

PART FOUR

Reception and performance



## 13 Mendelssohn received

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There can be little doubt that Mendelssohn's star, just fifty years ago threatened with obscurity, is again on the rise: his works are more prominently represented in musical life than at any time since the mid-nineteenth century, and the scholarly literature concerning him is more voluminous and more diversified than ever. The recrudescence becomes all the more remarkable if we consider the extraordinary difficulties it has faced – for since the 1850s Mendelssohn's critical reception has centered on ideologically extreme positions.<sup>1</sup> For the last decade of his life he stood at the center of European musical culture and was widely hailed as the personification of modernity, but by the mid-twentieth century his music was portrayed as having been archaic and epigonic even in its own time. Some critiques amounted to little more than ludicrous lionization, portrayals of Mendelssohn as a musical messiah whose death had robbed the musical world of its only real prospect for future salvation from the turmoils of the present; others descended rapidly into equally vapid dismissals, vitriolic tropes on the political controversies of the day that found in Mendelssohn the epitome of many issues that cried out for drastic reform. Mendelssohn was granted little role in the great narrative of nineteenth-century music history as it was written by these self-styled progressives, and many musicians and other music-lovers fell prey to that assessment even after the ideological underpinnings from which it originally derived had fallen from favor. In a word, the verdict was retained even though its evidentiary foundations and reasoning had been renounced.

A growing general awareness of the now-questionable sources of the conventional devaluations of Mendelssohn's music and a fascination with the vacillations in his reception history have propelled a resurgence of research concerning the composer. Despite considerable difficulties, the past few decades have witnessed great strides, identifying the themes and issues that produced the contradictions, exploring their motives, and revisiting the evidence – much of which has become generally accessible only recently – in order to arrive at fresh perspectives.<sup>2</sup> The following remarks offer a historically organized overview of these developments.

### ***Gradus ad Parnassum: 1825–1847***

Writings contemporary to Mendelssohn's ascent to the pinnacle of European musical life articulated many of the ideas for which he continues to be celebrated today. The earliest known public mention, published in the Leipzig *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in 1818, offered little detail, mentioning only his age, parentage, and teacher's name<sup>3</sup> – but shortly thereafter he garnered increasing recognition and increasingly impressive reviews as a composer, conductor, and pianist. A performance of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture – the work that Thomas Grey has called “the quintessential Mendelssohnian miracle”<sup>4</sup> – in Stettin on 20 February 1827 attracted some public attention.<sup>5</sup> Besides this, however, the concert is also significant because it featured two works by the prodigy Mendelssohn (the overture and the A $\flat$  major Double Piano Concerto) on the same program with the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven – the first performance in Northern Europe of a controversial masterpiece by the German-speaking countries' undisputed musical leader. If Mendelssohn's reputation had up to this point been cultivated primarily in private circles, the door was now open for him to step onto the public stage.

Mendelssohn eagerly seized the opportunity to be an active figure in public musical life, and the public overwhelmingly embraced him. Early in 1828 the young composer received a prestigious commission to provide the music for the Berlin festivities commemorating the tricentennial of the death of Albrecht Dürer<sup>6</sup>, and in the spring of 1829 his Berlin performances of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* again brought him into the international spotlight.<sup>7</sup> These performances launched the first of Mendelssohn's international public successes as he ventured to England, where he offered London's musical public a vivid glimpse of his talents as both performer and composer, as well as of his personal dynamism.

Although Mendelssohn's bid for the directorship of the Berlin Singakademie in 1832–33 was unsuccessful (almost certainly in part for anti-Semitic reasons),<sup>8</sup> he quickly bounced back. During his two-year tenure as Municipal Music Director of Düsseldorf his fame grew to such an extent that early in 1835 he was invited to take the helm of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig, one of the continent's finest orchestras. His increasing involvement with ambitious cultural projects over the course of the 1830s and 1840s reflected his growing public acclaim. In addition to directing numerous music festivals around Europe he was appointed General Music Director for the court of the new Prussian king, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, and charged with implementing an ambitious series of liturgical and musical reforms.<sup>9</sup> He also spearheaded the founding of the German-speaking countries' first conservatory of music and served as *de facto* director of that institution.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, Mendelssohn had established a strong connection with the needs, ideas, and ideals of contemporary Europe.

Contemporary biographies and notices consistently mention the same attributes in Mendelssohn: his high expectations as composer and educator, his extraordinary gifts as a performer, his brilliance as an advocate for the recovered treasures of the musical past, his unstinting artistic and personal integrity, and – perhaps surprisingly, from a latter-day perspective – his modernity, both as composer and as figure in public musical life. A little-known biographical notice published in *The Musical Gem* (London) late in 1833 reflects the hopes the musical world vested in him. Introducing the 24-year-old composer as one “whose claim to be ranked among the few great composers now living is undisputed, and from whose future exertions we may reasonably hope to see the limits of the art extended,” the anonymous author summarizes Mendelssohn’s education, draws attention to his private musical accomplishments (specifically, the youthful operas), and then discusses some of the events and works on which his already impressive public acclaim is based: the production of *Die Hochzeit des Camacho*, the Stettin performance of the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* Overture, the music for the Dürer celebrations, and his London triumphs from 1829 and earlier in 1833.<sup>11</sup> The final paragraph observes that “as a pianoforte player M. Mendelssohn is surpassed by none in command of the instrument, in rapidity and brilliancy of execution: but we dwell less on his abilities in this department of the art . . . because his talents as a composer have placed him in a much more elevated situation than a mere performer can ever hope to attain.”<sup>12</sup>

