woman spoke prophetically! Not all of Mendelssohn's letters have been preserved and some of them were withheld out of scruples which today are rather difficult to appreciate. Whether the anti-Semitic excesses of the Nazi regime spared those portions of the correspondence not previously given to the world is still unknown. Perhaps we shall never read it in all its inundating fullness. There were times in his short life when he wrote as many as thirty-five letters in one day! At any rate, those we have are precious. 16

It must not be imagined that Felix's numerous boyhood compositions served student ends primarily. This early spate of symphonies, concertos, songs, piano and organ pieces, chamber music and what not furnished matter for regular family musicales. The Mendelssohns had for some time been in the habit of holding miscellaneous concerts on alternate Sunday mornings in the big dining room of the house on the Neue Promenade. In these the young people participated and invariably some work or other by Felix made up a part of the program. Felix and Fanny usually played piano, Rebecka sang, Paul played cello. Felix also conducted and had at first to be placed on a stool so that his small figure could be seen. Little operas and operettas varied the programs, the boy being the author of four of them. These "operas" were not given in costume or with any attempt at dramatic, action. The characters were duly assigned and sung, but the dialogue was read and the chorus sat grouped around a table. The listeners offered their opinions freely, Zelter (who never missed one of these events) commending or criticising, as the case might be.

On Felix's fifteenth birthday, Zelter suddenly rose and, "in masonic phraseology", promoted his pupil from the grade of "apprentice" to that of "assistant", adding that he welcomed him to this new rank "in the name of Mozart, of Haydn and of old Bach". This last name was significant. For a little earlier the boy had received as a Christmas present a score of the "St. Matthew Passion" transcribed by Zelter's express permission from a manuscript preserved in the Singakademie. Henceforth the "assistant" was to immerse himself in this music and it was the exhaustive study of the treasurous score which resulted a few years later in the historic revival of the work an exact century after its first production under Bach's own direction.

The summer of 1824 Felix for the first time saw the sea. His father took him and Rebecka to Dobberan, on the Baltic, a bathing resort in the neighborhood of Rostock. Here he received those first marine impressions which in due course were to shape themselves musically in the "Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage" and "Fingal's Cave" Overtures. For the moment, the scope of this inspiration was less ambitious. He wrote for the military band at the local casino an overture for wind instruments ("Harmoniemusik"), which stands in his output as Op. 24. It is sweetly romantic music, with a dulcet *andante con moto* introduction that has a kind of family resemblance to the softer phraseology of Weber, a spirited, vivacious *allegro* forming the main body of the piece. 17

But the "Harmoniemusik" Overture was only an incident of the creative activity marking the year 1824. The chief composition of the time was the Symphony in C minor, which ranks as Mendelssohn's First. Actually, it is his thirteenth in order of writing, though for conventional purposes the preceding twelve (for strings) may pass for juvenile efforts. We may as well record here that, irrespective of the dates of the composition, the official order of Mendelssohn's symphonies is as follows: The Symphony-Cantata in B flat (the so-called "Hymn of Praise", dated 1840) stands as No. 2, the A minor ("Scotch"), written between 1830 and 1842, as No. 3, the A major ("Italian"), composed in 1833, as No. 4, and the "occasional" one in D minor, known as the "Reformation Symphony" (1830-32), as No. 5.

The Mendelssohn family was outgrowing the old home on the Neue Promenade and late in the summer of 1825 Abraham bought that house on Leipziger Strasse which was henceforth to be inalienably associated with the composer. If it had its drawbacks in winter the spacious edifice with its superb garden (once a part of the Tiergarten) was ideal at all other seasons. The so-called "Garden House" was one of its most attractive features and became the scene of those unforgettable Sunday concerts where a number of new-minted masterpieces were

first brought to a hearing. The young people published a household newspaper, in summer called the "Garden Times", in winter the "Tea and Snow Times". Pen, ink and paper were conveniently placed and every guest was encouraged to write whatever occurred to him and deposit it in a box, the contributions being duly printed in the little sheet. These guests included the cream of the intellectual, social and artistic life of Europe who chanced to be in Berlin. It was a point of honor to be invited to the Mendelssohn residence. 18

To this period belongs Felix's operatic effort "Die Hochzeit des Camacho" ("Camacho's Wedding"). The text, by Karl Klingemann, a Hanoverian diplomat who played a not inconsiderable role in Mendelssohn's life, was based on an episode from "Don Quixote". The story has to do with the mock suicide of the student, Basilio, to rescue his beloved from the wealthy Camacho. Possibly the little work would never have been written but for the ambitions of Leah Mendelssohn to see her son take his place among the successful opera composers of the day. Having embarked upon the scheme Felix went about it with his usual zeal. But the piece was played exactly once, and in a small playhouse, not at the big opera. Although there were many calls for the composer he seems to have sensed a defeat and left the theatre early. It was not long before he lost interest in the work altogether.

However, better things were at hand to obliterate the memory of the check suffered by "Camacho's Wedding". For we are now on the threshold of the composer's first mature masterworks. It must be understood that there was really no relation between Mendelssohn's years and the extraordinary creations of his adolescence. In point of fact, his creative mastery at the age of sixteen and seventeen is maturity arrived at before its time. That preternatural development, as remarkable in its way as Mozart's, is the true answer to the problem why the later creations of Mendelssohn show relatively so little advance over the early ones. We can hardly believe, for instance, that the F sharp minor Capriccio for piano or the Octet could have been finer if written twenty years after they were. How many not familiar with the respective dates of composition could gather from the music itself that the incidental pieces fashioned for the "Midsummer Night's Dream" by royal command came fully seventeen years after the immortal Overture? The whole might have been created at one sitting, so undiscoverable is any sign of cleavage. 19

The Octet for strings, finished in the autumn of 1825 represents, perhaps, the finest thing Mendelssohn had written up to that point. It is a masterpiece of glistening tone painting, exquisite in its mercurial grace and color, imaginative delicacy and elfin lightness. The unity of the whole is a marvel. But the pearl of the work is the Scherzo in G minor, a page as airy and filamentous as Mendelssohn—whose scherzos are, perhaps, his most matchless achievements—was ever to write. Not even the most fairylike passages in the "Midsummer Night's Dream" excel it.

