



MASTERPIECES BY MENDELSSOHN
November 22, 2009

PROGRAM NOTES
By Steven Ledbetter

CHORAL MUSIC OF FELIX MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY (1809-1847)

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, born 200 years ago this year, composed an extraordinary amount of music in the brief thirty-eight years of his life, starting with amazingly accomplished symphonies for string orchestra just as he was reaching his teens, and going on with symphonies, concertos, overtures, incidental music, chamber music, operas, piano pieces, songs, oratorios, and smaller choral works, all turned out at a remarkable speed and with complete professional polish. Already at the age of sixteen he composed the Octet for strings, which many feel is the single greatest work written by a child prodigy of so youthful an age—even Mozart doesn't match it by sixteen.

Later, in his thirties, he sometimes chafed under the demands of official positions and administrative duties, but he composed deft, lively, brilliant, effective compositions to the end, and became the composer who most influenced the rising concert life (especially in Germany and England—where he was Queen Victoria's favorite composer), for his creations, his conducting, and his social graces.

Perhaps it was because of the interest of Queen Victoria—a mixed blessing today, when the phrase “Victorian era” so often (and unfairly) implies a period of stodgy conformity— that Mendelssohn's music and artistic achievement are sometimes patronized because he was not “an innovator”—usually taken to mean that he did not advance the cause of chromatic harmony or fit in other movements aiming at “the music of the future.”

Yet he did innovate in significant ways, and often did so in the context of works that were immediately and widely liked. One such piece was the Violin Concerto in E minor, which he was writing for his friend Ferdinand David, and which found new solutions for century-old structural issues. At one point, Mendelssohn urged David to show a specific passage to the Danish composer Niels Gade “and let me have his opinion of it.” Realizing how eager David was simply to have the concerto finished so that he could learn and play it, he had to insist, “Do not laugh at me too much. I feel ashamed in any case, but I cannot help it; I am just groping around.” But that is the kind of “groping” that produces masterpieces.

Aside from a handful of works (notably the oratorio *Elijah*), Mendelssohn's choral music has been too much ignored in recent decades. Again the "curse" of Victorianism hangs on many of his church pieces, which are too often thought of as examples of comfortable, easy-going Christianity that is more sentimental than deeply felt. Yet of all the romantic-era composers of choral music, Mendelssohn (along with Brahms and Verdi) knew the Renaissance and Baroque choral repertoires that showed them how to treat the four- or eight-part ensembles of human voices in a strong and effective way: the German composers by way of Bach, Verdi by way of Palestrina.

Mendelssohn was one of the leading lights in the recovery of the music of Bach, having been responsible for the first performance since the time of the Thomaskantor to perform his *St. Matthew Passion* in anything like its complete form. This afternoon's program contains a wide range of Mendelssohn's smaller choral works, which grow out of his early familiarity with the German Baroque tradition and also what he learned during a lengthy youthful stay in Rome. The traditions of the past are evident in his own choral music, even as he adopts the harmonic language of his own romantic era.

Psalm 100, *Jauchzet dem Herrn alle Welt*, is a bit of a mystery. Claims have been made that Mendelssohn wrote it for the New Israelite Temple of Hamburg (he had received a letter from the director of the temple requesting such settings). He promised to provide something for the Jewish congregation, but he had already completed Psalm 100 on January 1, 1844, and he did not mention it in his reply. In fact it seems to have been written for the choir of the Berlin Cathedral (who published it in 1855). King Frederick William had hoped that Felix would compose a complete cycle of Psalms for the church year, but the composer tired of the limitations of *a cappella* writing and proposed that a committee of composers be assembled to complete the cycle.