These remarks, drawing on unofficial as well as public sources of information,<sup>13</sup> bespeak a sense of excitement at Mendelssohn’s prodigious and multifaceted accomplishments and his meteoric rise to international renown. But the essay is also noteworthy for its evident lack of concern for the composer’s religious background and confession. Except for a footnote mentioning that “the name of Bartholdy was added to his patronymic at the request of a relation” and a statement that Felix was the “grandson of the famous Jewish philosopher and elegant writer of the last century, Moses Mendelssohn,”<sup>14</sup> there is no reference to his Jewish background. Indeed, the casualness of the following paragraph’s statement that “about the same period [as the premiere of *Die Hochzeit des Camacho*] he also set some of Luther’s Hymns, and composed an *Ave*” suggests that the author attached little significance to the composer’s religious heritage or his conversion to Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

Another noteworthy contemporary life-and-works account was published by Johann Peter Lyser (1804–70), a member of Schumann’s *Dauids-bündler*, in the *Allgemeine Wiener Musik-Zeitung* in December 1842.<sup>16</sup>

Like most commentators, Lyser makes much of the composer's dramatic entry onto the European musical stage, emphasizing his brilliance, his youth, and his promise for future greatness. Yet his remarks also articulate two further themes in the contemporary appreciation of Mendelssohn: his proclivities for implicitly challenging generic conventions, and the standards of integrity that enabled him to tower over other contemporary musical celebrities.

Lyser's techniques for making these points are worthy of comment here. After explaining that he knows the composer not only as "the master of his art," but also as a friend who openly shares with him his feelings and thoughts even though the two do not always agree, he asserts that Mendelssohn has taken an artistic path diametrically opposite that chosen by his enormously successful contemporary Meyerbeer. Lyser reports that whereas Meyerbeer's opponents charge that he offers everything for the sake of effect, Meyerbeer's advocates argue that Mendelssohn avoids effect too strenuously.<sup>17</sup> Although Lyser finds both criticisms too strong, he suggests that Mendelssohn's unflinching artistic integrity was what had made *St. Paul* successful in the New World as well as Europe.

Yet Lyser also finds that after an examination of the score of *St. Paul* – particularly the recitatives – it seems to him "as if the work is more a creation born of an enthusiastic will to meet its challenges than a free outpouring of the soul reveling in its art"<sup>18</sup> – and this observation leads him to a discussion of the works that he considers most indicative of that faculty: the *Lieder ohne Worte*. Together with the concert overtures, these "free outpourings" had established Mendelssohn as "head of the new Romantic school."<sup>19</sup> He further emphasizes the importance of Mendelssohn's mastery of sacred as well as secular music. Perhaps most interestingly, Lyser sees this proclivity for stylistic diversity as accountable for Mendelssohn's active engagement of musical styles of the past, and argues that it was precisely this engagement, together with his fluency in modern musical style and his musical integrity, that established Mendelssohn's position at the forefront of Romanticism.

Robert Schumann's criticisms reflect similar views, especially in their emphasis on both Mendelssohn's modernity and his engagement of the musical past.<sup>20</sup> Schumann, too, emphasizes Mendelssohn's integrity by contrasting his works (specifically *St. Paul*) with those of Meyerbeer: the two composers could hardly be more different, Schumann asserts, for he is at pains to find any merit at all in *Les Huguenots* and to find any substantive problems in *St. Paul*; his review closes with the observation that "his [Mendelssohn's] road leads to happiness; the other, to evil."<sup>21</sup> Equally useful are Schumann's comments on Mendelssohn's D minor Piano Trio op. 49 – the first important work in that genre since the great trios of Beethoven and Schubert. For Schumann, op. 49 revealed Mendelssohn not only as a

composer who had succeeded in tackling the challenges of that genre, but also as the composer who had “risen to such heights that we can indeed say that he is the Mozart of the nineteenth century; the most brilliant among musicians; the one who has most clearly recognized the contradictions of the age, and the first to reconcile them.”<sup>22</sup> And in his posthumously published draft for a memoir of Mendelssohn, Schumann celebrated not only his colleague’s manifold musical gifts, but also his artistic integrity: “His judgment in musical matters, especially concerning compositions – the finest and most astute that one could ever imagine . . . [His] self-criticism [was] the strictest and most conscientious that I have ever seen in a musician.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet Schumann and Lyser go beyond describing Mendelssohn as merely the leading composer of the present; they assign him a lasting position in the history of music. Despite his youth, both observe, he has already contributed immeasurably to the progress of the art – despite (or perhaps because of) his cultivation of forms, genres, and styles from the musical past. Schumann suggests that Mendelssohn’s D minor Piano Trio had resuscitated its genre, and that while Mendelssohn was “the Mozart of the nineteenth century,” he also would “not be the last artist; this new Mozart will be followed by a new Beethoven, who perhaps has already been born.”<sup>24</sup>