Before passing on to the last-named, however, we must not fail to signalize the "Trumpet" Overture, composed about the same time (which Abraham Mendelssohn liked so much that he said he should like to hear it on his deathbed); the Quintet, Op. 18, the Sonata, Op. 6, the songs of Op. 8 and 9, the unfailingly popular Prelude and Fugue in E minor, of Op. 35. Let us not be confused, incidentally, by opus numbers in Mendelssohn which have as little to do with priority of composition as they have in the case of Schubert.

Felix and Fanny read Shakespeare in translations of Schlegel and Tieck. Their particular favorite was the "Midsummer Night's Dream". In August 1826, in the delightful garden of the Leipziger Strasse home the youth of seventeen signed the score of an Overture to the fantastic comedy which, as much as anything he was to write, immortalized his name. The famous friend of the family, Adolph Bernhard Marx, claimed to have given Felix certain musical suggestions. Be this as it may, the Overture was something new under the sun and not a measure of it has tarnished in the course of an odd 130 years. It was first performed as a piano duet and shortly afterwards played by an orchestra at one of the Sunday concerts in the garden house. 20

Felix entered the University of Berlin in 1826 and offered as his matriculation essay a translation in verse of Terence's "Andria". Nevertheless, he seems to have had no time to bother about a degree. Music was absorbing him completely, especially his weekly rehearsals of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" with a small choir. The more intimately he penetrated into this mighty work the keener became his desire to produce it at the Singakademie. Together with his friend, Eduard Devrient, he divulged his scheme to Zelter, only to be rebuffed. Spurred by the energetic Devrient he returned again and again to the attack, till Zelter finally weakened. Having carried the day Mendelssohn left the Singakademie jubilantly exclaiming to the elated Devrient: "To think that it should be an actor and a Jew, to give this great Christian work back to the world!" It was the only recorded occasion on which Mendelssohn alluded to his Hebraic origin.

Three performances were given of the "St. Matthew Passion" at the Singakademie—the first on March 11, 1829, a century almost to a day since the original production in the Leipzig Thomaskirche. Mendelssohn conducted the first two. It was the real awakening of the world to the grandeur of Bach, the true beginning of a movement which has continued undiminished right up to the present. Fanny spoke more truly than perhaps she realized when she declared that "the year 1829 is likely to form an epoch in the annals of music".

Scarcely had Mendelssohn restored the "St. Matthew Passion" to the world than he left Berlin for the first of those ten trips he was to take to the country that was to become his true spiritual home. Abraham Mendelssohn having finally decided his son might safely adopt music as a means of livelihood resolved to let him travel for three years in order to gain experience, extend his artistic reputation and settle on the scene of his activities. Felix was not averse to the idea. Already he was feeling some of those pin-pricks of hostility which Berlin, for reasons of jealousy or latent anti-Semitism was to direct against him in years to come. It was Moscheles who counseled a visit to London, where another friend, Klingemann, filled a diplomatic post. 21

Mendelssohn's first Channel crossing was not calculated to put him in a pleasant frame of mind. He was seasick, he had fainting fits, he quarrelled with the steward and solemnly cursed that "Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage" Overture he had composed scarcely a year earlier. The boat trip lasted almost three days! Luckily his friends had found him comfortable quarters in London, at 103 Great Portland Street. At once it developed that he and London

were predestined for each other. The metropolis both appalled and enchanted him. “It is fearful! It is maddening!”, he wrote home; “I am quite giddy and confused. London is the grandest and most complicated monster on the face of the earth. How can I compress into a letter what I have been three days seeing? I hardly remember the chief events and yet I must not keep a diary, for then I should see less of life.... Things roll and whirl round me and carry me along as in a vortex”.

He had arrived at the height of the season. The wife of Moscheles took him about in a carriage (“me in my new suit, of course!”) He went to the opera and to the theatre, saw Kemble in “Hamlet” and was incensed at the way Shakespeare was cut. Still “the people here like me for the sake of my music and respect me for it and this delights me immensely”. He made his first London appearance with the Philharmonic on May 25, 1829, and even at the rehearsal found two hundred listeners on hand, “chiefly ladies”. The program contained his C minor Symphony, though later an orchestrated version of the scherzo from the Octet was substituted for the original minuet. J. B. Cramer led Mendelssohn to the stage “as if I were a young lady”. “Immense applause” greeted him. This was soon to be an old story. When people spied him in the audience at a concert someone was sure to shout: “There is Mendelssohn!”; whereupon others would applaud and exclaim: “Welcome to him!” In the end Felix found no other way to restore quiet than to mount the stage and bow.

22

He played piano for the first time in London at the Argyll Rooms on May 30. His offering was Weber’s “Concertstück” and he caused a stir by performing it without notes. One might say he was heard *before* the concert—for he had gone to the hall to try a new instrument several hours earlier but, finding it locked, seated himself at an old one and improvised for a long time to be suddenly roused from his revery by the noise of the arriving audience. Whereupon he dashed off to dress for the matinee in “very long white trousers, brown silk waistcoat, black necktie and blue dress coat”. Not long afterwards he gave concerts with Moscheles and with the singer, Henrietta Sontag. The Argyll Rooms were so crowded that “ladies might be seen among the double basses, between bassoons and horns and even seated on a kettle drum”.

London life, for that matter, seemed made to order for Felix, the more so as he was received with open arms by those influential personages to whom he brought letters of introduction. Yet the whole spirit of London was vastly to his taste. Writing later from Italy he confided to his sister that, for all the luminous atmosphere of Naples, “London, that smoky nest, is fated to be now and ever my favorite residence. My heart swells when I even think of it”!

The admiration was mutual! England of that age (and for years to come) adored Mendelssohn quite as it had Handel a century earlier and peradventure even more than it did Haydn and Weber. Musically, the nation made itself over in his image. And Felix loved the rest of the country as he loved its metropolis. The London season ended, he went on a vacation in July, 1829, to Scotland, accompanied by Klingemann. The travelers stopped first at Edinburgh, where they heard the Highland Pipers and visited Holyrood Palace. Like any conventional tourist Felix saw the apartments where Mary Stuart lived and Rizzio was murdered, inspected the chapel in which Mary was crowned but now “open to the sky and ... everything ruined and decayed; I think I found there the beginning of my ‘Scotch’ Symphony”. And he set down sixteen bars of what became the slow introduction in A minor. It was to be some time, however, before the symphony took its conclusive shape. If Holyrood quickened his fancy “one of the Hebrides” (which he saw a few days later) struck even brighter sparks from his imagination. A rowboat trip to Fingal’s Cave inspired him to twenty bars of music “to show how extraordinarily the place affected me”, as he wrote to his family. He elaborated the overture—than which he did nothing greater—in his own good time and recast it before it satisfied him. For in the first form of this marine mood picture, he missed “train oil, salt fish and seagulls”. Yet the twenty bars he set down on the spot form its main subject.

