

A Bicentennial Birthday Message

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Good Morning.

Some months ago, we had the special chance to visit with longtime Emerson friend and colleague, The Reverend Dr. Robert Tabscott, when he explored with us the remarkable cultural coincidence of Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin having been born on the same day of the same year: February 12, 1809. But in this year of Emerson Chapel Silver Anniversary observations, it turns out Lincoln and Darwin are not the only noted figures receiving recognition for having February 1809 birthdays.

There was an internationally revered composer born that month and year, and in this concert season, soloists, orchestras, and audiences all over the world are observing his bicentennial birthday. He was first recognized as a musical child prodigy to rival Mozart, then went on to produce among varied masterpieces arguably the most performed march ever written, and who was dead at age thirty-eight. Who was this fellow, apparently having a bad hair day when the portrait on our Order of Service was done, and what can we learn from his life and work?

To begin with, we might pause over one of the most interesting characteristics of his art: to be one of the few 19th Century composers whose so called “serious” work was absorbed into mainstream popular culture.

Consider, for example, the source of this familiar seasonal chestnut:

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Many of us probably think of the piece as an anonymous folk tune, but the melody was written by our composer in 1840 for a festival to honor the legendary printer, Johannes Gutenberg, and adapted to the words of the English hymn, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.”

Just three years later, he produced what is arguably the most widely recognized and performed march ever written:

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(Even with the depressed number of weddings in hard economic times, how would you like to be receiving just one year's royalties for that little sucker?)

But by now you've guessed: both pieces are the work of Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn, born in February 1809, dying in November 1847.

Mendelssohn was a paradoxical, contradictory, complexly interesting man and artist; a composer often – and mistakenly – associated with light, good humored, elegantly Neoclassic entertainment, most often comfortable with 18th Century musical forms like concerti, overtures, scherzi, marches. For example, if I didn't tell you who wrote this orchestral introduction, you might very plausibly say, "Mozart."

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But no, not Mozart. That's from the Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra Mendelssohn wrote in 1823 at age fourteen.

Not bad, we might say for a fourteen year old, but three years later, he amazingly outdid himself creating this masterpiece, the Overture to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, filled with unforgettable color, imagination, delicacy, elfin humor, and containing the most famous donkey brays in the whole concert repertoire.

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Astonishing as that accomplishment was for a seventeen year old, the real miracle may be that seventeen years later, in 1842-43, Mendelssohn returned to produce a full set of incidental music for performance of the play, with no loss of magic. Here is an excerpt from the famous scherzo, replete with everything but fairy dust.

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Here is another of Mendelssohn's 18th Century tributes. The name may not be familiar ("The War March of the Priests" from his 1843 incidental music to Jean Racine's play, *Athalie*), but think back for a moment to your high school graduation. Odds are you marched in to Sir Edward Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1*, but you likely marched *out* to this famous number, for its time at the top of the charts of the Hot Hundred

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And yet, for all of his attachment to Neoclassic 18th Century forms, Mendelssohn was also very much an artist of the Romantic mid-19th Century, fully capable of urgent, even passionate expression. As we listen to the opening of his first piano concerto from 1831, one can almost see and smell smoke rising from the keyboard.

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Well, at least part of the explanation of how all this happened lies with the extraordinary life Mendelssohn led. He was born in north Germany, in Hamburg, interestingly enough, two weeks after Edgar Allan Poe, nine days before Lincoln and Darwin, on February 3, born into one of Europe's most distinguished families. His paternal grandfather was the brilliant Talmudic scholar, Moses Mendelssohn, beloved and renowned to his contemporaries – even in a time of rabid and overt ethnic bigotry – as the “Jewish Socrates.”

Felix' Uncle Joseph and his father, Abraham, were art loving financiers who founded the Mendelssohn Banking House. His Aunt Dorothea wrote poetry and married the poet Friedrich von Schlegel. Felix' mother, the former Leah Salomon, preferred to read Homer in the original Greek. (To have been a fly on the wall in this family's dining room . . .)

After the occupation of Hamburg by Napoleon's army, the Mendelssohns moved to Berlin in 1812, where their home soon became an extraordinary social and cultural meeting place, part of a life Abraham and Leah sought to solidify by following the example of Leah's brother in undergoing Protestant baptism. When they and their four children became Christians, they preferred to adopt a hyphenated surname: “Mendelssohn-Bartholdy.”

To be sure, the original motivation was to afford the children some greater assurance of sharing in German cultural life, but as Felix grew to adulthood, he came to abhor the idea of the ghetto – physical or spiritual – and to admire the goal of assimilation. He reinforced these beliefs by falling in love and marrying in 1837 (when he is twenty-eight and she is eighteen) Cecile Jeanrenaud, the beautiful and multitalented daughter of a Huguenot minister, with whom he would enjoy an exceptionally happy ten year marriage with five children.

Nonetheless, he remained proud of being Moses Mendelssohn's grandson, maintaining close attention to Jewish interests, especially to the mid Century struggle for legal and political equality.