It is worth noting that Lyser, Schumann, and other contemporary enthusiasts also offer constructive criticisms for Mendelssohn: his support came from judicious critics, not slavish hangers-on. His fame was hard-won, the product of sustained and diligent efforts to better society through music – a cultural endeavor that Leon Botstein has termed “the Mendelssohnian project”<sup>25</sup> – and an unremitting self-critical faculty that led him to withhold from print the vast majority of his works. Indeed, Mendelssohn’s contemporary acclaim becomes all the more remarkable when one considers that the works released in print during the composer’s lifetime embrace only seventy-two numbered *opera* and an additional twenty-four minor publications – this out of a corpus of several hundred compositions. Nor did Mendelssohn’s extraordinary success rest on the uncritical judgments of the masses, for even his greatest advocates recognized that he, like everyone in those troubled times, faced challenges. Nevertheless, by the end of his life he was the single most influential composer, performer, and pedagogue in European musical life. With his death, those sympathetic to his cause felt they had lost their standard-bearer. They faced a crisis whose dimensions would not become fully evident for nearly a century.

## Divergences, 1847–1875

The success of the “Mendelssohnian project” during the composer’s lifetime was both a blessing and a curse in the years after his death. Those

who viewed him as a bastion of integrity and champion of musical progress increasingly spoke and wrote of him as a fallen hero, bemoaning the loss of their leader. With the exception of Robert Schumann, whose style in the late 1840s and early 1850s is substantively indebted to Mendelssohn,<sup>26</sup> the composer's followers were unable to sustain their hero's cultural project. And at least partly in response to the musical world's clamoring to hear more of the voice of which it had been deprived, his heirs began to publish many of the works left unpublished at his death. Despite the laudable intention of perpetuating the presence of Mendelssohn's voice in cultural discourse, however, the composer probably would have viewed this development with some dismay. After all, the posthumously published compositions included not only late works that he likely would have published had he lived even one more year (masterpieces such as *Lauda Sion* and the F minor String Quartet), but also many that he had withheld from publication (including, for example, all of the *a cappella* sacred music along with the "Reformation" and "Italian" Symphonies). Collectively, these publications infused Mendelssohn's public persona with dimensions that he had elected not to disseminate in print.

On the other hand, the proximity of Mendelssohn's death to the wave of revolutions that swept the continent in 1848, with the explicit goal of overturning the culture in which he had ascended to the pinnacle of success, presented his detractors with a genuine opportunity. Dissenting voices now offered a variety of arguments to diminish his significance for post-revolutionary culture and contravene the growing Mendelssohn cult.<sup>27</sup> The most notorious of these arguments is, of course, the anti-Semitic critique represented in Wagner's 1850 essay on "Jewry in Music."<sup>28</sup> In general, this critique argues that Mendelssohn (like Meyerbeer, with whom Mendelssohn's advocates had contrasted him so adamantly) was incapable of true musical greatness because of his Jewish heritage; that he therefore could not have contributed to musical progress; and that his ascent to power and political prestige had been symptomatic of Restoration culture's intrinsic flaccidity, which had made most of society's institutions and values susceptible to the pernicious superficialities of Jewry.

It is worth noting, however, that this reasoning derived from an understanding of Germanness and Jewishness that was defined primarily neither by political or geographic criteria (for these were necessarily meaningless to German speakers who felt a sense of national unity before 1871) nor by bloodlines, as modern readers might assume. Rather, in the 1850s Jewishness (like Germanness, Italian-ness, and Gypsydom) was defined first of all by language, culture, and religion. Thus Wagner, in explaining "the involuntary repulsion that the nature and personality of the Jews possesses for us, so as



to vindicate that instinctive dislike which we plainly recognize as stronger and more overpowering than our *conscious* zeal to rid ourselves thereof<sup>29</sup> and documenting “the be-Jewing of modern art” (*Verjüdung der modernen Kunst*),<sup>30</sup> discusses his Jews’ physical appearance briefly but speaks at great length about Jewish speech, song, and religion: “[i]ncomparably more important – yes, decisive – is the significance of the effect that the Jew exerts on us through his *speech* [emphasis Wagner’s].”<sup>31</sup> Because Wagner’s Jews speak European languages “merely as learned,” they are necessarily incapable of expressing themselves “idiomatically, independently, and comfortably [sic] to [their] nature.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, because Wagner’s community of Jewry “stood outside the pale of any [European] community, stood solitarily with [its] Jehovah in a splintered, soilless stock, to which all self-sprung evolution must stay denied, just as even the peculiar (Hebraic) language of that stock has been preserved for him merely as a thing defunct,”<sup>33</sup> that community had by definition “taken no part in the development” of European art and was capable only of aping and mimicking the poetic arts of expression.<sup>34</sup> Such self-expression as “the cultured Jew” (*der gebildete Jude*) could muster would, of necessity, be artistically repugnant – for it would express the voice of “the most heartless of all human beings” (*der herzloseste aller Menschen*).<sup>35</sup>