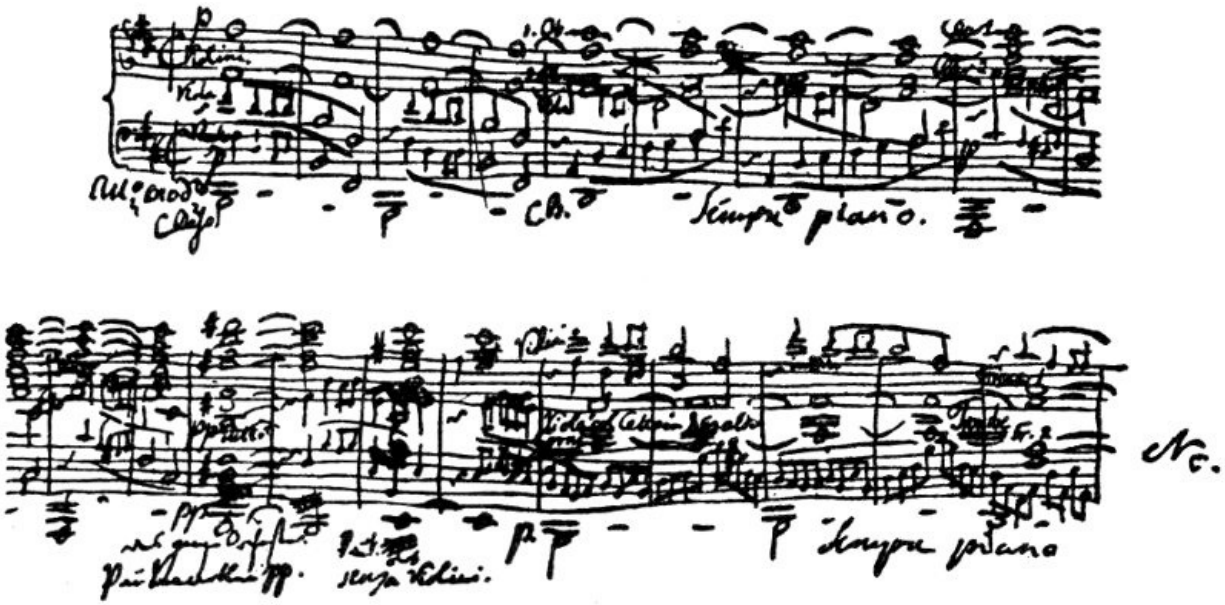
23

Back in London his mind was occupied with numerous compositions, among them the first stirrings of the “Scotch” and “Reformation” Symphonies and the “Hebrides” Overture. But before developing these he wanted to write an organ piece for Fanny’s marriage to the painter, Wilhelm Hensel (whom Leah Mendelssohn had put on a five years’ “probation” before she consented to give him her daughter’s hand!); and a household operetta for the approaching silver wedding of his parents. Klingemann wrote the libretto of this piece (“Heimkehr aus der Fremde”, which the critic Chorley in 1851 Englished as “Son and Stranger”). It contained special roles for Fanny, Rebecka, Devrient and Hensel—the last-named limited to one incessantly repeated note, because he was so desperately unmusical.

Hebrides, August 7, 1829.

24

> *... in order to make you understand how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me, the following came into my mind there:*



Felix returned to Berlin for the parental festivities. But Fanny's wedding he missed, having injured his leg in a carriage accident and being laid up for two months. He might, had he chosen, have accepted a chair of music at the Berlin University in 1830, but he preferred to continue his travels. It seemed almost a matter of routine that he should stop off at Weimar to greet Goethe once more. He may or may not have suspected that he was never to see the poet again. Another friend he visited was Julius Schubring, rector of St. George's Church in Dessau. Nürnberg, Munich, Salzburg, the Salzkammergut and Linz were stations on the way to Vienna, where his enjoyment was poisoned by the depressing level of musical life and the shocking popular neglect of masters like Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. He made a side trip to nearby Pressburg to witness the coronation of the Austrian crown prince as King of Hungary. The most exciting incident of the day was the smashing of Mendelssohn's high hat by a spectator whose view it obstructed! 25

Italy was another story. "The whole country had such a festive air", he wrote in one of the first of those Italian letters which are among the gems of his correspondence, "that I seemed to feel as if I were myself a prince making his grand entry". To be sure, there was not much music worth listening to and he was horrified by some of the things he heard in the churches. But there were the great masters of painting, there was the beauty of the countryside, the unnumbered attractions of Venice, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Naples, the fascination of Italian life and the charm of the Italian people. He heard the Holy Week musical services in the Sistine Chapel with works of Palestrina, Allegri and lesser men; wrote long and detailed letters to Zelter about the technical aspects of church singing in Rome, composed industriously, saw his boyhood playmate Julius Benedict and became acquainted with a wildly eccentric young French musician named Berlioz. On his way northward, in Milan, Felix met Beethoven's friend, Dorothea von Ertmann; also, Karl Mozart, whom he delighted by playing some of his father's music.

