

PART TWO

Situating the compositions

4 Mendelssohn and the rise of musical historicism

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The relation between Mendelssohn's works and the music of the past has preoccupied musicians, critics, and scholars since their first performances. During his lifetime, the view emerged that Mendelssohn's engagement with early music was a defining aspect of his creativity, and confronting this facet of his activities remains central to understanding his works and their significance. Successive generations have, of course, responded in different ways to Mendelssohn's compositional historicism, yet for much of the period from the 1840s to the 1960s it provided a focus for negative assessments of his output: even today, some scholars – disconcerted by the sheer extent of the composer's investment in the past – represent his responses to earlier music as fabricated musical kitsch.¹ In general, however, our post-modern sensibilities are more sympathetic to Mendelssohn's achievement. There is, after all, an essential kinship between his concerns and our own (ironically, the current enthusiasm for his choral works was stimulated by a distinctively postmodern form of historicism, historically informed performance). Indeed, it could be claimed that, in this regard, Mendelssohn was the first composer of modernity: the first musician to wrestle with the dilemma of being dispossessed of a *lingua franca*.

In recent years, several musicologists have reappraised Mendelssohn's compositional historicism: the final section of this chapter outlines different interpretive strategies and reconsiders some of the issues involved. My principal focus, however, is on reconstructing the development of Mendelssohn's historical consciousness and exploring how his shifting conception of history shaped his engagement with earlier works and styles. While scholars have devoted much attention to stylistic pluralism in his music, it is imperative to acknowledge that the matrix of ideas underpinning Mendelssohn's historicism was similarly eclectic. In exploring these aspects of the composer's relation to the past, it is also essential to locate his music and ideas within the broader discourses of contemporary historicism. While his predilection for the past may appear deviant when viewed alongside, say, the music of Chopin and Berlioz, it reflects broader trends in music and the other arts.

Historicism and modernity

It should not be supposed that the term historicism is used here, as in musical writings of the 1960s and 1970s, to refer to an excessive veneration of the past or dependence on earlier styles. Few, if any, of Mendelssohn's works fit in with Carl Dahlhaus' notion of historicism as a "twilight zone between the dead past and the denied present," or with Walter Wiora's view that it involves the imitation of the old outweighing the invention of the new.² To equate historicism with the literal replication of earlier styles not only renders it peripheral to nineteenth-century music, but also diverges substantially from the current use of the concept in other disciplines.³ Neither should it be assumed – in relation to broader cultural and intellectual developments – that it indicates solely the emergence of historical relativism, and thus stands opposed to the elevation of classical norms or suprahistorical truths.⁴ Rather, historicism encompasses a constellation of competing tendencies, a circle of problems generated by the birth of a new form of historical consciousness. In describing the upheaval that occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Michel Foucault argues that as a result of the awareness of the historicity of nature, language and human products, Western civilization was "dehistoricized": a hitherto uniform and essentially unchanging inheritance shattered into a thousand alien pasts; artifacts came to symbolize fragmentation and transience rather than the unity and permanence of a natural order.⁵ In Mendelssohn's Germany, the ramifications of this epistemic break were particularly acute. Indeed, this shift is mirrored in microcosm within the composer's own artistic and intellectual development, and was largely responsible for his compositional crisis of the early 1830s.

Even at the time of its emergence, in the final decades of the eighteenth century, historicism comprised a variety of conflicting stances. One strand was the impulse to retrieve and repossess something believed to have been lost by modern civilization: to counter the alienation of the modern subject by reassimilating the past within the present. Another was the desire to challenge contemporary norms, through asserting the validity of the art of a plurality of peoples and periods. A further dimension to historicism, the impulse to elevate monuments from the past as models for the present, interacted uneasily with this burgeoning relativism. Indeed, the conflict between these stances – the realization that time-honored norms were no longer sustainable, and the attempt to compensate for this by constructing new absolutes – is fundamental to historicism and differentiates it from earlier, classicizing tendencies. A clear example of this tension can be seen in Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (*History of Ancient Art*, 1764) and in critical reactions to it.⁶ While Winckelmann

sought to reconcile his historical methodology with the elevation of Greek art as a universal model, others regarded these perspectives as antithetical. The increasing attention paid to the historical study of art generated the conviction that every work and style is the unique product of its particular social, religious, and political context; in addition, the plurality of historical models available to the modern artist rendered the notion of a return to origins difficult to sustain. As a consequence, Herder dismissed Winckelmann's doctrine of classical imitation as a vain delusion, considering the time of the "beloved sweet simplicity" of ancient art to be irretrievably lost.⁷ And while Goethe's revelatory encounter with Strasbourg Minster enabled him to disregard the precepts of his age, he did not elevate Gothic architecture as a source for modern artistic renewal: instead, he argued that it is a false tendency to seek to revivify cherished aspects of the past, since they developed under "completely different conditions."⁸