Similar views are pronounced in the book *Sur les Bohémiens et de leur musique en Hongrie*, attributed to Franz Liszt at its first publication in 1859 (before Wagner had publicly acknowledged authorship of “Das Judenthum”).<sup>36</sup> Taken as a whole, this monograph is a celebration of the beauties and artistic wonders of the native musical tongue of the Romani Gypsies – an idiom closely associated with Liszt’s fame.<sup>37</sup> Yet the treatise also extensively discusses the Jews and their music (as Liszt thought he understood it, of course), attempting to explain why, despite certain obvious parallels between Gypsies and Jews, the music of the Gypsies was noble, pure, and suffused with true artistic beauty, while that of the Jews was utterly incapable of rising to the status of art. Here, too, the blame is assigned to the Jews’ culture, religion, and language. The Gypsies, Liszt asserts, were able to express themselves truly and deeply in music because of their language, and because their historical plight had led them to pour their sorrows, joys, and other emotions into a musical idiom that was as much their own as the Magyar language was. The Jews, by contrast, were by nature and at the mandate of their religion a people who shunned self-expression. They had exerted a disconcertingly powerful presence in European culture and had even deceived some into believing that their art – especially their music – was brilliant. Yet the music of Liszt’s Jews could never aspire to the status of art, for it was not produced from the inspired impulse of creation; it was only imitation.<sup>38</sup>

They [the Jews] have also cultivated art to the point of invading it. They have taken possession of all the genres, and have had some brilliant success stories in the realm of execution as in that of composition. As virtuosos and as authors, their successes have been just; for they have handled form marvellously.

Yet

They have been able to exercise and practice art, but they have never known how to *create* art. Never having been able to break free of the seal of a silence that is religious and respectful for themselves, [these being] all the movements of their hearts, how should they have learned how to confide these to art? . . . The Israelites have not been able to invent new styles, for they have never sung of their own feelings. Their enduring discretion . . . [and] their religion of silence have never permitted them to express anything of the impulses of *their* souls, to sing of the sufferings of *their* hearts, to recount the pulsing of *their* passions, of *their* loves and hates, in that language of the ideal.<sup>39</sup>

These and other writings from the 1850s reveal that the anti-Semitic reception that diminished Mendelssohn's cultural authority in that crucial decade stemmed directly from cultural and aesthetic concerns whose centrality to issues of musical integrity is still largely accepted: the issues of expression, communication, and social identity. In asserting Mendelssohn's Jewishness as a determinant of his artistic character, Liszt, Wagner, and others impugned the very things that his earlier advocates had considered unquestionable: his deeply felt expression and his artistic integrity. Thus in Wagner's view, no matter how fluent Mendelssohn may have become in the musical idioms of "our" society, his music had to take pathetic recourse to the now-sullied "travesty" of the "sense-and-sound-confounding gurgle, yodel, and cackle" of Jewish music.<sup>40</sup> Mendelssohn had

shown that a Jew may have the amplest store of specific talents, may have the finest and most varied education, the highest and most sensitive sense of honor – yet even with the aid of all these advantages be unable to call forth in us even once that deep effect that takes hold of our heart and soul, an effect which we await from music because we know her capable thereof.<sup>41</sup>

If one accepted this line of reasoning – and many did – then the celebrated depth of expression and experience in Mendelssohn's music must have been an illusion, the product of superficialities and contrivances. His obviously enormous spheres of influence must have reflected the naivety of a pre-revolutionary society that had been willfully duped out of its *Volk*-rooted legitimate institutions. Most importantly, his position in music – the art that, of all arts, was unquestionably rooted in self-expression – was necessarily an ephemeral and marginal one.

Such anti-Semitic ideologies became all the more influential because they went hand in hand with the ascendance of a substantially different view of the nature and mechanisms of historical processes. The first half of the nineteenth century was generally dominated by a historical model that emphasized constant and multidimensional dialectical processes as the agents of progress. Progress (generally construed to mean increased sophistication, complexity, and size) was generated through the historically mandated synthesis of intrinsically antithetical forces, ideas, persons, styles etc. The influence of this view is reflected in Schumann's, Lyser's, and others' emphasis on Mendelssohn's modernity in the context of discussions that emphasize his use of earlier musical forms, genres, and styles. And Mendelssohn's own intellectual pedigree – he was a student of Hegel and Goethe (for whom Hegel's ideas on history were central) – suggests that he would naturally harbor such a view. Moreover, such a proposition certainly would be consistent with Mendelssohn's frequent contraposing of conspicuously archaic and conspicuously modern musical styles – an aspect of his idiom that has generated considerable controversy.<sup>42</sup>

Increasingly after the mid-1840s, however, a view of historical processes which emphasized modernity and granted little role to any reference to the past was manifest in writings on music.<sup>43</sup> For purposes of this discussion, the most important representative of these views was Schumann's successor as editor of the *Neue Zeitschrift*: Franz Brendel. A philosopher and historian who was a disciple of Hegel, Brendel maintained much of Hegel's historical doctrine while taking it one step further in such a fashion as to deeply alter its ramifications.<sup>44</sup> While dialectics remained central to this modern view of historical processes, those processes themselves were now conceived as unilinear and unidirectional – and the compositional cultivation of earlier musical styles countermanded historical progress. As Brendel put it in his influential *Geschichte der Musik in Italien, Deutschland und Frankreich*, first published in 1851, “in the history of the spirit all that is decisive is newness, originality; everything else is of subordinate importance . . . Those composers who unconditionally ally themselves with the old masters do not work for progress, for a further development of the art.”<sup>45</sup> In this view, any overt cultivation of forms, genres, or styles associated with the musical past was suspect, and composers who employed those historically retrospective idioms as vigorously as Mendelssohn did were guilty, at the very least, of not having been sufficiently committed to steady and unconditional musical progress.