With his incredible dispatch he had managed to accomplish a great amount of creative work in Italy, despite his social and sight-seeing activities. He had finished a version of the "Hebrides" Overture, had made progress with his "Scotch" and "Italian" Symphonies, written a Psalm, several motets, the "First Walpurgis Night" (later recast), piano pieces, songs. Returning to Germany via Switzerland he stopped off in Munich and gave a benefit concert on Oct. 17, 1831. It was for this event that he composed his G minor Piano Concerto. In a letter to his father Felix referred to it, somewhat contemptuously, as "a thing rapidly thrown off". It has been assumed that Mendelssohn may have had Paris in mind composing this concerto. At any rate, the first three months of 1832 found him once more in the French capital, where he made new musical acquaintances. One of these was the conductor, Habeneck; others, Chopin, Liszt, Ole Bull, Franchomme. Yet Mendelssohn found it difficult, even as he had earlier, to adjust himself to some musical insensibilities of Paris. He was appalled on one occasion to learn that his own Octet was given in a church at a funeral mass commemorating Beethoven. "I can scarcely imagine anything more absurd than a priest at the altar and my Scherzo going on", he wrote his parents. Habeneck, who had him play at one of the Conservatoire concerts, wanted to produce at one of them the "Reformation" Symphony, which Felix had composed in 1830 for the tercentenary of the Augsburg Confession. The performance never took place; the orchestra disliked the work, finding it "too learned, too much fugato, too little melody". 26

Were these objections wholly unfounded? Irrespective of what passed in those days for excessive "learning" the "Reformation Symphony" is, in good truth, a stodgy work, far more willed than inspired. The most engaging thing in it is the citation in the first movement of that "Dresden Amen" formula, which half a century later Wagner was to employ in "Parsifal". Strangely enough, some pages of the symphony sound like Schumann without the latter's melodic invention. It is only just to point out that the composer himself came to detest it, declared it was the one work of his he would gladly burn and refused to permit its publication. 27

Zelter died not long after Goethe and the Singakademie found itself without a head. Mendelssohn seemed his old teacher's logical successor and he would gladly have accepted the post. But many of the old ladies of the chorus did not take kindly to the idea of "singing under a Jewish boy". When it came to a vote Felix was defeated by a large majority and one Karl Rungenhagen installed as Zelter's successor. Rather tactlessly the Mendelssohns resigned their membership in a body. Felix's popularity in Berlin was not improved by the situation, despite the family's wealth and influence. He said little but the wound rankled, somewhat as happened earlier over Berlin's rejection of "Camacho's Wedding".

The Cäcilienverein, of Frankfort, asked the composer to write an oratorio based on St. Paul. But if Mendelssohn was unable to oblige at once, the seed was planted and, in proper season, was to take root. Late in 1832 a different kind of offer came from another quarter. The Lower Rhine Festival was to be given in Düsseldorf the spring of 1833. Would Felix conduct it?

The Düsseldorf commission was accepted and as soon as preliminaries were arranged Felix was off to his "smoky nest" once more. He had now completed his "Italian" Symphony and placed it, along with his "Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage" and "Trumpet" Overtures at the disposal of the London Philharmonic. The Symphony was produced on May 13, 1833. To this day it remains one of the most translucent, gracious and limpid creations imaginable—"kid glove music", as some have called it, but no less inspired for its gentility. Is it really Italian, despite the Neapolitan frenzy of its "Saltarello" finale? Is it not rather Grecian, like so much else in Mendelssohn's art, with its incorruptible symmetry and its Mediterranean *limpidezza*? Where has Mendelssohn instrumented with more luminous clarity than in the first three movements? The second one, a kind of Pilgrims' March, has none of the sentimentality which wearies in some of the composer's *adagios*. The third, in its weaving grace is, one might say, Mendelssohnian in the loveliest sense. [28]

"Mr. Felix", as he was freely called, returned to Germany for the Düsseldorf festival, which began on May 26 (Whitsuntide), 1833. Abraham Mendelssohn came from Berlin to witness his son's triumph. The Düsseldorf directorate was so pleased with everything that Mendelssohn was asked to take charge "of all the public and private musical establishments of the town" for a period of three years. He was to have a three months' leave of absence each summer. "One thing I especially like about Felix's position is that, while so many have titles without an office he will have a real office without a title", declared the father.

Meanwhile, the projected "St. Paul" oratorio was more and more filling its composer's mind and probably a large part of it had already taken shape. As a matter of fact, he looked upon his appointment at Düsseldorf less as a lucrative engagement than as furnishing him an opportunity "for securing quiet and leisure for composition". Still, he gave much attention to his duties, particularly those in connection with church music "for which no appropriate epithet exists for that hitherto given here". In an evil hour he had lightly agreed to take charge of the activities at the theatre. It was not long before he regretted it. Felix was never made to cope with the intrigues and irritations of an opera house. On the opening night, at a performance of "Don Giovanni", there was a riot in the theatre and the curtain had to be lowered four times before the middle of the first act. Associated with him was Karl Immermann, with whom he had previously negotiated about an opera book based on Shakespeare's "Tempest". In Düsseldorf their relations became strained and eventually Felix, in disgust, gave up his theatrical labours and the salary that went with them.

"St. Paul" was not so swiftly completed as the composer may have hoped from his Düsseldorf "leisure" [29] (actually, it was finished only in 1836). But he could not, from a creative standpoint, have been called an idler. To the Düsseldorf period of 1833-34 belong the Overture "The Beautiful Melusine", the "Rondo Brillant" in E flat, for piano and orchestra, the A minor Capriccio for piano, the concert aria, "Infelice", a revision of the "Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage" Overture and not a little else. The "Melusine" is one of his most poetic and mellifluous inspirations, with its lovely "wave figure" based on the arpeggiated form of the F major chord and so intimately related to one of the Rhine motives in Wagner's "Ring". How Mendelssohn managed to accomplish so much without slighting in any way his social obligations, his watercolor painting, his excursions here and there is hard to grasp.

In good truth, the enormous productivity which his unremitting facility encouraged, his piano playing and conducting, his incessant travels were subtly undermining his system. The effects did not make themselves felt at once but they contributed, bit by bit, to a nervous irritation that grew on him. Whether or not he appreciated that he came from a stock which, though healthy, bore in itself the seeds of an early death he made no effort to spare himself and never hesitated to burn the candle at both ends. The Mendelssohns had delicate blood vessels, they were predisposed to apoplexy. Abraham may or may not have been forewarned when, on returning to Berlin from Düsseldorf with his wife and Felix, he fell ill at Cassel. For a time his sight had been failing and he was becoming an outright hypochondriac. The more difficult he grew the more intense was the filial devotion Felix lavished on him.

Early in 1835 the composer received from Dr. Conrad Schleinitz a communication which showed that his good fortunes were to remain constant. It was nothing less than an invitation to accept the post of conductor of the Gewandhaus concerts in Leipzig. Mendelssohn was flattered but experience had made him canny. Before giving his reply he demanded categorical answers to a number of questions touching artistic and business matters. [30] Everything was settled to his satisfaction and, with his parents, his sisters and their husbands, he returned to the Rhineland to conduct another Lower Rhine Festival, this time to be held in Cologne.

