

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Symphony No. 2 in B-flat, Opus 52, *Lobgesang*

Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg on February 3, 1809, and died in Leipzig on November 4, 1847. Bartholdy was the name of his maternal uncle, Jakob, who had changed his own name from Salomon and taken on Bartholdy from the previous owner of a piece of real estate he bought in Berlin. It was he who most insistently urged the family's conversion to Lutheranism; the name Bartholdy was added to Mendelssohn—to distinguish the Protestant Mendelssohns from the Jewish ones—when Felix's father actually took that step in 1822, the children having been baptized as early as 1816.

*Mendelssohn composed the *Lobgesang* (Hymn of Praise) for a festival celebrating the 400th anniversary of Gutenberg's invention of movable type, held in St. Thomas's Church in Leipzig in June 1840; Mendelssohn himself conducted. But the piece as we know it is somewhat expanded from what was heard there. The score calls for three solo voices—two sopranos and a tenor, plus mixed chorus, and an orchestra consisting of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, organ (in the choral movements only), and strings. Duration is about 65 minutes.*

The early history of the *Lobgesang*--also, and confusingly, known as Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 2 (published as such both with and without the choral finale)—is somewhat mysterious. First of all, though, it is worth emphasizing that the “No. 2” has nothing to do with the work's chronological sequence in Mendelssohn's symphonies. It was composed eight years after the *Reformation* Symphony (No. 5), seven after the *Italian* Symphony (No. 4), and a decade after he had sketched the *Scottish* Symphony (No. 3), though the latter did not reach its final form until after Mendelssohn had composed and performed the *Lobgesang*. Many of Mendelssohn's works—including the *Italian* and *Reformation* symphonies—were not published in his lifetime, so the numbering system gives a very misleading picture of when various pieces were composed. In the matter of its conception, if not completion, the *Lobgesang* is the very last of Mendelssohn's symphonies.

The work began as part of a festival held in the city of Leipzig to honor Johannes Gutenberg on the 400th anniversary of the invention of printing from movable type. It enjoyed a marked success at the premiere. Robert Schumann reviewed the concert in glowing terms:

The whole [piece] stimulated enthusiasm, and certainly the work, particularly in the choral movements, is to be accounted one of [Mendelssohn's] freshest and most charming creations. ...We shall not emphasize details; and yet—that duet, interrupted by the chorus, *Ich harrete des Herrn* [No. 5], after which there broke forth in the audience a whispering which counts for more in the church than loud applause in the concert-hall. It was like a glimpse into a heaven of Raphael's madonnas' eyes.

About a month later, Mendelssohn wrote to his good friend Karl Klingemann describing the event, referring to the *Lobgesang* as “no oratorio, but, as I called it in German, ‘*eine Symphonie für Chor und Orchester*’...three symphonic movements followed by 12 [sic] choral and solo sections.” On November 18, Mendelssohn wrote again to Klingemann, describing some changes he has made in the work:

Strange, that when I first conceived the idea I wrote to Berlin that I wanted to write a symphony with chorus; afterwards, I didn't have the courage for it, because the three movements were too long for an introduction, and yet I always had the feeling that there was

something lacking in the mere introduction. Now the symphonic movements will come in according to the *old plan*, and then the piece will come out....I do not believe that it will *really* lend itself to performances, and yet I love it so much.

It appears, then, that Mendelssohn originally wanted a choral symphony (no doubt inspired, in the first instance, by Beethoven's Ninth) for the Gutenberg festival, but that he settled for a choral work with a "mere introduction." Later he returned to his "old plan" and combined the choral work with three orchestral movements. On the basis of this and other evidence, Eric Werner assumes that Mendelssohn had already begun a symphony in B-flat, intended at the outset to be purely orchestral, when the commission for the Gutenberg festival came up. In this view, Mendelssohn would have chosen to make the opening theme of the first movement an element in a symphonic-choral cycle (possibly revising the existing scherzo—the second movement—so as to insert the cyclic theme as a contrapuntal accompaniment). But he evidently backed off from completing this version of the work for the festival and only returned to it later.

In any case, Mendelssohn was clearly fond of the piece. He must have been gratified, then, that, during his own lifetime and for many years thereafter, it was enormously popular—quite possibly his most frequently performed symphonic work. In the last century, though, the *Lobgesang* has fallen into what might charitably be described as near-oblivion. A chance to hear the work again provides us with a touchstone for musical taste in the 1840s and some indication of how it has changed in a century and a half. To be sure, much of the criticism of the time centered on the question of genre: just what kind of work was this? Today we have had much more experience of composers mixing different kinds of works—sacred and secular, choral and orchestral, and so on, to get very heated over such questions.

Though Mendelssohn may have planned the work as an analogue to Beethoven's Ninth, he was far too perceptive not to realize how difficult it would be to match the Beethoven work. But in the end, the proportions of his symphony are so unlike those of the Beethoven work—Mendelssohn's choral finale far outweighs the rest of the symphony in length—that it bears only the most superficial relationship to its putative model. In the end, Mendelssohn accepted Klingemann's proposal for what to call the piece: a "symphony-cantata," all in all a more apt description.

The first movement begins with a majestic proclamation from the trombones, a tune that we shall eventually hear allied to the words "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord," from Psalm 150. This theme will bear the brunt of the development in the first movement. The Allegretto dances lyrically along in a rocking 6/8 time, sometimes taking on the character of a graceful waltz; its middle section transforms the opening theme of the first movement into the 6/8 meter. The Adagio religioso is sweet in that sometimes sugary way that Mendelssohn can have when he wants to be lyrical and serious at the same time, but there are delicate touches of orchestral color.

Following the three movements of the "Sinfonia," the cantata proper begins with a vigorous statement of the work's principal theme, first in the orchestra, and then in a choral fugue on the opening words of Psalm 150. The work continues in solo and choral passages that are beautifully colored (the woodwinds, for example, in the soprano solo with women's voices that concludes No. 2, or the delicacy of touch in the chorus of No. 4). By far the best-known part of the score is the soprano duet with chorus, No. 5, which has been performed by church choirs from Mendelssohn's day to ours—and it was this passage that Schumann chose to highlight in

his review. But Schumann probably did not hear the most expressively powerful part of the score, Mendelssohn's memorable afterthought, composed after a sleepless night, in which the tenor repeatedly asks, "Watchman, will the night soon pass?" Only at the very end of the movement does the soprano announce, "The night has passed," a thrilling moment, leading to a substantial chorus in the bright key of D major. Then an a cappella harmonization of the familiar chorale "Now thank we all our God" continues, for the chorale's second stanza, in an attractive piece of pseudo-Bach, with the chorus singing the lines of the chorale in octaves while the orchestra surrounds and embellishes the lines with steady sixteenth-note figurations. Following a flowing duet for tenor and soprano, Mendelssohn ends his cantata with—naturally—an elaborate final chorus planned on a grand scale and closing with a last reminiscence of the opening theme.

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