This view of historical processes, in turn, engendered an increasingly teleological perspective on musical history: the great narrative was to be understood as a series of successive eras, each of which represented progress that, while predicated on the ideas and accomplishments of earlier eras,

represented a further evolutionary development (i.e., an improvement) on that era. Here, too, the presence of influences from earlier musical-stylistic eras – in the opinions of Lyser and Schumann, an essential aspect of Mendelssohn’s advancement of music – now became a liability rather than an asset. A composer whose works were substantively infused with ideas, styles, forms, genres, or values of the Baroque or Classical eras necessarily was less thoroughly “Romantic” (and hence less influential in the progress of musical history) than were other composers who did not cultivate those elements.

This change in historiographic values is reflected in countless mid-century assessments of Mendelssohn’s life, works, and historical significance. Not only were many of the stylistic features that previously had contributed to his historical import now considered liabilities, but the historiographic methodology of musical form and genre was undergoing profound change. The development of Wagner’s thought in his criticisms of Mendelssohn reflects precisely this change in values. Wagner was probably in the minority when he sarcastically lamented that “the whole of Germany lays bare its heart to the musical gospel according to Felix Mendelssohn” in 1841,<sup>46</sup> but in post-revolutionary Europe such accounts were more acceptable. In 1851, in constructing a history of music that proceeded from Mozart through Beethoven to himself, he could overtly fault Mendelssohn for the “perfection” of his music and “lift him off his quilted piano-bench.”<sup>47</sup> By 1869 he was safely able to blame him for an entire culture of conducting and musical interpretation that possessed “polish” (*Gebildetheit*) but no “culture” (*Bildung*),<sup>48</sup> and another decade later he blamed his icon of polished unculturedness for the proliferation of an entire culture of “cold-blooded recklessness” (*kaltblütige Unbesonnenheit*) in composition “resembling that old general of Frederick the Great who sang whatever was set before him to the tune of the Dessauer March.”<sup>49</sup>

The dilemma is clear: Mendelssohn had posthumously become the whipping-boy of his age, a figure who, for post-revolutionary Europe, personified the failings of the *Vormärz*. He suffered because of his cultivation of styles and forms associated with earlier composers. He was criticized because he excelled in the domain of religious music – a domain of composition that was the rightful province of earlier eras. And despite having published but little of his sacred music, he was increasingly known as a composer of church music as his heirs considerably augmented the quantity of works in those genres.<sup>50</sup> His detractors in the 1850s and afterward made much of his failure to complete an opera in his maturity<sup>51</sup> – for Brendel and others of his historical persuasion, applying the classical categorization of poetry to the perceived laws of historical process, now held that the history of music had proceeded from the epic through the lyric to the dramatic, and

that the last of these constituted the realm in which the next age of musical progress would be achieved.<sup>52</sup> Most importantly, Mendelssohn now epitomized not only the weaknesses and perversions to which all Jews, because of what Liszt, Wagner, Brendel, and others considered their cultural homelessness, were liable, but also the detrimental effects of Christian Europe's ostensibly gracious but naive attempt to assimilate Jewry.

Mendelssohn's early posthumous critical reception probably was not helped by the publication, in the 1860s and 1870s, of numerous self-serving memoirs and unreliable collections of letters, or by the generally uncritical adoption of material from these texts in numerous secondary studies.<sup>53</sup> After all, to those convinced of the imperative of progress as the new historians conceived it, such writings merely celebrated the failures of Restoration culture. Moreover, the tone and style of presentation of these collections too often smacked of nostalgia – and a supposed music-historical nostalgia was precisely the trait that Mendelssohn's later detractors most vehemently criticized in his music. These writings may have edified those who were generally sympathetic to Mendelssohn's ideals of ethically bound and societally universal music and musical institutions, and they certainly constituted invaluable starting points for later research – but they probably won few converts to their cause.

### **Between *Wissenschaft* and *Musikwissenschaft*: Mendelssohn's reception between 1875 and 1914**

The completion in 1877 of the series of editions of Mendelssohn's collected works, edited by Julius Rietz and published by Breitkopf & Härtel, constituted another landmark in Mendelssohn's posthumous reception. Even though, as some quickly recognized, this series was neither complete nor true to the developing idea of a critical edition, it nevertheless offered a more comprehensive view of Mendelssohn's creative output than previously had been available. If used in tandem with the widely circulated editions of his letters, the numerous memoirs of his friends and colleagues, and the various life-and-works studies that had already appeared, the *Werke* seemed to meet the final prerequisite for a historically viable reassessment of a composer who had posthumously become extremely problematical.

That task, however, turned out to be more complicated than some might have hoped, since Mendelssohn's detractors and apologists now found themselves entrenched in ideological positions that were worlds apart. Now more than ever, analysts, critics, and historians were obsessed with the grand sweep of music history; now more than ever, most viewed that history as a tale of evolutionary progress that culminated in drama; and now more than

ever, most were convinced that history was to be drawn as an end-weighted narrative of heroes and epigones: agents of progress who merited inclusion in the canon, and their followers.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, historians (proceeding from selected important late works of Beethoven)<sup>55</sup> now increasingly emphasized the importance of highly individualized and subjective self-expression rather than universalized communication. And perhaps most importantly, the comparatively new science of musicology (*Musikwissenschaft*) increasingly appropriated philosophical and methodological tenets from the natural sciences, formulating its arguments in terms of issues that lay at the core of those disciplines.