If there was one place which promised to provide as happy a home for Felix as London did it was Leipzig. The atmosphere of the town was a spiritual balm after the hectic life of Düsseldorf. Who shall say that it was not with symbolic intent that the newcomer led off his activities with his own "Calm Sea" Overture and Beethoven's serene Fourth Symphony? And although Felix's circle of musical friendships sometimes appeared boundless he now came into intimate contact with certain choice and master spirits of the age whom he might otherwise have known only casually. An early visitor at Mendelssohn's new home was Chopin and in a letter to his parents in Berlin he writes of his pleasure in being able to associate once more with a thorough musician. One of those to whom Felix introduced Chopin was Clara Wieck, then only sixteen. On October 3—a historic date, as it proved—another stepped into the charmed circle, Robert Schumann, to whom Mendelssohn was to become a god. "Felix Meritis entered", wrote Schumann describing in his best Florestan vein the first Gewandhaus concert. "In a moment a hundred hearts flew to him!"

Light-heartedly Felix accompanied his sister, Rebecka, and her husband on a trip to the family homestead in Berlin. There seemed to be even more gayety than usual and a greater amount of extempore music-making for the

entertainment of the father. A short time after he had returned to Leipzig in great good humor he was shocked by the entrance of his brother-in-law, Hensel, with the news that Abraham Mendelssohn had died in his sleep on Nov. 19, 1835. The blow was heavy but Felix, once he regained control of himself, endured it with fortitude. Yet the loss of the father whom, to the last, he idolized marked the first great sorrow of his life. To Pastor Schubring he wrote: “The only thing now is to do one’s duty”. It sounds like a copy-book maxim but it was undoubtedly sincere. His specific “duty” in this case was to complete the still unfinished “St. Paul”, about which Abraham had been ceaselessly inquiring. [31]

Logically the oratorio should have been given by the Cäcilienverein, in Frankfort, which had originally commissioned it. But Schelble, the director of the Society, was ill. So the premiere took place at the Düsseldorf Festival of 1836. Klingemann, who sent an account of it to the London “Musical News”, said that the performance was “glorious”, that he “had never heard such choral singing”. The composer himself was more restrained. “Many things gave me great pleasure, but on the whole I learned a great deal”. He had come to the conclusion that the work, like so many of his others, would benefit by a careful overhauling. And in due course he set about recasting and improving. He had grounds for satisfaction. If “St. Paul” does not reach some of the prouder dramatic heights of the later “Elijah” it is a woeful error to underrate it.

Mendelssohn felt he owed it to his old friend, Schelble, to take over the direction of the Cäcilienverein; so he cancelled a Swiss vacation he had planned and went to Frankfort. He hobnobbed with the Hiller family and with Rossini, who happened to be in Germany for a few days. But more important, he made the acquaintance of Cécile Charlotte Sophie Jeanrenaud, daughter of a clergyman of the French Reformed Church. Cécile’s widowed mother was herself still so young and attractive that for a time people thought that she, rather than the 17 year-old girl, was the cause of Felix’s frequent visits. Fanny Hensel had latterly been urging her brother to marry, alarmed by his somewhat morbid state of mind. Cécile Jeanrenaud, according to Wilhelm Hensel, complemented Felix most harmoniously; still, “she was not conspicuously clever, witty, learned, profound or talented, though restful and refreshing”. Mendelssohn was not the man to let his affections stampede him into marriage. So before an engagement might be announced he accompanied his friend, the painter Schadow, on a month’s journey to the Dutch seaside resort, Scheveningen, there to take long walks on the beach, think things over and come to an understanding with himself. Only then did he settle definitely upon the step. [32]

The marriage took place in Frankfort on March 28, 1837, and the couple went for a honeymoon to Freiburg and the Black Forest. The wedding trip was followed by a seemingly unending round of social obligations. Nevertheless, Mendelssohn found time for considerable work. Then a summons to England, to produce “St. Paul” at the Birmingham Festival (the oratorio had already been given in Liverpool and by the Sacred Harmonic Society in London). If only “St. Paul” had been the whole story! But Mendelssohn had enormous miscellaneous programs to conduct, he played the organ, he was soloist in his own D minor Piano Concerto. Back in Leipzig he settled with his wife in a house in Lurgenstein’s Garden, welcomed Fanny, who saw for the first time those “beautiful eyes” of Cécile, about which she had heard so much, and greeted the arrival of a son, named Carl Wolfgang Paul. The Gewandhaus concerts flourished as never before. Felix produced much Bach, Handel and Beethoven; also he had many of those typical German “prize-crowned” scores of sickening mediocrity to perform. Musical friends came and went—Schumann, Clara Wieck, Liszt, Berlioz, and a young Englishman, Sterndale Bennet, whom both Mendelssohn and Schumann praised to a degree which we, today, can scarcely grasp. Small wonder that, amidst all this unmerciful and never-ending ferment Felix occasionally became worried about his health. “I am again suffering from deafness in one ear, pains in my throat, headaches and so on”, he wrote to Hiller. Occasionally his friends made fun of his intense love of sleep. One can only regret that he did not yield to it more often!

We must pass over Mendelssohn’s unending labours in Leipzig, at a number of German festivals and in England (where his new “symphony-cantata”, the “Hymn of Praise”, was featured) to follow him once more to Berlin. In 1840 Frederick William IV had become King of Prussia. One of the pet cultural schemes of the monarch was an Academy of Arts, to be divided into classes of painting, sculpture, architecture and music. For the direction of the last department the king wanted none but Mendelssohn. Hence much correspondence passed between Mendelssohn and the bureaucrats concerning the royal scheme. Time had not softened his hostility toward officialdom, particularly of the Berlin brand. However, he bound himself for a year, took up residence on the Leipziger Strasse once more, submitted his scheme for the Musical Academy and received the title “Kapellmeister to the King of Prussia” along with a very tolerable salary. Frederick William wished, among other things, to revive certain antique Greek tragedies, beginning with Sophocles’ “Antigone”. The scheme led to exhaustive discussions between Mendelssohn and the poet, Tieck, touching the nature of the music to be written. In due course there followed “Oedipus at Colonos”. The kind of music needed was, as it will probably remain forever, a problem defying solution. What Mendelssohn finally wrote turned out, by and large, to be adequate Mendelssohnian commonplace. [33]

