

Mendelssohn

Twelve String Symphonies

London Festival Orchestra
Ross Pople *cond*

Hyperion CDA44081/3 (3CDs: 203 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

Incidentally, I well remember how I first got to know Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's string symphonies. I was a freshman in musicology at the Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, and one of our professors told us at length about how Schubert's early symphonies reflected the composer's struggle to appropriate the classical heritage. It occurred to me that a similar examination of Mendelssohn's early symphonies could prove equally interesting, so I went to the library, opened the respective volumes of the complete edition – and was completely appalled by what I saw. Instead of recalling the late Haydn and Mozart – not to mention Beethoven – symphonies, the music looked and sounded rather 'pre-classical' (back then such a term was not yet taboo); if anything, reminding me of C.P.E. Bach's *sinfonie*. Today, of course, I can easily compile a list of features that inspired my overall impression: the complete lack of wind instruments, the distinctly 'one-effect' opening movements (with no conspicuous thematic separation of the secondary key area) and the three-movement structure (in the first six of the series) all suggested a pre-Haydn aesthetics – not to mention that writing symphonies by the dozen and performing them with continuo accompaniment must have seemed anachronistic in the early 1820s even by notoriously conservative Berlin standards. The numerous fugal sections just add to this chronological confusion. While on the one hand they would seem archaic and slightly out-of-place already in an authentic mid-eighteenth-century *sinfonia*, with the increasing influence of Mozartian models (a clear tendency in the second half of the series) they are, somewhat paradoxically, less and less at odds with the overall style. (I must also add here that the front illustration of the recording, a sort of *fête galante* dancing scene by Nicolas Lancret from around 1730, is not particularly helpful in orienting the listener with respect to chronology or style, and for me fails to invoke the character of Mendelssohn's music altogether.)

I apologise for such a lengthy historical introduction, but these stylistic incongruities pose two crucial questions that cannot be ignored by either performer or reviewer. The first: is the greater concert-going (or record-buying) public really supposed to be interested in this music? Granted, Mendelssohn was a child prodigy, but he too had to get over his early (or, to borrow Greg Vitercik's cogent term, rather 'pre-early'¹) works that might belong more to the study room than to the concert/recording repertoire. After all, Mozart was also a child prodigy (if not *the* child prodigy), but how much of his pre-14-year-old (that is, roughly pre-1770) output is played anywhere today? Furthermore, one could

¹ Greg Vitercik, *The Early Works of Felix Mendelssohn: A Study in the Romantic Sonata Style* (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992): 41.

argue that in Mendelssohn's case the performance of such works is considerably more dangerous than with Mozart: while acquaintance with a few charmingly unskilful juvenilia is unlikely to overturn the well-established 'Mozart, the child of the gods' image, a similar Mendelssohn opus might successfully perpetuate the 'pretty form, but not much else' stereotype. (NB: arguably most musicians will agree that Mendelssohn never made it quite as high as Mozart in the 1780s, but to discuss that with any relevance one should draw upon the works from his last decade for comparison.) In any case, I tend to assume that the relatively frequent appearance of some of these string symphonies in the modern concert hall is due more to the limited strings repertoire than to any kind of conscious effort to rediscover a 'misunderestimated' master.