Most important among these issues was the supposed interrelationship between evolutionary advancement, race, and gender. The widespread acceptance of Darwin's theory of natural selection as the mechanism for evolutionary change, and of the comparatively new science of Mendelian genetics, together with general acceptance of contemporary scientific findings that white European males, untainted by oriental or other "inferior" blood-stocks, held the key to human progress,<sup>56</sup> seemed to corroborate the judgments of post-1848 critics who had portrayed Mendelssohn as an outsider to the true progressive causes in European music. As Marian Wilson Kimber has documented in a recent essay, long-standing prejudices concerning race and gender, aided by newly formulated scientific arguments, produced a new image of Mendelssohn in the last decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>57</sup>

Most of these changes in values marked a reversal from those of the culture of the *Vormärz*. Mendelssohn's views on the responsibilities of the musician as a public figure, and his emphasis on music's function as an art of universal but consummately subjective communication ran counter to ideologies asserting that music's proper function was to express each composer's individual personality, even at the risk of not being comprehensible to the broader world. In these "modern" music-historical values, the musical ethic of universalized public communication and participation did not belong to Romanticism per se, but was an evolutionary hold-over from the values of the preceding music-historical era. Proximity to one's musical public, once a virtue and a means of shaping one's time, had become a liability.<sup>58</sup>

Thus Mendelssohn came to be almost universally condemned by scientific and musical scholarship in the early twentieth century. To those who sympathized with the views of his detractors, science now offered an explanation for what was already perceived as verity – the notion of his historical inconsequentiality. The criticisms of the *Zukunftsmusiker* who had succeeded Mendelssohn as champions of musical progress were verified by musicological applications of the techniques and findings of cutting-edge

science. Consequently, the deprecatory verbiage of contemporary race- and gender-chauvinists began to pervade musicological assessments of Mendelssohn as well: the composer's putative renunciation of the path of progress after the mid-1830s was now explained by the pseudo-scientific assertion that all Jews, while capable of easy brilliance in their early years, were genetically doomed to recidivism later in life. And the mid-nineteenth-century view that Mendelssohn was a consummately "manly" figure began to give way to increasing charges of "effeminacy" and "Semitic softness," which, in a world in which white European men were the agents of progress, automatically placed him outside that progressive mainstream.<sup>59</sup>

Fortunately, not all were persuaded by these questionable verdicts. Between about 1880 and 1914 a dedicated community of scholars managed to pursue the matter of Mendelssohn scholarship with the same sort of rigor that was being devoted to other scholarly issues that were temporally or aesthetically remote from the musical mores of the late nineteenth century. Foremost was the great patron of English musical lexicography, George Grove, who conducted extensive research on the unpublished materials, contributed numerous articles on little-known and unknown compositions to contemporary English periodicals, and authored, in his own *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, a Mendelssohn article that remains exemplary to this day.<sup>60</sup> By the centennial of Mendelssohn's birth these accomplishments included several other contributions: editions of Mendelssohn's correspondence with three of his closest friends and professional confidants, Ferdinand David, Karl Klingemann, and Ignaz Moscheles;<sup>61</sup> several smaller critical editions of previously unknown correspondence;<sup>62</sup> Alfred Dörffel's chronicle of the history of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra;<sup>63</sup> and, perhaps most importantly, a full-scale scholarly life-and-works study (based in no small part on Grove's article in the *Dictionary*) in German by Ernst Wolff.<sup>64</sup> These truly scholarly studies drew extensively on previously unpublished material and presented their material in a fashion that, while fundamentally sympathetic to Mendelssohn, was consistent with the developing ideals of source-critical musicological objectivity. They served as the starting point for a handful of devoted scholars during the stormy years of the early twentieth century.

### ***Aus tiefer Not: 1914–1945***

Despite some notable bright spots,<sup>65</sup> the early twentieth century was a particularly dismal period in Mendelssohn's already controversy-plagued reception history. With the corpus of regularly performed works reduced



to the E minor Violin Concerto, the *Variations sérieuses*, and the *Midsummer Night's Dream* music, the heyday of Wagnerism and the sheer heat of the other ideological debates of early twentieth-century music left little room for scholarship concerning Mendelssohn – and such potential as may have existed was seriously damaged by rampant anti-Semitism, both in Germany and elsewhere. The anti-Semitism of the 1930s and 1940s was particularly destructive, however – for it permitted no discussion of the merit or lack thereof of any of Mendelssohn's music. Distressingly large sectors of the musical public accepted the notion that, as music composed by a Jew, Mendelssohn's works were intrinsically incapable of any merit but more than capable of seducing unsophisticated auditors into a destructive pleasure. And in the so-called Third Reich any recognition of any of this music would at the very least send the politically unacceptable message that Jews could be capable of great art.<sup>66</sup>

The resulting scenario is well known: in Nazi spheres of influence Mendelssohn's music was banned; books concerning him were burned and monuments destroyed; and he was systematically written out of musical history in a chillingly Orwellian fashion. To name but three examples: Julius Alf's chronicle of the early years of the Lower Rhine Music Festival – a festival with which Mendelssohn was involved continually during the last decade of his life – clearly refers to events, works, performances, and developments that stemmed from Mendelssohn, but consistently fails to acknowledge his role in these events.<sup>67</sup> Similarly (and more enduringly damaging for different reasons), Wolfgang Bötticher's seemingly authoritative biography of Robert Schumann, while drawing extensively on unpublished documents and offering much that remains valuable, not only duly identifies Mendelssohn and other composers with a Magen David, but also alters quotations from Mendelssohn and quotations from Schumann about Mendelssohn so as to reflect negatively on the Jewish composer.<sup>68</sup> Most notoriously, the period abounded with musicological treatises that explicitly updated the findings of Wagner, Liszt, and others in order to validate them through Nazi racial science.<sup>69</sup>

