

PART ONE

Issues in biography

1 Mendelssohn and the institution(s) of German art music

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By his twenty-first year, Felix Mendelssohn had completed a handful of orchestral and chamber works that placed him among the front ranks of contemporary composers. Yet, as rapidly as a reputation was building around these pieces,¹ it was not as a composer but as a conductor that he made his grand entrance onto the stage of Germany's musical history. On 11 March 1829, he directed the Berlin Singakademie in a revival of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, unheard since its composer's death and thought, in Mendelssohn's time, to have been premiered exactly a century before.² Upon receiving word of the event, Goethe famously observed to his friend – Mendelssohn's teacher – Karl Friedrich Zelter, "To me, it is as though I have heard the roar of the sea from a distance."³

The "Bach revival" that feverishly ensued had hardly been conjured *ex nihilo* by the young conductor: the Singakademie had offered occasional motets and cantatas of Bach's since its 1791 founding, first under the direction of Christian Friedrich Carl Fasch, then, after 1800, under Carl Friedrich Zelter; and by 1829, Bach's generally neglected choral music (his keyboard music had never passed wholly out of currency) had found an important outlet, too, in Frankfurt's Caecilienverein. But there was no question that the 1829 *St. Matthew Passion* revival – abbreviated though the work was through the excision of six of the chorales, some recitative, and all but two of the arias – constituted an event of epoch-making significance in the revitalization of Bach's reputation.⁴ And the event serves, for Mendelssohn, as a fitting structural down-beat to a musical career animated as fully by the recovery and consolidation of a musical heritage as by its furtherance through musical composition. Recent scholarship has cast doubt on the historical veracity of Eduard Devrient's oft-repeated account of the dramatic exchange in which he and Mendelssohn persuaded the recalcitrant Zelter to authorize the performance of the passion.⁵ But Devrient's rhetoric – his pitting of youthful vision against a calcified status quo – points to a more fundamental truth that cannot be gainsaid: his generation's readiness to embrace the reclamation of the past as a bold new frontier.

The architectural surroundings of the Passion revival were themselves emblematic of the project at hand. The Singakademie's hall, four years old

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at the time, was based on an 1818 design by Prussia's leading architect, Karl Friedrich Schinkel, conceived as one of a series of neo-classical structures through which Schinkel was systematically implanting the Prussian people's cultural ambitions upon their capital city's increasingly imposing skyline.⁶ His Schauspielhaus had opened in 1821 (Mendelssohn himself had attended the first performance there: the epoch-making premiere of Weber's *Der Freischütz*), and his massive Altes Museum was, by 1829, nearing completion at the northern end of the Lustgarten. The lesson of such projects was clear: its music, its drama, and its art mattered to this German audience – for whom the humiliations of Napoleon's onslaught were none too distant a memory, who raced to match economic stride with the more robustly industrialized capitals of France and England – not so much as cycles of commodities created, consumed, and shortly exchanged for newer ones, but as public institutions, victoriously embedded in the cartographies of their city and of their emerging cultural identity.

Where the musical culture of the 1830s and 1840s was concerned, no one played a greater role in this process of embedment than Mendelssohn. Outside the operatic industry, none of his consequential contemporaries – Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Berlioz, Liszt, or Chopin – led a life so effortlessly and universally mapped out by biographers in terms of the institutions he served. At the same time, the course of Mendelssohn's career provides a nearly comprehensive catalogue of the venues through which his generation undertook serious music-making, dispersed as his activities were across the realms of choral society, public music festival, professional orchestra, opera house (at least briefly), church, royal court, and beyond. Lurking beneath all is the apparent conviction that what mattered was not only – not even principally – what individuals could create, but what the public could be taught to value. What mattered in the end was what could be institutionalized, woven securely into the cultural, intellectual, economic, spiritual, even architectural fabric that comprised Germany's nascent nationhood. Mendelssohn's professional life was a sustained demonstration that the weaving of this fabric constituted as creative, disciplined a venture as composition itself.

