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MUSICAL EVENTS

The Youngest Master

Mendelssohn at two hundred.

by Alex Ross

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Felix Mendelssohn, whose two-hundredth birthday fell on February 3rd, was the most amazing child prodigy in musical history. “What about Mozart?” you may ask. Go talk to Goethe, who heard the child Mozart in 1763 and the child Mendelssohn almost sixty years later, and who gave the palm to young Felix. According to Goethe, Mendelssohn bore “the same relation to the little Mozart that the perfect speech of a grown man does to the prattle of a child.” Even if Goethe got a bit carried away, his enthusiasm is understandable. Mendelssohn began composing at the age of ten, and within a year or two he was producing pieces that were technically secure and, at times, strikingly imaginative. Two of his adolescent works—the Octet for Strings and the Overture to “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”—have won permanent places in the repertoire. Mozart reached a comparable level only in his early twenties.

In late January, an organization called the Mendelssohn Project, led by Stephen Somary, presented a concert at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, highlighting youthful arcana that had been retrieved from libraries and collections. Orion Weiss played a Piano Sonata in F Minor that Mendelssohn wrote in 1820, when he was eleven; the first movement came off like a virtuoso student exercise, but the second movement turned into something much more individual, its main theme pirouetting wistfully, like a Bach

Sarabande. The Shanghai Quartet deftly presented twelve fugues for strings, from 1821; these again showed Mendelssohn’s uncanny sympathy for Bach, which his teacher, Carl Zelter, instilled in him. (The boy once dumbfounded Zelter by finding a contrapuntal error in one of the Brandenburg Concertos.) And Weiss accompanied Weigang Li in a vibrant performance of the one-movement Violin Sonata in D Minor (1823), whose ornate chord progressions and mercurial passagework indicate a scarily rapid maturation.



In his teens, Mendelssohn found a fiercely elegant musical voice.

By his mid-teens, Mendelssohn had found his own fiercely elegant voice. The Octet burns with a kind of happy fury; Larry Todd, Mendelssohn's most authoritative biographer, has argued that its lunging themes and crackling counterpoint were inspired by scenes from Goethe's "Faust." Even more staggering is the "Midsummer Night's Dream" Overture, which offers one magical tableau after another: the opening harmonies of winds and horns, their notes gleaming like stars emerging from mist; an elfin scurrying of strings; opulent themes for the royals and a rugged dance for Bottom and the players; and the coda for Puck, which moves beyond comedy into some sphere of transcendent sadness. Rich in feeling, free of excess, it almost sounds like the statement of a wise old man—a musical Goethe, dreaming of youth. That it came from a boy of seventeen essentially defies explanation.

The question for Mendelssohn, as for all prodigies, was "What next?" He went on writing music until he suffered a fatal series of strokes, at the age of thirty-eight. Works such as the "Hebrides" Overture, the "Scottish" and "Italian" symphonies, and the Violin Concerto showed no obvious falling-off of inspiration. He was lionized in Central Europe and also in England, where he became something like a guest national composer. But there were mutterings of discontent. Hector Berlioz complained that Mendelssohn was "rather too fond of the dead."



"Do you ever stop to think about the nepotism issues I've spared you?"

Heinrich Heine mocked his "very serious seriousness," saying that the music lacked the raw feeling, the "naïveté," essential to the highest art. By 1900, critics were dismissing Mendelssohn as a relic of the Biedermeier and Victorian eras, of the bourgeois cult of comfort. George Bernard Shaw lambasted the composer's "kid-glove gentility, his conventional sentimentality, and his despicable oratorio mongering." Mendelssohn remained popular, but he seemed to slip from the ranks of the truly great.

One attack created particularly nasty resonances—that of Richard Wagner, whose pamphlet "Judaism in Music," published in 1850, identified Mendelssohn as one of a number of insectoid Jewish entities who had infested the body of German art. Somary, in remarks made at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, stated that Wagner had brought about the "suppression" of Mendelssohn, drawing a link between "Judaism in Music" and the Nazi ban on Jewish music. Somary made a passionate case, although he simplified a tortured relationship. Wagner revered Mendelssohn in his youth, and behind the anti-Semitic bile lay an abiding, if grudging, admiration. In later years, Wagner played the overtures at the piano and sang melodies from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" to his children. Mendelssohn even haunted Wagner's sleep; one night Wagner dreamed that his older colleague had addressed him with *du*—the intimate second-person pronoun. "Parsifal," Wagner's final work, pays homage to Mendelssohn on more than one page of the score.

"He never lost control of himself," Wagner once said of Mendelssohn. The fundamental problem for so many Romantically inclined listeners was that Mendelssohn had no interest in what the scholar Peter Mercer-Taylor has called "unchecked personal self-expression." Instead, his oratorios, choruses, glees, and parlor songs were intended to foster fellow-feeling and to serve as an aesthetic model for the upright life. In this, he succeeded triumphantly; there are still Mendelssohn Clubs—community choruses and singing societies—in cities across America. The challenge for contemporary performers is to tease out the complexity that dwells below a deceptively well-bred surface.

Celebrations of the Mendelssohn bicentennial have paled next to the epic Mozart blowout of 2006, but a respectable quantity of Mendelssohn's music has been heard in New York halls in recent weeks. The Mendelssohn Project presented its trove of lost scores; the New York Philharmonic gave an all-Mendelssohn program; James Levine led a robust "Italian" Symphony, with the Met Orchestra; and the Lyric Chamber Music Society offered an absorbing evening of vocal and piano rarities, including the premières of two newly discovered "Songs Without Words." The Lyric program, which featured finely expressive singing by Ying Huang, also contained two songs by Fanny Hensel, the composer's sister, who possessed comparable talent but was forced to give up a musical career in favor of marriage and motherhood. (Later this season, the Lyric will present Hensel's Piano Trio in D Minor, a formidable, extravagantly gesturing work that seems almost a response to her brother's habitual self-containment.)

The Philharmonic did Mendelssohn right by inviting Kurt Masur, its former music director, to preside over the birthday bash. Long the leader of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, which Mendelssohn once molded into the best orchestra in Germany, Masur believes deeply in the music and effectively communicates his faith. In the "Ruy Blas" Overture and the cantata "Die erste Walpurgisnacht," he elicited a sound at once graceful and muscular, drawing out timbral grit, textural roughness, and emotional heat. The

Violin Concerto fared less well, on account of a weirdly charmless solo turn by Anne-Sophie Mutter. The German virtuoso brought to bear her usual bowing power, sultry tone, and precision of intonation, but she gave a textbook lesson in how not to perform Mendelssohn. The shimmering opening melody turned into a shapeless stream of notes. Accents and slurs vanished in a rush of superficial excitement. Minute gradations of emotion gave way to exaggerated, pseudo-modern statements.

But Mendelssohn is thriving in other hands. The violinist Daniel Hope and the Chamber Orchestra of Europe recently made a bold, stylish recording of the Violin Concerto, alongside one of the finest modern accounts of the Octet. Both the Emerson and the Pacifica Quartets have released expressively pointed surveys of Mendelssohn's quartets. Last year, I heard the Brentano Quartet give a taut performance of the Quartet in F Minor, Mendelssohn's final major piece, and one whose gruff rhythms and grinding chromatic lines suggest a creative departure. The composer's beloved sister had just died, and, according to a tantalizing recent report in the British press, he may have been suffering from an infatuation with the Swedish soprano Jenny Lind. Mendelssohn seemed, in other words, on the verge of losing control. If he had lived to harness those darker emotions, particularly in the realm of opera, he might have become the rival that Wagner obviously feared. ♦