The collusion of some sectors of the musicological community in the Nazi anti-Mendelssohn campaign certainly represents a low point in the composer's posthumous reception, but other scholars also have a certain complicity in the mid-twentieth-century nadir of Mendelssohn scholarship, albeit without the anti-Semitic motivations of Nazi ideology. Alfred Einstein, for example, assigned Mendelssohn to an unenviable position in the teleology of musical style. Whereas Schubert was "the romantic classic" (i.e., forward-looking for his day) Mendelssohn was "the romantic classicist" (a historical throwback with Romantic leanings).<sup>70</sup> Moreover,



The romantic is, in Mendelssohn, the better part . . . His classicism was the product partly of his natural harmonic disposition, partly of his education, which was more comprehensive than that of the great musicians before him and of a different kind. He was a master of form.<sup>71</sup> He had no inner forces to curb, for real conflict was lacking in his life as in his art.<sup>72</sup>

Einstein then offers an assessment that both recalls the suggestions of Wagner and Liszt on the derivative nature of Mendelssohn's music and anticipates the claims of later commentators:

He admitted into his music the powerful simplicity and the contrapuntal style of Handel and Bach – without, it must be said, being able to assimilate it. He had to suffer it as a foreign element in his musical language, as, too, he merely adopted Beethoven's sonata form, without replenishing or renewing it.<sup>73</sup>

Similarly, Paul Henry Lang, in what remains perhaps the most eloquent general history of music in the English language, perpetuates Einstein's tone as well as his verbiage. For Lang, Mendelssohn's music possessed a superficiality born of a supposedly unconflicted personality; he was a classicist (and hence historically retrospective) in an age of progressive Romanticism; and he was an outsider to the values and conflicts of his age. Lang adds that Mendelssohn benefited from a natural facility that was ill at ease with the cultivated Romantic image of the struggling artist.<sup>74</sup>

There can be no question that in many of Mendelssohn's works there is missing that real depth that opens wide perspectives, the mysticism of the unutterable. A certain sober clarity permeates his music, not the clarity of mood and conviction, but that of the organizing mind . . . In the romantic era most of the great musical personalities ceased to live in harmony with their social environment, espousing revolutionary ideals. Mendelssohn's personality was opposed to a secession, for to him an artistic understanding of the prevailing social order was an emotional necessity . . . While we cannot help noting the limitations in Mendelssohn's music, largely due to his nature and his social philosophy, his frail figure becomes gigantic if we glance at the musical world around him. What he created is not overwhelming, it does not carry us away; he was not one of the very great, but he was and remains a master, and he has given us much that fills us with quiet enjoyment and admiration.<sup>75</sup>

There is nothing to suggest that Einstein's and Lang's views of Mendelssohn were born of any anti-Semitic sentiments on those scholars' parts. At the same time, however, these critiques clearly perpetuate the assessments of earlier scholars whose motivations were unabashedly anti-Semitic, in language conspicuously similar to earlier anti-Semitic critiques – without, it must be admitted, offering any new evidence for corroboration. That such

views evidently derive from the appraisals submitted in the second half of the nineteenth century is hardly surprising, since both Einstein (1880–1952) and Lang (1901–91) were reared in central Europe during the most spirited years of the scholarly redefinition of Mendelssohn's historical position. But the observation is also troubling – for while both scholars' views are rooted in an ideologically charged but academically vacuous period in the history of Mendelssohn research, those portrayals are also troped in many of today's mainstream music-history surveys.<sup>76</sup>

### ***Wachet auf*: The revival of Mendelssohn scholarship since 1945**

With the end of the Second World War, musicians and scholars gradually became aware of the travesties of the musical and musicological past. This awareness, together with at least some scholars' need for a *Wiedergutmachung* (a corrective compensation for damage wrongfully inflicted) led to a resuscitation of Mendelssohn scholarship. Initially, progress was slow: the most important products of the early post-war years were Bernhard Bartels' 1947 biography of the composer (which, while offering little new material, represents the first German approach since the mid-1930s to shy away from Nazi anti-Semitic ideologies) and a 1951 reprint of George Grove's original Mendelssohn article for his dictionary – an essay whose substance was still able to throw into unflatteringly sharp relief the deficiencies of most of the Mendelssohn scholarship available at the mid-twentieth century.<sup>77</sup> Equally important was Peter Sutermeister's new, critical edition of the composer's letters from 1830 to 1832 – an invaluable body of primary sources that, although poorly edited even in recent editions, constituted most biographers' and other scholars' primary access to Mendelssohn's correspondence.<sup>78</sup>