Greek tragedy was not the only sort of dramatic entertainment projected by the King of Prussia. Racine’s “Athalie”, Shakespeare’s “Tempest” and “Midsummer Night’s Dream” likewise took their place on the royal schedule. Nothing came of “The Tempest” so far as Mendelssohn was concerned. But he fashioned some excellent music for Racine’s play and enriched the “Midsummer Night’s Dream” with an incidental score which may well be inseparably associated with the immortal fantasy to the end of time. There was, to be sure, no need for a new overture, Felix having written the most perfect conceivable one in his boyhood. But a dozen other numbers, long or short, were called for and, with the most consummate ease and soaring inspiration, Mendelssohn produced them. They are exquisitely delicate settings of Shakespeare’s elfin songs and choruses, a “funeral march” of extravagant grotesqueness, clownish dance music, a flashing Intermezzo, depicting the pursuit of the lovers through the wood, and other “background” pieces. The memorable concert numbers, however, are the incomparable Scherzo—perhaps the most priceless of all the famous scherzi the composer wrote; the romantic Nocturne, with its rapturous horn revery, and the triumphant Wedding March, a ringing processional which, in reality, belongs to all mankind rather than to Shakespeare’s stage lovers. [34]

The royal scheme for the Academy was not advancing and presently the plans began to gather dust in official

pigeon holes. Frederick William, seeing the turn things were taking, appointed his Kapellmeister the head of the music performed in the Dom. The Singakademie, conscience-stricken over its earlier treatment of the composer, now made him an honorary member. For all that, Mendelssohn was not fundamentally happier in Berlin than he had been previously. Fortunately he had not resigned his Gewandhaus post when he left Leipzig and it had again become more desirable to him than all the royal distinctions Berlin could confer. He had added greatly to his creative output during this period (for one thing he had rewritten the "Walpurgisnacht" and finished the "Scotch" Symphony) and now he was occupied with plans for a new music school in Leipzig—the famous Conservatory, first domiciled in the Gewandhaus. In January, 1843, its prospectus was issued. The faculty was to include men like the theorist Moritz Hauptmann, the violinist, Ferdinand David, the organist, Carl Becker and finally, as professors of composition and piano, Schumann and Mendelssohn. Felix was not really overjoyed at the prospect of pedagogical drudgery; yet to Hiller he wrote "I shall have to go ... three or four times a week and talk about 6-4 chords ... I am quite willing to do this for the love of the cause, because I believe it to be a good cause".

Quite as peacefully as her husband, Leah Mendelssohn died shortly before Christmas, 1842. Felix grieved, if he was perhaps less stricken than by the passing of his father. Doubtless he felt once more that nothing remained but "to do his duty"—and these duties were unsparing and seemed to grow more numerous and complex as the years went by. One sometimes questions if, truly, the labors of a Bach, a Haydn and a Mozart were more ramified and unending than Mendelssohn's—even if he had no need to toil in order to keep the wolf from the door! 35

As time passed the Mendelssohn craze in England grew steadily by what it fed on and it was only natural that Felix should find himself repeatedly in London. He alluded to his successes and to the intensity of his welcome by his British friends as "scandalous", and declared himself completely stunned by it all. "I think I must have been applauded for ten minutes and, after the first concert, almost trampled upon!" The young Queen Victoria was quite as effusive as her subjects. She invited the composer to Buckingham Palace and was graciousness itself. He played her seven of his "Songs Without Words", then the "Serenade", then Fantasies on "Rule Brittania", "Lützows Wilde Jagd" and "Gaudeamus Igitur". It was by no means the only time British royalty was to show him favor. Up to the year of his death Victoria and Albert were to shower distinctions upon him, to treat him, as it were, like one of the family.

Doubtless this is as good an opportunity as another to particularize. On one memorable occasion the Queen sang to his accompaniment and both she and her Consort scrambled to pick up sheets of music that had fallen off the piano. On another, the sovereign asked if there were "anything she could do to please Dr. Mendelssohn!". There was, indeed! Could Her Majesty let him for a few moments visit the royal nursery? Nothing Dr. Mendelssohn could have wished would have delighted Victoria more! Unceremoniously leading the way she showed him all the mysteries of the place, opened closets, wardrobes and cupboards and in a few minutes the two were deep in a discussion of infants' underwear, illnesses and diets. Mendelssohn and Cécile's own family was growing by this time and might easily profit by the example of Buckingham Palace. 36

The Queen found so much delight in the "Scotch" Symphony that the composer promptly dedicated it to her. But for that matter, England could scarcely hear enough of it. Whether or not one ranks it as high as the "Italian" the A minor unquestionably represents the other half of Mendelssohn's chief symphonic accomplishment. The question to what degree it embodies Scottish elements or any appreciable degree of local colour is less important than the fact that it is strong, impassioned music, informed with a ruggedness and conflict unlike the sunnier A major. There is a mood of tumult and drama in the first movement, whose closing subject is a definite prefigurement of the songful theme in the opening *allegro* of Brahms' Second Symphony. The Scherzo begins with a sort of jubilant extension of the Irish folksong "The Minstrel Boy" and the buoyant movement, as a whole, is full of tingling life. On the other hand, the *Adagio* undoubtedly displays a weakness characterizing so many of Mendelssohn's slow movements—it is sentimental rather than searching or personal, since with Mendelssohn grief is "only a recollection of former joys". Yet the *finale* is superbly vital and the sonorous coda with which it concludes has a regal stateliness and a bardic ring.

Whatever honours, labours, irritations and unending travels and fatigues were his portion on the Continent (and they seemed steadily to increase) it was to England that Mendelssohn continually turned to refresh his spirit. Not that his toil there was lighter or his welcome less hectic! But there was something about it all that filled his soul. People presented him with medals, commemorative addresses, they organized torchlight processions, sang serenades—and almost killed him with kindness. Yet we are told that "he never enjoyed himself more than when in the midst of society, music, fun and excitement". "A mad, most extraordinary mad time ... never in bed till half-past one ... for three weeks together not a single hour to myself in any one day ... I have made more music in these two months than elsewhere in two years". He ordered a huge "Baum Kuchen" from Berlin (though usually, Grove informs us, he made no great ado over "the products of the kitchen", his chief enjoyments being milk rice and cherry pie). His power of recovery after fatigue was said to be "as great as his powers of enjoyment". With it all "he was never dissipated"; the only stimulants he indulged in were "music, society and boundless good spirits". Seemingly it never occurred to him that even a strong constitution can have too much of these. 37

When Mendelssohn became conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra he appointed as his concertmaster his old friend, the violinist Ferdinand David, who it will be recalled was born in the same house at Hamburg. As early as 1838 Felix had written to David: "I should like to write a violin concerto for you next winter. One in E minor runs through my head the beginning of which gives me no peace". Actually, he had tried his hand at a violin concerto accompanied by a string orchestra during his boyhood though this was only a kind of student effort. But David took the promise seriously and when nothing came of it for a time determined not to let Mendelssohn forget it.