While the enthusiasm of Goethe and Herder for neglected periods and styles was tempered by relativism, other commentators turned to them as a means of revivifying modern art. In the years around 1800, this trend is particularly apparent in relation to Gothic architecture, medieval poetry and early Italian painting. Famously, the poet Heinrich Heine contended that the work of the Romantic circle – Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, and Novalis – amounted to "nothing other than the revival of the poetry of the Middle Ages, as it manifested itself in song, sculpture, in art and life."⁹ While Heine's polemic provides an oversimplified view of the output of the Romantic circle, he does not exaggerate the enthusiasm with which they exhorted contemporaries to emulate the techniques and spiritual fervor of medieval art. In championing early Italian painting, the Romantic circle, like Herder and Goethe, proceeded from a critique of neo-classicism. Yet in seeking to free art from prescriptions and proscriptions abstracted from antiquity, they represent the art of Raphael and his predecessors as a universally valid ideal. The historical strategies adopted by Schlegel demand attention, since they epitomize a paradox fundamental to nineteenth-century historicism. Although Schlegel admitted that he was responsive only to old paintings, his idealization of early Italian art cannot be understood as an indiscriminate or ahistorical *Schwärmerei* for the past.¹⁰ Rather, he appropriated the concepts and methodology that Winckelmann had applied to ancient Greek art in order to construct a golden age of medieval painting: for Schlegel, as for Winckelmann, it is clear that only through a historical approach could a suprahistorical ideal emerge.¹¹

For Schlegel (who converted to Catholicism in 1808), the revival of the techniques and spirituality of early Catholic painting provided the sole source for renewing modern art. This stance found a practical application in

the work of the Brotherhood of St. Luke or “Nazarenes,” a group of German painters, led by Friedrich Overbeck and Franz Pforr, who settled in Rome in 1809. Inspired by the writings of Schlegel and Wackenroder, the Nazarenes sought to challenge neo-classical principles by returning to the unreflective spirituality, subject matter and fresco techniques of Italian painting up to Raphael. While Heine dismissed the paintings of the Nazarenes – “the long-haired Christian new German school” – as mere parodies of old Italian art, others regarded them as its rebirth.¹² Even Goethe praised drawings by Overbeck and Peter Cornelius as “stupendous things,” contending that “this is the first time in the history of art that significant talents have shaped themselves backwards, by returning into the mother’s womb in order to initiate a new artistic epoch.”¹³ Schlegel laid a similar stress on the “living freshness” of the Nazarenes’ achievement, arguing that it was a preparatory step on the path to a new golden age of religious art: only through modeling their works on those of Raphael and his school – and being “completely filled and penetrated by their spirit” – can artists progress toward a “truly modern art for the modern age.”¹⁴

Not all commentators shared Schlegel’s conviction that the rebirth of art required the revival of the techniques and spirituality of the fifteenth century. Still less were they willing to tolerate the degree of archaism that he considered permissible in the pursuit of this ideal. Crucial in this regard was the view that every style is the unique embodiment of its age and context: a corollary to this was the notion that, to be of value, a modern work must be the authentic expression of its author’s convictions and world-view, requiring the use of contemporary materials and forms. This position received its most influential formulation in Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* (given at the University of Berlin in the 1820s and published posthumously in 1835). For Hegel, the perfection and ideal of art was located in the distant past, since the absolute identity of spiritual content and sensory form was attained only in ancient Greek art. Arguing that the Christian era charts an ever-increasing disintegration of this relation, he claimed that the final stage of this process had been initiated by his contemporaries, in whose art can be seen “the severance of the sides whose complete identity affords the proper essence of art, and therefore the decay and dissolution of art itself.”¹⁵ Hegel concedes that modern artists are no longer tied to a particular material or mode of representation, and in choosing their forms are not restricted to the styles and resources of the present. He insists, nonetheless, that the external forms adopted must be the authentic expression of the spirit of the age and the product of the artist’s personal conviction: “the content must constitute the substance, the innermost truth of his consciousness” and must “shine clearly and thoroughly through the external material in which it has enshrined itself.”¹⁶ Modern artists cannot take on a mentality

from the past in order to gain a spiritual foundation for their productions; with Schlegel in mind, Hegel stresses that those who convert to Catholicism for the sake of their art can gain no sustenance from a world-view foreign to the present.¹⁷ Neither can the artist make use of forms that are ineluctably linked to a superseded mentality; while the study of older techniques and styles may be beneficial, they cannot be replicated in modern art:

No Homer, Sophocles, etc., no Dante, Ariosto or Shakespeare can appear in our day; what was so magnificently sung, what was so freely expressed, has been expressed; these are materials, ways of looking at them and treating them which have been sung once and for all. Only the present is fresh, the rest is dull and stale.¹⁸

This conclusion is hardly surprising, given that Hegel's philosophy of history is grounded on the principle of non-repetition. Yet even though Hegel is hostile to artistic historicism, his insistence that the stylistic freedom of the modern artist is part of the "effect and progress of art itself" tends to mitigate the force of his strictures.¹⁹ Indeed, his demand that the use of older forms must exhibit tangible signs of the modern spirit could be interpreted as a charter for eclecticism. Moreover, it is evident that Hegel viewed the broadening of interest in earlier styles as having benefited modern painting, and he does not question the advantages gained by German culture through its exposure to diverse forms of art.²⁰

The latter theme was of fundamental importance to German thought in the first half of the nineteenth century, often accompanied by the notion that it was Germany's destiny to appropriate and unite the artistic products of every nation and age. The idea that Germany had a historical mission to create a *Weltliteratur* resonates through many discussions of the appropriation of earlier styles.²¹ The music critic Franz Brendel, for example, claimed – in portentous Hegelian language – that it was "the world-historical task of Germany to assemble the spirits of all other peoples around the throne of its universal monarchy."²² Not only had German philosophy and literature forged a great whole from "the entirety of the world's previous development," but a "world music" (*Weltmusik*) had been created from the fusion of diverse styles.²³

From the second decade of the nineteenth century, composers increasingly experimented with the replication and combination of a range of earlier styles. Composers even emulated the didactic programs of historical concerts, in which pieces from a variety of periods were performed in chronological order: Louis Spohr's Symphony No. 6 in G (1839) bore the subtitle "Historical Symphony in the Style and Taste of Four Different Periods," while in the previous year Otto Nicolai had planned a historical concert consisting of his own works in a range of earlier styles.²⁴ While such

eclecticism was by no means the norm in music of this period, composers were subject to the same stylistic anxieties as their counterparts in the other arts. The problems generated by the awareness of a multiplicity of earlier styles are especially evident in architectural debates of this period, in which the question “in what style should we build?” (the title of an 1828 pamphlet by Heinrich Hübsch) centered on choosing an orientation from among competing historical ideals.²⁵ One solution was to regard each style as equally valid, an option evident in the artistic ventures of Ludwig I of Bavaria:

Whoever strolls around Munich . . . has the best opportunity to become acquainted with the entire history of architecture from the present back to Egyptian art. This stone artistic atlas remains constantly in view. Beginning with the style of the Renaissance, the models range from the Germanic, Romanesque, Byzantine, Roman and Greek styles, and will culminate – in all probability – in the imitation of oriental buildings.²⁶

Different solutions to the crisis of architecture are evident in the work of Karl Friedrich Schinkel, whose buildings and designs reflect shifting conceptions of how the past could be used in the present. In 1810, Schinkel produced two contrasting plans (one a Doric temple, the other a vaulted Gothic hall) for a mausoleum for Queen Luise of Prussia, in order to demonstrate the suitability of the Gothic style for national monuments.²⁷ If these designs constitute a manifesto in favor of Gothic architecture, Schinkel’s later approach was less dogmatic. His eclecticism is apparent in four different designs – two classical and two medieval – for the Friedrich-Werdersche church in Berlin, and especially in his plans (1815–16) for a *Befreiungsdom* (a memorial cathedral to the wars of liberation).²⁸ Here, Schinkel’s solution to the problem of choosing from among the ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Gothic styles was to combine all three, thus unifying in one design the three forms of art – Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic – that Hegel identified in his lectures on aesthetics. In the 1820s and 1830s, Schinkel increasingly advocated the Greek style as the unique paradigm of architecture; his chief challenge, therefore, was to reconcile this ideal with the demand for contemporaneity, while also acknowledging the merits of intervening styles: “We might draw nearer a solution if we could remain true to ancient Greek architecture in its intellectual principle all the while expanding it to accommodate the conditions of our new epoch and undertaking the harmonic admixture of the best of all in between periods.”²⁹