Verleih' uns Frieden (the German equivalent of *Da pacem, Domine* – "Grant us peace in our time, O Lord") was composed during his Roman stay (from November 1, 1830, to April 1831), where he consulted the Palestrina scholar Giuseppe Baini and examined a library rich in Italian polyphonic music assembled by Fortunato Santini. During this stay he composed a great deal of sacred choral music, alternating settings of Catholic texts (in Latin) and Lutheran texts (in German). *Verleih' uns Frieden* is laid out in three supplications: by basses, then altos, and finally the full four-part chorus. Robert Schumann, reviewing the piece upon publication, found it treasurable: "Madonnas by Raphael and Murillo cannot remain long from view."

Psalm 115, Non nobis, Domine, Op. 31, is arguably the most impressive of the Roman compositions. Mendelssohn had sketched it in 1829, while on a visit to England, where he had studied Handel's *Dixit Dominus*, and completed it in Rome on November 15, 1830, for soloists, chorus, and orchestra. It is ironic and appropriate that Handel had composed his piece in Rome in 1707, and Mendelssohn found inspiration in it for his own "Roman" work over a century later. He has learned from Handel the art of the warmly Italianate melody, which is especially evident in the two internal movements (a duet with chorus; a tenor arioso). The finale opens in the key of the arioso that preceded it with an *a cappella* chorus in eight parts. A postlude brings back opening verse of the text, where the principal theme returns converted from 4/4 to 3/4 time. Mendelssohn composed the work in Latin. When he published it in 1835, he added a German text to encourage performance in Lutheran churches as well.

Weihnachten (from “Sechs Sprüche”), Op 79 No. 1, is the first of a series of short choral settings of compact Biblical passages, called *Sprüche* (“proverbs,” or simply just “verses”) in German. Mendelssohn wrote the six pieces over a period of years, beginning with two settings for Christmas and New Year’s Day written in late 1843. The Christmas setting is the first of these. Right after the turn of the year to 1844, the first two pieces having already been performed, he composed similar short choral pieces for Passion Sunday and Good Friday. Finally in May 1846, he responded to a commission Frederick William IV for two more *Sprüche*, so that by October he had composed one for each of the major high feast days: Advent, Christmas, New Year’s Day, Holy Week, Good Friday, Ascension. He planned to publish it immediately, but withdrew it (for reasons unknown); it came out posthumously in 1849.

Laudate pueri dominum, Op. 39, No. 2, is a motet for women’s voices inspired by his experiences in Rome in 1830. Mendelssohn liked to watch the sunset from the top of the Spanish Steps, which offered a stunning view across the Tiber to the great dome of St. Peter’s (designed by Michelangelo) with the sun setting behind it. Standing there in front of the 15th-century church Trinità dei Monti, he could hear a chorus of cloistered French nuns singing the Office, as a kind of soundtrack to the glorious sunset. This experience suggested a set of motets for women’s voices. *Laudate pueri Dominum* is actually a replacement for the work he originally wrote as No. 2 in the set; he composed it on August 14, 1837 (long after leaving Rome), but there is a possible reminiscence of Palestrina’s “Missa Assumpta est Maria,” which Baini may have showed Mendelssohn during his visit.

Psalm 42, *Wie der Hirsch schreit*, Op. 42, is one of several works that Mendelssohn began sketching in April 1837, while on his honeymoon. He completed the full seven-movement score that autumn. He and his wife Cécile were visiting England at the time (he had started teaching her English, which he spoke and wrote well). When the new work was ready, he assembled a group of friends (and, it seems, a substantial supply of Rhine wine) and made a “wonderous bellowing” as they sight-read the piece. He recast some parts of it in December, and premiered it on New Year’s Day, 1838, with Clara Novello as the solo soprano and Mendelssohn himself conducting. Both of them had bad colds, Mendelssohn so much so that he had gone deaf in one ear. But Psalm 42 became one of his most popular choral works in his lifetime.

Like any student of Bach, Mendelssohn borrowed the arch-pattern of laying out the movements (compare, for example, Bach’s motet *Jesu meine Freude*) with a choral movement at the beginning, middle, and end, interspersed with paired movements for soprano (each pair consisting of a recitative followed by an aria with chorus) in each half.

© Steven Ledbetter (www.stevenledbetter.com)