Fully five years elapsed before the composer finished in its first form the concerto which to this day stands with the violin concertos of Beethoven, Brahms and Tchaikovsky as the most enduring of the repertoire. For the various technical problems of the solo part and even of the orchestration David was constantly at the disposal of

his friend. He offered numberless hints of the utmost value and is even believed to have shaped the cadenza in the first movement as we know it. Even after the score was presumably complete David advised further changes and improvements, so that the work did not acquire its conclusive aspect till February, 1845. On the following March 13 it was performed by David at a Gewandhaus concert. Not under the composer's direction, however. The latter was in Frankfort, in poor health and greatly worn out, and had no stomach for the excitements of another premiere. The conductor was his Danish friend, Niels W. Gade. It was not till two weeks later that David apologized by letter for his delay in describing the triumph of the concerto. "The work pleased extraordinarily well and was unanimously declared to be one of the most beautiful compositions of its kind". In more than a century there has been no reason to alter this verdict. [38]

Mendelssohn's constitution may have been resilient and his recuperative powers as remarkable as his friends imagined, but it should have been clear to the more far-sighted among them that sooner or later these incessant journeys, this interminable business of composing, conducting, playing, teaching, organizing must exact a stern penalty. It is not surprising that, at the time the violin concerto was given in Leipzig, he preferred to remain in Frankfort with his wife and the children (who had gone through quite a siege of juvenile illnesses) and make a serious effort to rest. But truly efficacious rest is a habit that must be systematically cultivated. Felix did not possess it in his earlier years, nor could he acquire it now when overwork promised to consume the sensitive fibre of his being.

Yet in the summer of 1845 he was approached once more with a scheme of major dimensions. The Birmingham Festival Committee offered him the direction of a festival planned for August, 1846, and asked him to "compose a performance"—in this case, a new oratorio. He was sensible enough to refuse to conduct the whole festival but he was willing to produce such an oratorio, even if only ten months remained to compose most of the score and rehearse the performance.

The prophet Elijah had engrossed his imagination as an oratorio subject ever since he had completed "St. Paul" and discussed the new work with his friend Klingemann. In 1839 he had corresponded with Pastor Schubring about a text and he had even made rudimentary sketches for the music. Other obligations crowded it out of his mind. Now, six years later, he returned to it. He realized that the time was short but his heart was set on "Elijah", although he was prudent enough to suggest some other work if the oratorio should by any chance strike a snag. [39]

Mendelssohn could write fast—too fast, perhaps, for his artistic good. Still, "Elijah" was a heart-breaking assignment. It is only just to say that he realized certain inadequacies of the first version and revised not a little of the score after hearing it. His labours were complicated by the lengthy correspondence he was obliged to carry on with William Bartholomew, the translator. Mendelssohn insisted on a close adherence to the King James version of the Bible, with the result that the English words often conform neither to the accent nor the sense of the German originals. The choice of a soprano offered another problem. The composer wanted Jenny Lind, whom he admired extravagantly (he loved her F sharp and the note seems to have haunted his mind when he wrote the air, "Hear Ye, Israel"). But Jenny Lind was unavailable and he had to be satisfied with a Maria Caradori-Allan, whom he disliked and whose singing he afterwards described as "so pretty, so pleasing, so elegant and at the same time so flat, so unintelligent, so soulless that the music acquired a sort of amiable expression about which I could go mad". Be all of which as it may, Caradori-Allan was paid as much for singing in the first "Elijah" as Mendelssohn was for composing it! The precious creature actually told him at a rehearsal that "Hear Ye, Israel" was "not a lady's song," and asked him to have it transposed and otherwise altered.

However, the first performance in Birmingham, Aug. 26, 1846, was a triumph for the composer though, to be candid, the uncritical adulation of the audience had settled the verdict in advance. The report of Mendelssohn's boyhood friend, Julius Benedict, is typical: "The noble Town Hall was crowded at an early hour of that forenoon with a brilliant and eagerly expectant audience.... Every eye had long been directed toward the conductor's desk, when, at half-past eleven o'clock, a deafening shout from the band and chorus announced the approach of the great composer. The reception he met from the assembled thousands ... was absolutely overwhelming; whilst the sun, emerging at that moment, seemed to illumine the vast edifice in honour of the bright and pure being who stood there, the idol of all beholders"! [40]

It enhances one's respect for the artistic probity of Mendelssohn that he preserved his balance. He evaluated his work critically, carefully modified or enlarged it and obliged Bartholomew to make a quantity of changes in the English text. On April 16, 1847, he conducted the revised version in the first of four performances by the Sacred Harmonic Society in Exeter Hall, London. On April 23 the Queen and the Prince Consort heard the work. Albert wrote in the book of words and sent to Mendelssohn a dedication: "To the Noble Artist who, surrounded by the Baal-worship of debased art, has been able by his genius and science to preserve faithfully, like another Elijah, the Worship of True Art, and once more to accustom our ears, amid the whirl of empty frivolous sounds, to the pure tones of sympathetic feeling and legitimate harmony: to the Great Master, who makes us conscious of the unity of his conception, through the whole maze of his creation, from the soft whispering to the mighty raging of the elements. Inscribed in grateful remembrance by

Albert"

It was a fitting climax to Mendelssohn's tenth visit to England—in some ways his most memorable, in any case his last.