Reconstructing Mendelssohn’s historical consciousness

Of all the composers active in the first half of the nineteenth century, it is Mendelssohn whose output provides the closest musical analogue to that of

his fellow Berliner, Schinkel. Like Schinkel, Mendelssohn experimented with a variety of earlier styles, yet regarded only one – that of Bach – as an ideal valid in a range of different genres. In addition, it is vital to acknowledge that, as with Schinkel, Mendelssohn's historical orientation shifted significantly over the course of his life. This must be borne in mind in interpreting his works: conceptions that are applicable to the *Sieben Charakterstücke* (*Seven Characteristic Pieces*) op. 7 (1827) or the early choral music may have little relevance to *St. Paul* (1836) or the Six Preludes and Fugues op. 35 (1837). Providing a detailed reconstruction of how Mendelssohn's historical consciousness emerged and changed goes beyond the scope of the present essay. It is necessary, however, to outline the key phases of this development, not least because the applicability of historicism to Mendelssohn's earlier output is questionable.³⁰

In his childhood and early youth, Mendelssohn's exposure to earlier music stemmed primarily from two sources: the regular cultivation of Baroque music in his home, and his participation in the performances of the Berlin Singakademie and Freitagskollegium. He was first introduced to the music of Bach by his mother Lea; her interest in the *Well-Tempered Clavier* does not suggest antiquarianism, but rather testifies to an enduring family tradition stemming from contact with Bach's pupil Johann Philipp Kirnberger. A similar perpetuation of tradition is evident in Mendelssohn's composition teacher Carl Friedrich Zelter, whose work and ideas were fundamental in shaping his historical orientation. In his numerous memoranda to the Prussian government from the first decade of the nineteenth century, Zelter repeatedly stressed that his activities were the last remnant of Berlin's musical heyday under Frederick the Great, arguing that the value of the Singakademie lay in its preservation of this tradition.³¹ A similar appeal to tradition is apparent in a letter to Goethe following Mendelssohn's celebrated performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*, in which Zelter represented himself as Berlin's true guardian of Bach's legacy: "For fifty years I have venerated Bachian genius. Friedemann [Bach] died here, Emanuel Bach was a chamber musician at the court here, Kirnberger and Agricola were pupils of the elder Bach . . . I myself have taught for thirty years in this tradition."³²

This sense of continuity with the past was clearly communicated to Mendelssohn, whose own contrapuntal studies with Zelter were oriented around this Bachian genealogy.³³ Also important for Mendelssohn's historical orientation was Zelter's endeavor to preserve traditional generic distinctions, and thus to provide a counterweight to the degeneracy he perceived in modern musical culture.³⁴ In Zelter's view, composers no longer heeded the dividing lines between the "grand, serious church style," the theatrical style, and the chamber style, with the result that "the genres of the beautiful are nullified"; a key role for his Singakademie was therefore to restore

musical taste through the performance of Classical works that exemplified the true nature of the church and oratorio styles.³⁵ Throughout his life, Mendelssohn's compositional engagement with the past was conditioned by a similar conception of genre: this is apparent in his mature orchestral music – in which he was reluctant to depart from the structural norms established by Haydn and Mozart – as well as in his religious works.³⁶ As for Zelter, the works of Bach and Handel provided models of the possibilities and restrictions of the oratorio style, while Palestrina epitomized liturgical music in its purest form. The impact of Zelter's musical and aesthetic conservatism is apparent in the young Mendelssohn's letters, which present outspoken critiques of contemporary taste and a rigid conception of the church style. Such views were reinforced by his reading of Anton Friedrich Justus Thibaut's *Über Reinheit der Tonkunst* (*On Purity in Music*, 1824) and by his acquaintance with its author, whom he met in September 1827. While even Zelter regarded Thibaut's antiquarianism as one-sided, Mendelssohn acclaimed him for enabling him to appreciate old Italian music.³⁷ It is significant for the composer's later development that he attributed this revelation not to Thibaut's historical or technical insight but to his enthusiasm and instinctual understanding; no less important is Mendelssohn's insistence that, in spite of the value of other religious music, "everything is gathered together" in that of Bach.³⁸