But if the revival of genuine scholarship concerning the composer was slow in starting, the pace picked up considerably as the sesquicentennial of his birth neared. In addition to a flurry of short articles and documentary studies, the period surrounding the commemorative year witnessed the appearance of the Eric Werner's Mendelssohn article for the first edition of *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* and, in 1963, his full-fledged life-and-works study – the first legitimate scholarly studies to consider the significance of Mendelssohn's Jewish heritage for his life and works.<sup>79</sup> Donald Mintz's dissertation not only addressed a crucial lacuna of Mendelssohn research – the systematic study of his compositional process and the manuscript sources for his music – whose scholarly validity had long since been accepted in scholarship concerning other major composers, but also dared, on the basis of that evidence, to contradict directly one of the most enduring of the platitudes and interpretive fallacies in assessments

of Mendelssohn's historical significance: the notion that he was a quasi-reactionary figure in musical Romanticism.<sup>80</sup> The 1960s and 1970s also witnessed the growth of the Internationale Felix-Mendelssohn-Gesellschaft (founded in 1958–59); the issuance of critical editions of more than twenty previously unpublished compositions in a new, truly critical and (by its completion) truly complete *Gesamtausgabe* of Mendelssohn's works; a major scholarly symposium on "the Mendelssohn problem";<sup>81</sup> and the founding of a scholarly journal devoted specifically to research on all aspects of the lives, works, and histories of various members of the Mendelssohn family.<sup>82</sup>

Although this proliferation of work on Mendelssohn, most of it sympathetic to the composer, might be considered a modified recapitulation of the state of Mendelssohn research in the late nineteenth century (an observation that would be ominous indeed if it presaged a repeat of the scholarly holocaust that occurred in the early twentieth century), there are at least two healthy differences. First, the currently flourishing Mendelssohn discourse continues to take recourse to primary sources. This methodological buttressing has led to important findings concerning Mendelssohn's musical output as well as his biography. The former category embraces recoveries and new explorations of previously obscure but musically rewarding works,<sup>83</sup> important findings concerning well-known compositions (for example, the string quartets, all of the mature symphonies, the op. 23 *Kirchen-Musik*, the op. 35 Preludes and Fugues for piano, *St. Paul*, and *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*),<sup>84</sup> and even discoveries of compositions that previously were utterly unknown.<sup>85</sup> The biographical findings, drawing on the largely untapped resource of the composer's unpublished correspondence, have managed to identify and explore with unprecedented productivity issues, ideas, and events that shaped his life and compositional personality, but were overlooked or misrepresented in earlier studies. The year 2003 brought two major contributions of this genre: a new documentary biography by Clive Brown and a magisterial full-length life-and-works study by R. Larry Todd.<sup>86</sup>

Most prominent among these issues is the matter of the composer's Jewish heritage and its significance. Although commentaries devoted little public attention to this aspect of Mendelssohn's identity during his lifetime, it quickly became a major issue in his posthumous vilification, and the verbiage of these pseudo-historical assessments continued to pervade general commentaries well into the twentieth century. One factor that contributed to the success of Grove's and Wolff's biographies was their tactful handling of this issue, which at the time was unavoidably charged with both political and music-historical implications. Those studies, however, tend to portray Mendelssohn as largely unaffected by his Jewish heritage. The work of Eric Werner<sup>87</sup> is significant not least of all because it affirmed what Werner considered the inevitable significance of Mendelssohn's Jewishness, drawing extensively on unpublished correspondence and other little-known

documents to situate the composer in the context of assimilatory German-Jewish culture as it existed during the years of his development and maturity. At least in part because of these and other scholars' efforts, it is now possible to discuss Mendelssohn as a cultural figure whose public and private life was materially affected by his Jewish heritage, without having to return to the anti-Semitic platitudes and other superficialities that characterized most nineteenth-century references to that heritage.

This observation leads to another healthy trend in today's Mendelssohn discourse: its thorough self-criticism. The matter of the composer's Jewish heritage is but one prominent example of this trend. In his dissertation and an important recent article, Jeffrey Sposato pointed out Werner's repeated and seemingly deliberate misrepresentation of unpublished documents crucial to this issue;<sup>88</sup> these findings initiated a vigorous debate that spanned three issues of *The Musical Quarterly* and involved several other leading scholars. New ideas continue to be advanced on such issues as his compositional development, the significance of individual biographical events and episodes, his relationships with his contemporaries and with the music of the past,<sup>89</sup> political and philosophical influences on his aesthetic,<sup>90</sup> his relationship with his older sister, Fanny Hensel, and more.

Collectively, these studies, together with the ever-increasing presence of Mendelssohn's music in concert life, have offered an impressive new image of the composer – one that enables us to see beyond the false dichotomies constructed by late nineteenth-century polemicists and rediscover the multifaceted phenomenon who dominated the cultural life of mid-nineteenth-century Europe. Finally, it seems, Mendelssohn's artistic voice is regaining its presence in society.

Mendelssohn's identity resists reduction to a single musical and historical phenomenon: this fact, perhaps, is both the most compelling rebuttal of the dismissals of his opponents and the strongest tribute to the multidimensional complexity he cultivated as he rose to the heights of European musical culture in the 1830s and 1840s. He was at once Christian and Jewish, performer and creator, pedagogue and role-model, public icon and private artist. The vacillations in his reception have diminished the luster of his name, but that damage is by no means irreparable. Indeed, there is now more cause for encouragement than perhaps at any point since 1847, for musicians and scholars everywhere are rediscovering the beauty and complexity of the musical and historical challenges and rewards that for so long remained hidden from view – rewards that are offered in a truly unique constellation in the life and works of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy.

In memory of W. G. Andrew, 1922–2002:  
history enthusiast extraordinaire