Before Mendelssohn left London he paid a farewell visit to Buckingham Palace. He had a mysterious presentiment that he must leave hurriedly. Friends pressed him to remain in England a little longer. "Ah! I wish I may not already have stayed too long here! One more week of this unremitting fatigue and I should be killed outright". He was manifestly ill. Fate caught up with him at Frankfort. Scarcely had he arrived in a state of prostration when he abruptly learned that his sister, Fanny Hensel, had died while at the piano conducting a choir [41]

rehearsal. With a shriek, Felix collapsed. The shock of the news and the violence of his fall on hearing it brought about a rupture of one of those delicate cerebral blood vessels which had caused so many deaths in the Mendelssohn family.

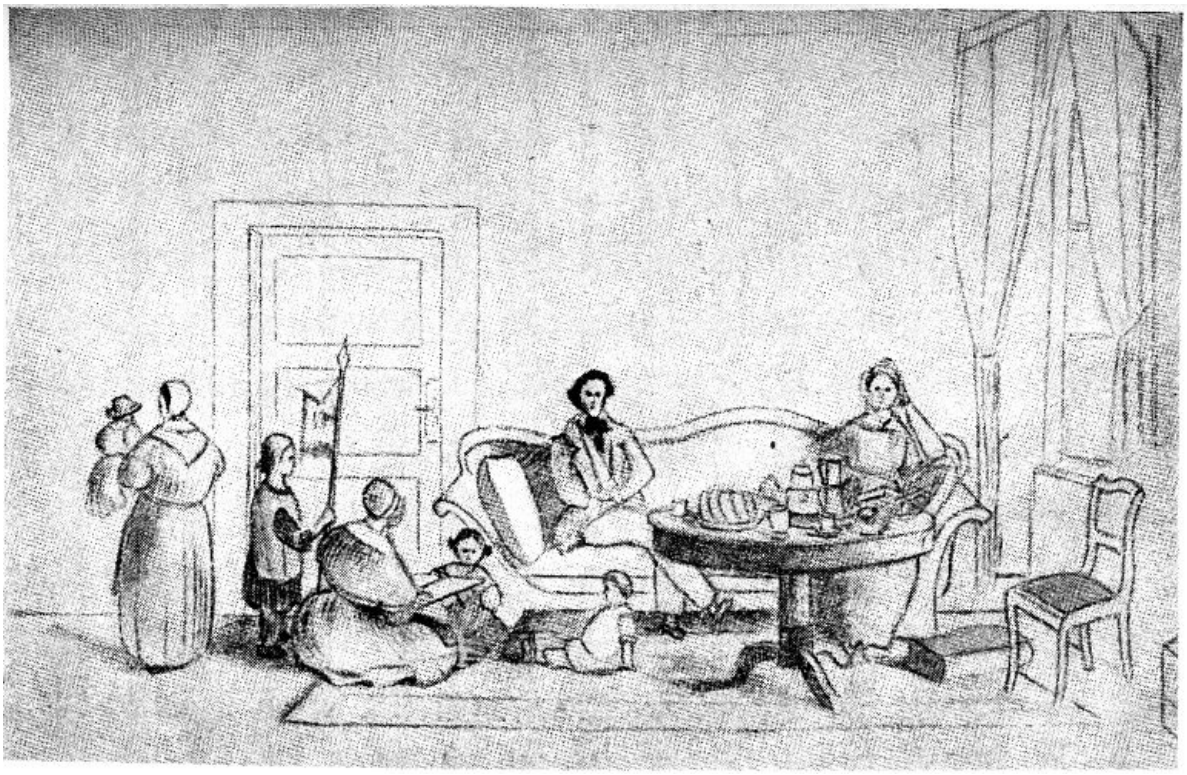
In a measure he recovered. He went to Baden-Baden and later to Switzerland. He wrote letters, sketched and still composed. He greeted friends from England, he learned that London and Liverpool wanted new symphonies and cantatas. This time he did nothing about it. When he, finally, returned in September to Leipzig, he seemed to feel better, though Moscheles, meeting him, was frightened to see how he had aged and changed. On Oct. 9, while visiting his friend, the singer Livia Frege, in connection with some Lieder he planned to publish, he was seized with a chill. He hurried home and was put to bed, tortured by violent headaches. He had planned to go to Vienna late in the month to conduct "Elijah" with Jenny Lind as the soprano. Of this there could now be no question. On Nov. 3, 1847 he suffered another stroke and lay, it is claimed, unconscious, though Ferdinand David says that, till ten in the evening, "he screamed frightfully, then made noises as if he heard the sounds of drums and trumpets.... During the following day the pains seemed to cease, but his face was that of a dying man". Some time between 9:15 and 9:30 in the evening he ceased to breathe. He was exactly three months short of 39 years old. Grouped about the bed were his wife, his brother Paul, David, Schleinitz and Moscheles. "Through Fanny's death our family was destroyed", wrote Paul Mendelssohn to Klingemann; "through Felix's, it is annihilated"! Leipzig was stunned by the news. "It is lovely weather here", wrote a young English music student, "but an awful stillness prevails; we feel as if the king were dead...." 42

Posthumously, Mendelssohn's fate seemed like a strange reversal of his supreme idol's, Bach. Bach passed into long eclipse, then, largely through Mendelssohn's heroic efforts, underwent a miracle of resurrection which has grown more overpowering clear down to our own time. Mendelssohn, almost preposterously famous at his death, was before very long pronounced outmoded, overrated, virtually negligible. The whole history of music scarcely shows a more violent backswing of the pendulum. To take pleasure in any but a handful of Mendelssohn's works was for decades to lose caste, if not to invite ignominy. By 1910—just about the centenary of his birth—the low water-mark of derogation had been reached.

Now, a hundred years after his death, a most definite reaction is in progress. Is it not, rather, a salutary readjustment than a mere reaction? If Mendelssohn's poorer works have not endured is it not better so? Struggle and suffering might, indeed, have lent a deeper undertone to his songs or enabled his adagios, in old Sir George Grove's words, "to draw tears where now they only give a saddened pleasure. But let us take a man as we have him. Surely there is enough conflict and violence in life and in art. When we want to be made unhappy we can turn to others. It is well in these agitated modern days to be able to point to one perfectly balanced nature in whose life, whose letters and whose music alike all is at once manly and refined, clever and pure, brilliant and solid. For the enjoyment of such shining heights of goodness we may well forego for once the depths of misery and sorrow".

And Grove's words taken on an added poignancy precisely because they were *not* spoken of an epoch as grievous as our own!

43



Family Group. Sketch by Mendelssohn, Soden, 1844.

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