This creative outlook came naturally to the scion of the Mendelssohn family, whose remarkable, generations-long journey seemed impelled by the conviction that there was no greater good than full intellectual, economic, and cultural enfranchisement, and no higher calling than the call to citizenship. Mendelssohn's mother, Lea, was the granddaughter of Daniel Itzig, financial adviser to Friedrich II and one of Prussia's richest inhabitants; Itzig would become the first Jew in Prussia to be granted a patent of naturalization. Felix's father, Abraham – who had made a sizeable fortune of his own

in banking – was the son of the celebrated Moses Mendelssohn, who had emerged from a humble childhood in the town of Dessau to become one of the leading philosophers of the Enlightenment, and the first Jew to travel as an intellectual equal among the inhabitants of Berlin’s most elite cultural circle. Moses’ oldest daughter, Brendel (known in adulthood as Dorothea), played a central role – along with her friends Rahel Levin and Henriette Herz – in the brilliant “salon” culture that had grown up by the turn of the century around homes like her parents’, numbering among her acquaintances Friedrich Schleiermacher, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel (the latter she eventually married). Her younger sister, Henriette, hosted a highly successful salon of her own in Paris in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Though salon culture was in a state of general decline in the course of Felix’s childhood, one would hardly have guessed as much from the steady stream of intellectual and artistic figures that passed through his Berlin home, particularly after the family’s 1825 move to a palatial new property at 3 Leipzigerstraße. As a teenager Felix could boast acquaintance with a host of luminaries that included historical philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, natural scientist Alexander von Humboldt, philologist Gustav Droysen, orientalist Friedrich Rosen, and music critic and historian Adolph Bernhard Marx.

At the same time, Abraham and Lea brought every available resource to bear on the educations of their children (Fanny, born 1805; Felix, born 1809; Rebecka, born 1811; and Paul, born 1812). Tradition holds that, by Felix’s sixth year, he and Fanny had begun receiving lessons in French and mathematics from their father, and in literature, art, and German from their mother.⁷ Felix studied for two years (1816–18) at the *Lehr-, Pensions-, und Erziehungsanstalt*, a private elementary school.⁸ Dr. Carl Wilhelm Ludwig Heyse was brought on board as *Hauslehrer* in 1819, directing Felix’s studies in geography, mathematics, history, French, and Greek (at which he excelled). By this time, Felix and Fanny – both of them already pianists of staggering achievement – had begun taking lessons at the instrument with Ludwig Berger. Felix’s violin lessons with Carl Wilhelm Henning began in 1819, and he would become an accomplished landscape artist under the guidance of painter Gottlob Samuel Rösel.

Nowhere were Felix’s industry, creativity, and intellectual acumen more in evidence, though, than in the work in music theory and composition he began under the direction of Singakademie director Carl Friedrich Zelter in 1819. Basing his teaching firmly on J. P. Kirnberger’s pedagogical method, which was based in turn on J. S. Bach’s, Zelter led Mendelssohn through a rigorous program of study in figured bass, chorale, and counterpoint.⁹ By his fifteenth year, Mendelssohn was producing large-scale chamber, orchestral,

and piano works of which most professional composers would have been justly proud. With the 1825 completion of the String Octet op. 20, these gave way to masterpieces. He had also, by this point, achieved no small prowess as a conductor through the direction of various ensembles that gathered at the Mendelssohn's Sunday musicales, a tradition that began around 1822.

By the time of the *St. Matthew Passion* revival, the twenty-year-old Mendelssohn thus presented a very impressive package indeed, of which his stunning compositional accomplishments were only a single facet. Throughout his life, Mendelssohn's facility at both piano and organ rarely failed to delight, though his assiduous refusal of bravura display for its own sake left the bulk of contemporary commentators at a loss as to where he ranked among his generation's towering piano virtuosi. A *Harmonicon* review of a performance of 13 May 1833 encapsulates those features of his playing almost universally acknowledged – its accuracy, its faithfulness to the letter of the score, and, where appropriate, his preternatural gift at improvisation:

The performance of Mozart's concerto by M. Mendelssohn was perfect. The scrupulous exactness with which he gave the author's text, without a single addition or new reading of his own, the precision in his time, together with the extraordinary accuracy of his execution, excited the admiration of all present; and this was increased almost to rapture, by his two extemporaneous cadences [i.e., cadenzas], in which he adverted with great address to the subjects of the concerto, and wrought up his audience almost to the same pitch of enthusiasm which he himself had arrived at. The whole of this concerto he played from memory.¹⁰