The nature of the teenage Mendelssohn's devotion to Bach requires clarification, since it has sometimes been misunderstood as the product of priggish religiosity or a yearning for the past. These perspectives ignore the unique nature of Mendelssohn's musical upbringing, in which the music of the past formed a "living present"; indeed, in several letters from this period, Mendelssohn pairs Bach with Beethoven, representing him as a vital part of modern German culture.³⁹ The coupling of Bach and Beethoven is strikingly apparent in Mendelssohn's output from this period. While his Piano Sonata in E major and String Quartet in A minor evidence a creative agon with some of the most idiosyncratic of Beethoven's late works, other pieces testify that Bach's music also represented – as Wulf Konold's argues – a "current compositional challenge," a living yardstick against which Mendelssohn measured his achievements.⁴⁰ The latter stimulus is clearest, perhaps, in the Fugue in A major from the *Sieben Charakterstücke*, in which the young composer ventured to surpass the scale and grandeur of his models (the ricercare fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*). While the impact of Bach also resonates in movements from the String Sinfonias (1821–24), their primary models are from the mid-eighteenth century, more specifically, the court of Frederick the Great. These works, described by Lea Mendelssohn as having been composed "in the manner of the ancients," do not suggest an impulse to revive a dead idiom but rather testify to the conservative taste of Zelter

and the musical institutions of Berlin.⁴¹ Similarly, in Mendelssohn's choral music from these years, his engagement with German Baroque music and the eighteenth-century Italian *stile antico* should not be understood as a self-conscious archaizing. His quasi-liturgical pieces, such as the *Te Deum* (1826) and *Tu es Petrus* (1827), reflect an impulse to master idioms that he was continually exposed to via the Singakademie, and thus to demonstrate his fluency in every sphere of modern musical life.

The historical orientation reflected in Mendelssohn's output from the mid 1820s is different from that embodied in his later works. Rather than consciously engaging with diverse historical styles, these pieces represent the assimilation of the music that surrounded him in his youth. In this period, as Susanna Großmann-Vendrey aptly comments, Mendelssohn's conception of music history resembled a "colorful kaleidoscope"; in the absence of a developed historical awareness, he approached the works of the past in terms of their aesthetic impression and of the generic criteria passed on by Zelter. Accordingly, his compositional responses to earlier music cannot be understood in terms of historicism, but rather constitute the forging of a means of expression from generic models. Aspects of this approach, to be sure, continued to inform his composing. Yet it became difficult for him to reconcile the essentially ahistorical nature of his youthful engagement with the past with his mature intellectual outlook: even the conviction that Bach represented a unique, timeless ideal was to be challenged. As a result of his exposure to the views of Hegel and Goethe, his deepening knowledge of music history, and his contact with an extraordinary range of art during his travels between 1829 and 1833, Mendelssohn increasingly regarded works and styles as historically contingent: the exemplars of the church and oratorio styles receded into a foreign past, becoming ideals estranged from the present.

One factor contributing to this development was Mendelssohn's revival of the *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829, an event normally regarded as emblematic of the absorption of the past into nineteenth-century musical life. Such assimilation, however, was complicated by the awareness of cultural change, as is evident from Mendelssohn's conviction that the work required drastic cuts in order to be reclaimed for a modern audience. While Mendelssohn did not share Zelter's belief that that Bach's choral music required wholesale adaptation, his experience of directing the *Passion* led him to concur with his teacher's view that "Bach, in spite of all his originality, was a child of his milieu and his age."⁴² Moreover, as the indignant comments of Zelter and various Leipzig musicians – who thought of themselves as having long sustained a living tradition – attest, the revival of the *St. Matthew Passion* was widely represented as marking the rediscovery of Bach: the notion of a living Bach tradition was increasingly displaced by the view of his works as monuments

disinterred from the past.⁴³ Thus, while Mendelssohn's performance of the *Passion* catapulted him into the position of a leader of the early music revival, it weakened his sense that Bach formed a part of the living present: this development served to problematize the issue of how modern composers should respond to his works (Mendelssohn's chorale cantatas from these years provide a variety of responses to this question).

Another factor that shaped Mendelssohn's historical consciousness was his exposure to Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, which he attended in the winter of 1828–29. There is little evidence to suggest that he immersed himself deeply in Hegel's thought (indeed, it is clear that he shared something of Zelter's antipathy toward the philosopher), yet he was sufficiently well acquainted with his aesthetics to be able to recount Hegel's ideas to Goethe.⁴⁴ In addition, as letters from the early 1830s testify, Mendelssohn was both exasperated and troubled by Hegel's prognostication of the death of art.⁴⁵ A further formative experience was the composer's final visit to Goethe in 1830. During his fortnight's stay in Weimar, Mendelssohn gave what Goethe described as "historical exhibitions" on the piano, in order to illustrate the evolution of music: "Every morning, for about an hour, I have to play works by a variety of great composers in chronological order, and must explain to him how they contributed to the advance of music."⁴⁶ While Mendelssohn already had some familiarity with the historical development of styles, his conversations with Goethe helped to shape his mature view of music history as a continuum governed by the laws of natural growth. As will become evident, Mendelssohn himself found it difficult to reconcile his compositional inclinations with this linear conception of stylistic development.