As a child, Felix was predictably precocious. The musical measure of such qualities, of course, is Mozart, who composed his first keyboard pieces at age five, sonatas at seven, symphonies at eight.

[It's people like this who remind us how pitifully little most of us have done with our lives. As the mathematician and folk singer Tom Lehrer has put it, "It's a sobering fact to realize that when Mozart was my age, he'd been dead for three years"]

The child Felix began piano lessons at age six, and grew so advanced in skills that by age eight he was already studying composition with famed pedagogue, composer, and friend of Goethe, Carl Zelter. By age nine, he had given a critically acclaimed public recital; by eleven, he was composing. Behind the family home was a garden house, capable of seating several hundred guests. Here Felix staged musicales with a hired orchestra he would conduct before audiences startled with the abilities of this musical *wunderkind*.

So if we were to ask who was the most precocious composer who ever lived, while most music lovers might quickly reply "Mozart," if the question is taken to mean who was the youngest composer ever to produce works of undeniable genius, the answer might just as easily be "Felix Mendelssohn." Mozart's childhood and teenage compositions, while filled with interesting qualities, still sound like the work of a greatly gifted child. Within six years of writing *his* first works, Mendelssohn had already produced two acknowledged and enduring masterpieces: the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and a year earlier, this, perhaps the greatest music ever penned by a sixteen year old: from the scherzo of Mendelssohn's Octet for Strings, written in 1825.

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Felix sketched, wrote poetry, did watercolors, read widely in philosophy, history, literature. He grew into an adult whose exterior – at least the public persona – was cultured, sophisticated, urbane, serene; all qualities not hard to discover in his music. His education was thorough and broad. He visited the aged Goethe at his home in Weimar, attended Hegel's lectures at the University of

Berlin, studied with the finest tutors his family's considerable money could buy, and worshipped Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven.

And yet, for all we might have guessed, he did not develop into a Mozart-like prodigy, even if he never surpassed the miraculous teenage accomplishments of the Octet and *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture. Biographer Herbert Kupferberg writes that the puzzling question of Mendelssohn's life has been his seeming inability to move beyond the works of his youth, building on the remarkable expectations he established so early in his career. While it would be false, as Kupferberg agrees, to argue that his work ran downhill after a brilliant start, Mendelssohn does seem to have achieved very early a quality plateau, seldom exceeding it and sometimes slipping beneath it. In other words, he doesn't seem to have "grown" or developed as most creative artists do, or at the least, not so much.

Why? The conventional reason is that as the product of a wealthy and influential family, he never suffered enough to achieve artistic greatness. Many of us have had our ideas of 19th Century artists corrupted by cliché portraits of wild-eyed, unkempt geniuses starving in unheated garrets, beset by public and critical ignorance but grinding out one immortal masterpiece after another, while grandmotherly landladies carry steaming trays to the door, shouting, "Ludwig, you must eat. Here, have some soup."

The first edition of the famous *Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1879) puts the case this way:

His genius had not been subjected to those fiery trials which seem necessary to ensure abiding possession of the depths of the human heart He was never tried by poverty, or disappointment, or ill-health, or a morbid temper, or neglect, or the perfidy of friends

To which we may well reply today, "Rubbish." Mendelssohn may have escaped poverty, but he was no stranger to disappointments, obstacles, and loss. In his own city of Berlin, he had to cope not only with the usual counterespionage and foreign intrigue of the music profession, but with the rampant anti-Semitism openly acknowledged in denying him appointments. In this context, he was

regularly confronted with the bigoted belief that all the sprinkled holy water in Christendom would not make a Christian out of a Jew.

Kupferberg observes how Mendelssohn was also plagued by the problems of reconciling an enormously active professional career with the responsibilities he felt toward his wife, five children, parents, sister, and brother. He increasingly struggled with poor health, while trying to meet an exceptionally heavy schedule of commissions, performances, appearances, and further demands on his time. To portray him as serene and untroubled, a spoiled rich boy who never had to grow up, is to grotesquely distort the realities of his life, and we must look elsewhere for clues to his art.

The scope and range of his creative and re-creative work were little short of remarkable. Like our contemporaries Leonard Bernstein and Andre Previn, Mendelssohn was so diversely talented that he expended great energies avoiding concentration on any single area. One of the mid-Century's most admired composers, he was also a superb pianist and an innovative conductor who unearthed and premiered in 1839 Franz Schubert's unknown Ninth Symphony, while being among the first to use a baton and in performance to face the orchestra, rather than the audience.

He was an accomplished scholar, largely responsible for the 19th Century rediscovery of Johann Sebastian Bach through his landmark Good Friday 1829 centennial performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. He was an admired educator who founded and devoted himself tirelessly to the nurturance and development of the Leipzig Conservatory. He was a skilled administrator, who at age twenty-six was named Music Director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, which he proceeded to transform into the finest ensemble in Europe. And all the while he was multitasking, in his spare time he ran summer music festivals in Germany and England.