It is hardly faint praise to say that Mendelssohn held his own in the crowded field of piano virtuosi, but the last sentence of this review points to an aspect of Mendelssohn's musical persona – his musical memory – in which he had no peer. The excitement that gathered around the Singakademie's rehearsals for the *St. Matthew Passion* performance centered not only on the epiphanic impression of the gigantic work itself, but on the fact that its meticulous young conductor seemed to know every note by heart, directing rehearsals entirely from memory. At his English keyboard debut, in a concert of 30 May 1829, Mendelssohn electrified the audience by playing Weber's *Konzertstück* (still an unknown piece in England) from memory, a feat he repeated routinely across a range of even the most difficult repertoire. Anecdotes abound of private displays just as amazing to his contemporaries. One, which must stand for many, comes from Ferdinand Hiller's recollections of an event at one of Abbé Bardin's weekly musical gatherings in Paris, during Mendelssohn's visit to the city during the winter of 1832:

I [Hiller] had just been playing Beethoven's E flat Concerto in public, and they asked for it again on one of these afternoons. The parts were all there, and the string quartet too, but no players for the wind. "I will do the wind," said Mendelssohn, and sitting down to a small piano which stood near the grand one, he filled in the wind parts from memory, so completely, that I don't believe even a note of the second horn was wanting, and all as simply and naturally done as if it were nothing.¹¹

Mendelssohn was known throughout his life as an exacting conductor, but so consummate in musicianship and so gentlemanly in manner that few complained. His ability to bring forth, on the one hand, the best capacities of an ensemble and, on the other, his vision of a work quickly became the stuff of legends: "Nobody certainly," wrote Julius Benedict, "ever knew better how to communicate, as if by an electric fluid, his own conception of a work to a large body of performers."¹² Though Mendelssohn was not the first to conduct with a baton,¹³ he played a substantive role in standardizing the practice, and, indeed, for ushering in the era of the modern conductor as *auteur*.¹⁴

Yet Mendelssohn's upbringing had equipped him not only with a staggering array of capabilities, but with an extraordinarily robust configuration of professional aspirations: an amalgam of nationalistically tinted intellectualism, a civil service ethos, and the strong desire for financial and geographic stability. And underlying all – largely explaining the occasional misfires that would punctuate his early career – was the drive to achieve the broadest and most lasting possible impact. "I cannot quite agree with you in your not pointing out a positive vocation for Felix,"¹⁵ Abraham's brother-in-law, Jacob Bartholdy, had chafed. "The idea of a professional musician will not go down with me. It is no career, no life, no aim; in the beginning you are just as far as at the end . . ." Felix's whole professional life seemed impelled by the need to prove these sentiments mistaken.

A month after conducting the *St. Matthew Passion* revival, Mendelssohn left for England, the first phase of a three-year period occupied largely in travel. After a brief return to Berlin for the winter and early spring of 1830 – during which he was offered, and declined, the chair of music at the University of Berlin – he set off on the more substantial portion of the Grand Tour, highlighted with stays in Rome, Paris, and, once more, London, from which he returned to Berlin in June 1832. Though he did not conceive of the trip as a professional tour – his stated aim was simply to seek out the proper locale in which to begin his career – he found plentiful opportunities to perform. Indeed, only a few weeks into his initial sojourn in London the English public made it abundantly clear that a brilliant musical career was already underway.¹⁶ He conducted the Philharmonic Society in performances of his

Symphony no. 1 op. 11 and the *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture to wildly enthusiastic crowds;¹⁷ just as dazzling was the impression he made from the keyboard, in Weber's *Konzertstück* and Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto. Mendelssohn returned to England nine times before his death, and would maintain close ties with the Philharmonic Society and with a range of English publishers and choral societies for the remainder of his career.¹⁸