Mendelssohn's conception of history as a continuum was strengthened by his exposure to a wealth of earlier art during his travels between 1829 and 1833. This is particularly evident in the letters from his first journey to Italy, in which fragmentary reflections on the task of the modern artist occur in tandem with his responses to the monuments of the past. Two decisions, whether conscious or unconscious, emerged from Mendelssohn's contemplation of the relation between past and present. The first was a rejection of what he viewed as a one-sided focus on one particular historical period or composer: later, he was to note that "it is a constant source of annoyance that one person can see good only in Beethoven and another only in Palestrina and a third only in Mozart or Bach: either all four or none of them."⁴⁷ It is for this reason that he rejected the art of the Nazarenes, since their devotion to Raphael and his predecessors led them to scorn Titian and more recent masters.⁴⁸ Mendelssohn's second decision was to ground his conception of history on an instinctual, empathetic identification with the great masters and, so far as it was possible, to cut himself off from more critical modes of apprehending the past. His impulse to become absorbed in

artworks and make them his own – a notion that has much in common with Romantic hermeneutics – is evident in a remark about Goethe's *Alexis und Dora*: "as with all masterpieces, I often suddenly and instinctively feel that it could have been mine if a similar opportunity had befallen me, and that it was merely by chance that he expressed it first."⁴⁹ But Mendelssohn's notion of empathetic appropriation did not entirely resolve his (re)creative dilemmas: it represents a form of denial, an attempt to retrieve the unreflective and secure relation to the past that he had enjoyed in his youth. In a letter to Zelter defending his compositional historicism, Mendelssohn inveighed against "aestheticians and scholars of the arts [who] torment themselves by wanting to prove from external criteria why this is beautiful and that less so, through epochs, style, and whatever else their pigeon-holes might be called."⁵⁰ Here, Mendelssohn seeks to externalize his mature historical consciousness, to project the factors impeding his engagement with the past onto aestheticians and scholars, in order to represent himself as an unreflective artist. But only by confronting this problem directly – through composition – was Mendelssohn able to attempt a reconciliation between his competing artistic impulses and ideas.

Back to the future: the problem of religious music

The emergence of Mendelssohn's mature historical consciousness coincided with the publication (between 1828 and 1834) of several pioneering historical studies of early music. Mendelssohn was acquainted with three of the authors of these texts, Giuseppe Baini, François-Joseph Fétis and Raphael Georg Kiesewetter; a fourth, Carl von Winterfeld, was not known to the composer, who singled out his *Johannes Pierluigi von Palestrina* (1832) as an example of the misuse of history:

Even if such people feel an aversion to the present, they can provide no alternative to it and should be left well alone . . . The men have yet to come who will show the way again: they will lead others back to the old and correct path (which should really be called the forward path), but not as a result of writing books.⁵¹

Given the debates on church music that raged in this period, it is understandable that Mendelssohn mistook Winterfeld's dryly objective study for a polemical tract. More significant is his contention that musical renewal through the past was the responsibility solely of practicing artists: while here, Mendelssohn resembles John the Baptist awaiting a musical Messiah, in the ensuing years he increasingly took on the latter role himself. Mendelssohn's works from 1832 to 1837 testify to his desire not only to resolve his own

central compositional dilemma, but to provide exemplars of the true use of history in the present. His dogged pursuit of this goal is the factor responsible for the extraordinary gulf between much of his music from this period and the dominant genres, styles, and ethos of the time.⁵² Yet it was his historically orientated works – in particular, *St. Paul* – that led to him being acclaimed as the most important German composer of his day; moreover, these works served subsequently as focal points for assessments of his significance.