The truth seems to be that Mendelssohn grew from a child used to 5 A.M. study sessions in his home, into a highly charged, even nervously driven, adult who wrote his choral setting of Psalm 42 while on his honeymoon – we have no record of what Cecile thought of that effort – and who seemed determined to cram the professional experience of three lifetimes into one. Apparently incapable of rest, and propelled by little understood drives past normal endurance, he hardly ever seems to have allowed himself the inner poise and reflection from which his

art might have benefitted. [One reads biographical details of his life, almost wanting to shout, “Felix! Less caffeine; much less caffeine . . .”]

There was rarely time for the detailed study, the probing experimentation that Beethoven for example sustained, often over one work or even a single idea, through many years. As biographer Edward Tatnall Canby suggests, there was little time for slow ripening, and the flame of his imagination burnt too fast. At fourteen, Mendelssohn was an accomplished composer; at seventeen, a producer of masterworks; at twenty-five, one of the world’s leading musical figures; at thirty-five, he was old, with three years of broken health left.

His last major composition, the oratorio *Elijah* produced in England in 1846, according to a reviewer “touched off the emotional spring of Victorian religious respectability as no other has done.” The following year he won new English triumphs appearing as pianist and conductor of his own works, but at the price of having pushed his health to the breaking point. He returned home to Germany the spring of 1847 in a state of nervous exhaustion.

A final blow was waiting. The family closeness he cherished was broken with the sudden death of his sister, Fanny, to whom he was deeply attached, a loss from which he never seems to have recovered. To honor her memory, he composed a final string quartet, unlike any he had written: angular, urgent, ambiguous, as if searching for answers he knew unlikely to be found. Within six months, at age thirty-eight, Felix Mendelssohn was dead of a stroke. Huge crowds followed his funeral procession. Condolences came from Europe’s most important crowned and elected heads of state. A world figure had died.

Mendelssohn’s role in music history continues to be a controversial one, especially in determining to which Century it’s believed his prime allegiance belonged. He was part of that first generation of Romantic music innovators, including Hector Berlioz, Robert Schumann, Frederic Chopin, whose work begins to appear in the politically conservative 1820s and 30s, with its regular restoration of absolute monarchies – a dramatically different cultural environment from that in which Beethoven had matured, under the really electrifying impact of the American and French Revolutions, some forty years earlier.

For the artists of this new generation, when innovative rebels emerged, it must have been with the lonely sense that they were out of step with contemporary

history, not with it. As commentator S. W. Bennett has written, pervading their music, in contrast to the bold self confidence of a Child of the Revolution like Beethoven, is the poignant suspicion that life has more nagging loose ends than definitively answerable questions.

Critic Joseph Machlis suggests Mendelssohn was dedicated to a related mission: to preserve the tradition of classical forms in an age determined to turn from them. His consummate craftsmanship links him to a powerful, earlier, 18th Century tradition of balance, form, and order. Serene and elegant expression was the characteristic trait of a highly structured and conservative mind, a beautiful example of the sort of Neoclassic impulses within the developing and flowering musical Romantic movement which would leave so deep a mark several generations later on the work of Johannes Brahms.

Even so, we can never accurately say Mendelssohn was untouched by Romanticism impulses. In much of his music, the ardent portraiture, the tender lyricism, the color, fervor, and gentle melancholy are all evidence of an affinity with his own age. In England, these characteristics led to a public and critical acclaim of a foreign composer unmatched since that lavished on George Frederic Handel and Franz Joseph Haydn. That first (1879) edition of the landmark *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* devoted its longest article to him: sixty-eight pages. Bach received eight.

It was also the predictable flinching from this sort of praise which sparked opposition to Mendelssohn. We savor in hindsight the injustice of this famous contemporary dismissal of Mendelssohn's art: "He began by being a genius; he ended by being a talent." Better we decide for ourselves. From the radiant close of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture:

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Some talent. Some talent.

If we may never know what relentless expectations drove Mendelssohn to be the man and artist he became, we can be sure that had he not obeyed them, the world would be the poorer as a result. What personal price Mendelssohn may have paid for driving himself with such brutal urgency is yet one more unknown. But as we listen to his music and consider details of his remarkable life, we may recall the famous phrase, "the mind-forged manacles" by 18th Century British poet, engraver,

and mystic William Blake, who suggested the prisons into which others may try to force us are terrible, but more terrible still are the ones we create for ourselves.

As Mendelssohn's music fell into at least a moderate degree of 20th Century critical and audience neglect, the famed Spanish cellist Pablo Casals predicted that just as many of us respond more strongly to order and beauty than to dissonance and disruption, Mendelssohn's legacy would endure. "I feel sure," Casals wrote, "that he will come into his own once more."

In this bicentennial birthday year, for music lovers all over the world, that moment has already come.

Amen.

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