Carl Friedrich Zelter died on 15 May 1832, leaving vacant the directorship of Berlin's Singakademie. Mendelssohn, then in London, had been all but absent from the city's musical life for over three years (he did not perform publicly during his five-month stay in the city between December 1829 and May 1830).¹⁹ Despite the glories of the *St. Matthew Passion* revival, and of his rapidly advancing international reputation, Mendelssohn was not the obvious choice as Zelter's successor: that honor belonged to Karl Friedrich Rungenhagen, who had for nineteen years served capably as Zelter's assistant, and who directed the choir at Zelter's 18 May funeral.²⁰

It appears to have been chiefly under pressure from his family, and from friend Eduard Devrient, that Mendelssohn undertook his half-hearted pursuit of the Singakademie directorship. In a letter of 5 September 1832, he expressed to long-time friend Karl Klingemann both his lack of enthusiasm for the post (or, indeed, for Berlin in general) and his certainty that he would not be offered it: "then [comes] the whole motionless, stagnating Berlin backwater, then the negotiations about the Academy, with which they torment me more than is right, in order, in the end, to select their Rungenhagen or God knows whom."²¹ The matter came to a vote on 22 January 1833, when Mendelssohn was roundly defeated by Rungenhagen, 148 ballots to 88.²² Though Eric Werner discerns in Mendelssohn's loss "the severest trauma of his life"²³ – and follows Devrient in supposing anti-Semitism to have played an important role – William Little has pointed judiciously to a host of reasons that the Singakademie might have preferred the established Rungenhagen to the ambitious, yet unsettled, young Mendelssohn, and just as many reasons to rejoice that Mendelssohn did not begin his career tied to this city or this organization.²⁴

At the same time, Mendelssohn's stay in Berlin through these months was hardly a total professional loss. His ties to London's Philharmonic Society had been strengthened in November 1832 by a commission for three new works (the "Italian" Symphony would be the first instalment), and he offered a series of highly successful concerts in which his own music figured prominently alongside that of Bach, Beethoven, Weber, and others.²⁵ Most importantly, however, by the end of the winter he had received an invitation to conduct the fifteenth Lower Rhine Music Festival, being held in Düsseldorf at the end of May. Thus began a relationship that would continue happily through the rest of his life.

By 1833, the Lower Rhine Music Festival was already well on its way toward establishing itself as a pioneering display, in Cecilia Hopkins Porter's terms, of "the process by which an expanding, increasingly affluent, enlightened, and urban bourgeoisie acquired control over the musical establishment and provided the substance of a new mass public."²⁶ Its participants were almost exclusively amateur musicians, drawn from across Prussia's Rhine Province. Düsseldorf, Cologne, Aachen, and Elberfeld – among various configurations of which the festival had rotated since its 1818 inception – all enjoyed lively, decades-long traditions of civic music-making, an arena with which Mendelssohn was shortly to become well acquainted. Initially a two-day event (it moved toward a three-day format in the course of Mendelssohn's tenure), the festival almost invariably followed a single template: an oratorio was sung on the first day, Handel's outdistancing all others in popularity; a concert followed on the second day, generally setting off with a Beethoven symphony. The 1833 festival was built around Handel's *Israel in Egypt* and Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony, a piece that had not yet received a hearing at one of these events. The impression made by the young conductor received ample testimony in the supervisory committee's decision to carry through with their tentative plan to extend the proceedings into a third day, for the first time in the festival's history. The third day's concert, which became an increasingly regular event in the subsequent years, tended toward a *potpourri* of instrumental and vocal music.²⁷

The 1833 festival would turn out to be the first of seven that Mendelssohn would conduct, the last coming the year before his death.²⁸ It was at the 1836 festival that his own first oratorio, *St. Paul*, was premiered; two years later, in Cologne, Mendelssohn programmed J. S. Bach's *Ascension Oratorio*, the first work of Bach's to receive a hearing at one of these events. The festival's prestige built steadily through the years of Mendelssohn's involvement, its directorship, by the time of his death, having emerged as one of Germany's most coveted musical assignments (by the end of the century, its former conductors would include Louis Spohr, Gaspare Spontini, Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt, Johannes Brahms, and Richard Strauss).