Before exploring the broader interpretive issues raised by historicism in this music, it is necessary to discuss how the composer himself justified its eclecticism. In a letter from 1835, Abraham Mendelssohn affirmed his confidence that his son's first oratorio would successfully solve the problem of "combining old ways of thinking [*alten Sinns*] with new materials," avoiding the mistakes of the Nazarenes, whose attempts to regain the religiosity of earlier art resulted in mannerism.⁵³ Such certainty was not shared by all of Mendelssohn's confidants, some of who believed that the sphere of religious music was inherently dangerous for a composer so devoted to the music of the past. In line with his increasing distrust of aesthetic and historical speculation, Mendelssohn gave no substantive account of the relation between *St. Paul* and its Baroque models. The sole significant discussions of this matter – in letters to Zelter and Mendelssohn's friend Eduard Devrient – come from earlier in the 1830s; it should be borne in mind, therefore, that they reflect a different stage in the composer's intellectual development. Nonetheless, these remarks, responding to criticisms that some of the church music he had written in Italy showed too great a dependency on Bach, reveal at least a part of the foundations of his mature historical thinking. In a letter to Devrient from 1831, Mendelssohn initially affects a disarming naivety and nonchalance: "If it has similarity to Seb. Bach, again, I cannot do anything about it, for I wrote it just according to the mood I was in . . . I am sure you do not think that I would merely copy his forms, without the content; if it were so, I should feel such distaste, and such emptiness, that I could never finish a piece."⁵⁴ A more substantial exploration of the matter occurs in a letter to Zelter from 1830:

Nothing is valid except that which has flowed in deepest sincerity [*Ernst*] from the innermost soul . . . If the object alone has not given rise to the work, it will never "pass from heart to heart" [*Herz zu Herz schaffen*"] and consequently imitation is the same as the most superficial appearance of the most foreign thoughts. Certainly, no one can prevent me from enjoying and continuing to work at what the great masters have bequeathed to me, because not everyone should start from scratch, but it should be a continued working from one's own powers, not a lifeless repetition of what already exists.⁵⁵

These passages present a conglomerate of ideas drawn from a variety of sources. On one level, they reflect Hegel's influence: Mendelssohn's concern that his music might exhibit a disunity of form and content shows an awareness of Hegel's requirement that the external appearance of a work embodies the substance of the artist's consciousness. Mendelssohn's concern with demonstrating that his church music originated in "deepest sincerity from the innermost soul" is an attempt to show that similarities to older works present in his music are the product of a comparable religious spirit. He implicitly distances his activities from those of the Nazarenes, arguing that his compositions are the product of conviction (Hegel's *Ernst*) and spontaneity ("according to the mood I was in") rather than of a reflective impulse to appropriate old forms. Just as evident in the second passage, however, is a reliance on the ideas of Goethe, to an extent that renders it of limited value as a testimony of Mendelssohn's compositional intentions. As Thomas Schmidt has noted, the phrase "Herz zu Herz[en] schaffen" is a quotation from Part I of Goethe's *Faust*; in addition, Mendelssohn appears to share Goethe's contempt for originality and "creation out-of-oneself" (*Aus-sich-Schöpfen*).⁵⁶ It is in the last sentence of this extract, in which Mendelssohn represents repetition as contrary to the processes of history, that his dependence on Goethe becomes fully evident. Not only is the idea of creatively building on the past fundamental to Goethe's outlook, but what at first appears to be a confessional artistic credo on the part of Mendelssohn is in fact a paraphrase of a passage from Goethe's *Italienische Reise*.⁵⁷ The extent to which Mendelssohn's letters from Italy constitute literary exercises in Goethe's manner is well known; even so, it seems extraordinary that in repudiating imitation, Mendelssohn should simultaneously resort to it.

Perhaps the most telling remark on Mendelssohn's compositional historicism comes not from these letters, but from a plea to the program committee in Düsseldorf regarding the first performance of *St. Paul*. Here, he reveals his apprehension concerning the reception of the work, an anxiety centering on its relation to the great models of the genre: "I confess that it would displease me if the entire second day [of the festival] were to be filled with classical pieces from the past, and that I would prefer it if at least one modern piece be included alongside them, in order that my oratorio should not come into too direct comparison with the works of the great masters."⁵⁸ Mendelssohn's comments might be viewed simply as modesty, were it not for his remark about modern pieces: he appears assured that *St. Paul* solved the problems of composing religious music as well as the works of any of his contemporaries, yet convinced that failure was inevitable in a comparison with the masterpieces of Bach or Handel. Mendelssohn did not share the views of those, such as the aesthetician Eduard Krüger, who were convinced that the modern age was "incapable of the representation of

sacred forms”; such a perspective was inimical to his project for the renewal of musical culture, a salvage operation grounded on an engagement with earlier styles.⁵⁹ But he evidently regarded the possibility of success in this field as limited and relative, and dependent on “continuing to work at” the forms of his generic models.