The other crucial question concerns performance practice. If the composer indeed started out from mid-eighteenth-century models, but increasingly incorporated influences from the Vienna classics and had all this blend performed in an 1820s salon, to which style should we adapt our 'performing attitude'? I should frankly admit that, for a C.P.E. Bach symphony, any 'non-historical' performance sounds at best a compromise to me today, since I am yet to hear a 'modern' (that is, actually, traditional) performance wherein the richness of gestures and the audacity of sound effects could do justice to the minute details of the score just half as much as some of the excellent period-instrument performances I have been lucky enough to witness. I am by no means trying to preach a kind of 'historically informed' fundamentalism here; the point is less whether the players use gut strings or start the trill from above, but rather whether the astonishing diversity of musical characters can find its way from the score to the sound experience. Nevertheless, in order to achieve this, some (if you wish, indeed 'historically informed') stylistic contextualization would still seem an inevitable prerequisite. I was sad to hear a few evident French *ouverture* emulations go practically unrecognized (that is, played with faceless 'un-overdotting' and even quasi-legato, as most frustratingly at the beginning of No. 4), or to encounter an unaccompanied free violin passage played in strict rhythm at the end of the Andante in No. 3 (where the freedom implied by the last-note fermata should evidently be extended to the whole phrase, as appropriate to a kind of cadenza). One should of course not forget that we have a re-issue on our hands here, but such character identifications would hardly have been an over-expectation in the second half of the 1980s, when the performances were recorded. And to end my authentic ramblings on an even Utopian note: would anyone be interested in performing these symphonies with keyboard continuo (as they seem to have been played at the Mendelssohns' soirées²), if only as an experiment?

But I should stop enumerating the things *I* would like to hear in these symphonies, and instead take a closer look at what the London Festival Orchestra set out to do with them – and what they achieved admirably. No doubt, one of Ross Pople's primary concerns was to create a balanced, rich, even lush sound that overwhelms the listener by its sheer sonorous beauty. Many of the final chords arrive like moments of apotheosis; as we virtually explode into them one cannot but acknowledge that Schenker got it all right: this, the tonic triad, is what the piece was all about. Such privileging of the sonorous aspect might at first seem like a superficial concern, but Mendelssohn's string symphonies prove

² See R. Larry Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 61.

an extraordinarily grateful subject in this respect: if anything, the variability of textures is the field where the adolescent composer best reveals his precocious mastery. I only regret that the sensual beauty is perhaps too omnipresent in Pople's interpretation: assuming that the performers used the three respective volumes of the new Leipzig complete edition, many of the 'pianos' remain more on the 'mezzo forte' side, thus perhaps overemphasizing the fullness of sound as the listener's primary experience.

Another, though closely related, aspect of the London Festival Orchestra's performance is the elementary vigour that will enrapture even the most cold-hearted listener in almost every fast movement. In fact, quite a few of the tempos are so fast that it seems impossible to actually play them: while the semiquavers are as crisp as ever, the ensemble play sounds slightly blurred in several passages (a seemingly inevitable result, given that the neck-breaking speed leaves very little room for 'en route' aural adjustments). I do by no means want to question the musicians' technical facility – their virtuosity is impressive throughout and probably no other orchestra could get 'more of the notes' in these passages. However, such 'levelling' of the atmosphere of virtually all the fast (or even just faster) movements evidently means some further loss in character diversity. If the 'artistic lifebuoy' of racing speed is applied to the first movement of No. 1 (which, at the very opening of CD 1, indeed starts as if a supersonic airplane had just taken off) I well understand the tactics: there is not yet too much else in this movement, so why not turn it into a virtuoso showpiece? But as 'the notes themselves' become more and more interesting in the later symphonies, the same attitude seems less and less rewarding: the majority of the more mature fast movements is hardly in need of being 'saved' by gliding over their actual music.

The fugues are certainly worth a paragraph of their own. Although they are very competently written, their hegemony throughout the series will inevitably result in a distinct 'not again' experience whenever we realize that yet another has just started. The miracle, however, is that while the fugal openings are so unwelcome, as the other voices enter the listener's reluctance disappears completely. The orchestra gives its best here: each part goes its own way, preserving the essential independence, but – as if in another sphere – their sound then reunites to create that golden (and yes, perhaps even distinctly yellow) sound that anyone will best remember of these recordings. (In fact, hearing these passages, one must wonder how fugal writing could ever have acquired its 'dry and intellectual' reputation, once its actual sound can seemingly attain a sensuality wholly unavailable to any other musical texture.) And while I remain unconvinced that this charming gold would be the true colour of all the symphonies in each of their movements, I must admit that rather than just making me get to know these works better, this recording helped me get to love them better. Who could ask for more?

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