Reinterpreting Mendelssohn’s historicism

Given the delicate balancing act of attempting to salvage religious music while satisfying the demands of modernity, it is hardly surprising that *St. Paul* stimulated critical controversy in the decades following its premiere. This debate coincided with the strengthening of anti-historicist polemics in relation to the other arts: in the late 1830s and 1840s, Young Hegelian critics and aestheticians (such as Friedrich Theodor Vischer) and more seasoned campaigners (such as Heine) waged war against the Nazarenes and against retrospective tendencies in sculpture and architecture. Mendelssohn provided a musical focus for such debates. Indeed, as the most prominent compositional encounters with the past, *St. Paul* and the music for Sophocles’ *Antigone* had a symbolic function in contemporary musical discourse, serving as emblems of a broader artistic problem.⁶⁰ As a result, many of these discussions pursue comparisons with activities in the other arts, albeit often at the expense of a detailed consideration of the nature of the stylistic pluralism in Mendelssohn’s music. These texts (many of which have still not been submitted to detailed scholarly analysis) are of crucial significance, since the assumptions and terminology that emerged in the 1840s were to pervade discussions of this topic for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Two contrasting gambits, which continue to obscure the nature and function of Mendelssohn’s historicism, emerged in this period. On the one hand, critics hostile to the composer promulgated the notion that his relation to earlier music was a matter of passive dependency, a parasitical reliance on historical styles as a means of manufacturing a religious idiom (the best-known examples of this tactic are the discussions in Heine’s *Lutezia*).⁶¹ On the other hand, those critics more favorable to Mendelssohn’s achievement – such as Eduard Hanslick and, to a lesser extent, Brendel – stressed that in spite of their eclecticism, his works present a seamless welding together of old and new (it is astonishing how often one encounters the verb *verschmelzen* in German discussions of this matter).⁶²

In spite of the persistence of these ideas, they are strangely at odds with the music of *St. Paul*. Very few passages of this or indeed any other work by

Mendelssohn suggest an impulse to replicate earlier idioms, or resemble – in Heine’s phrase – “slavish copies” of Bach and Handel.⁶³ Yet conversely, the nature of the stylistic pluralism present in *St. Paul* palpably contradicts the notion of a seamless organic unity: Baroque and modern elements, forms and techniques collide and coincide in virtually every movement, while the premise shaping the work – the notion that the future of the genre lay in the synthesis of the Handelian epic oratorio with the Bachian church oratorio – elevates eclecticism to a structural principle. How, then, might we interpret the stylistic pluralism of this and other works, and the function of historicism in Mendelssohn’s output? Several promising alternative strategies are hinted at in criticism from the composer’s own lifetime. One option is to resist viewing *St. Paul* as an autonomous work and instead to regard it as a more complex entity, resembling the single-authored historical concerts of Spohr and Nicolai: a related idea was articulated by the critic Gottfried Wilhelm Fink, who regarded *St. Paul* as “so deliberately Handelian-Bachian-Mendelssohnian” that its primary purpose was to provide listeners with an accessible introduction to the Baroque oratorio.⁶⁴ Another perspective – whose formalism, however, is at odds with Mendelssohn’s representations of his intentions – is to view his appropriation of earlier styles as a kind of linguistic game: this notion, too, can be traced back to contemporary perceptions of *St. Paul*, since Schumann commented on its “masterly play with every manner of composition.”⁶⁵

An alternative approach is to explore how Mendelssohn’s engagement with earlier styles and models enacts a critique either of them or of his own compositional premises. This is not to suggest that he set out to parody the works of Bach or Handel, or that he sought – in a manner comparable to that of Heine’s poetry – to make the impossibility of modern religious music the subject matter of his own compositions.⁶⁶ But while Mendelssohn’s procedures do not suggest a polemical confrontation with his models, they nonetheless present – whether through affirmation, omission or reworking – interpretations of earlier music; moreover, in spite of the composer’s impulse to represent his appropriations as unreflective, the works themselves arguably contradict this. Both Friedhelm Krummacher and Peter Mercer-Taylor have explored the ways in which the chorale accompaniments in *St. Paul* function as an internalized commentary: for the latter, *St. Paul* thus provides a critical reflection on stylistic pluralism as much as an embodiment of it.⁶⁷ Alternatively, one can view Mendelssohn’s engagement with the music of the past as akin to the activities of the translator: elsewhere, I have explored how theories of translation can help us understand the dialogic nature of his works and their attempted recovery and adaptation of the spiritual content of other works.⁶⁸ No single critical interpretation,

of course, can satisfactorily explain either the functions that Mendelssohn assigned to historicism or the stylistic processes involved. But while there is still much work to be accomplished in this field, one breakthrough has been achieved: Mendelssohn's historicism – until recently a source of embarrassed bewilderment for his devotees – is increasingly viewed as one of the most significant and valuable aspects of his creativity.