Through the late 1830s, particularly in the wake of the *St. Paul* premiere, Mendelssohn became a familiar face at a range of similar gatherings across Germany and England. The year 1837 found him conducting his oratorio at the Birmingham Festival, to which he would return in 1840 and 1846. He conducted *St. Paul* again at the Brunswick Music Festival in 1839, and again at Schwerin's 1840 North German Music Festival. He would take part, too, in the Zweibrücken Music Festival of 1844, and in the 1846 German–Flemish Choral Festival in Cologne.

The most significant immediate result of Mendelssohn's participation in Düsseldorf's 1833 Lower Rhine Music Festival, however, was the offer of work of a more regular kind: the musical directorship of the city. A town of around 24,000,²⁹ Düsseldorf enjoyed a thriving musical life, if necessarily limited (as Mendelssohn would soon come to understand well) by the rather restricted pool of local talent. The post of musical director had been created in 1812, held by Friedrich August Burgmüller from that year until his death in 1824, and had stood vacant since then.³⁰ Under the terms of his contract, Mendelssohn was provided a salary of 600 thaler a year, for which he would assume the directorship of the city's orchestral and choral societies, together with the direction of music in the city's churches.

The first task facing Mendelssohn upon his arrival in October (he had spent the summer in England with his father) was the preparation of an entertainment for the visit of Prussian Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, to be undertaken in collaboration with local painters at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie, Schadow, Hildebrandt, and Schirmer. What materialized was a reprise of choruses from Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, with Mendelssohn at the piano, as accompaniment to a series of *tableaux vivants*.

Handel's oratorios were to play a central role through Mendelssohn's entire stint in Düsseldorf, his work in the city comprising a landmark in the progress of Handel's German reputation.³¹ *Alexander's Feast*, *Messiah*, *Solomon*, *Judas Maccabaeus*, and the "Dettingen" *Te Deum* all received hearings, together with Haydn's *The Seasons* and *The Creation*. Overtures by Gluck, Weber, and Cherubini factored importantly among instrumental offerings, together with Mendelssohn's own G minor Piano Concerto op. 25, and ambitious swaths of Beethoven (including the Third, Fourth, and Seventh Symphonies, the "Egmont" Overture, and the C minor Piano Concerto).³²

Düsseldorf was a predominantly Catholic city; it had been part of the Holy Roman Empire until 1806, when it passed into Napoleon's Rhenish Confederation, thence, under the 1815 terms reached at the Congress of Vienna, into Prussia's Rhine Province. Though the Protestant Mendelssohn could not enter into the direction of Catholic church music with more than an imprecise sense of religious conviction, his artistic convictions served him just as well. His monthly performances of sacred music find him assuming proudly the mantle of the reformer, most significantly in his struggle to give public expression to his own long-time devotion to sacred music of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Mendelssohn admired Justus Thibaut's influential 1825 book on the subject, *Über Reinheit der Tonkunst*, and had enjoyed a warm personal encounter with the author during an 1827 visit to Heidelberg. In the course of his 1830–31 sojourn in Rome,

he had sought out Giuseppe Baini, an expert on Palestrina, and plunged enthusiastically into Fortunato Santini's collection of Italian sacred polyphony.³³ Finding no such music in Düsseldorf's repositories, Mendelssohn struck out, only days after his arrival, for Elberfeld, Cologne, and Bonn, gathering what was to be had of the sacred music of Palestrina, Lotti, Leo, and Lasso. Despite his aversion to Haydn's "skandalös lustig"³⁴ masses, he pressed these, too, into use, along with masses by Mozart, Cherubini, and Beethoven, and a sampling of Bach's cantatas.³⁵

From Mendelssohn's Düsseldorf tenure dates his only period of service to the production of opera, and this period was not, in the balance, a very happy one. He had crossed paths before with the intendant of Düsseldorf's theater, playwright and author Karl Leberecht Immermann: in response to an 1831 commission to provide an opera for the Munich theater, Mendelssohn had turned to Immermann for a libretto, settling on the idea of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Though Mendelssohn had ultimately rejected Immermann's work on the project, the author retained sufficient confidence in the young musician to pull for his 1833 appointment in Düsseldorf,³⁶ and now hoped Mendelssohn would join him in his ambitions to found a new German theater. Their first enterprise was the staging of a series of "model productions" ("Mustervorstellungen" – Immermann's term), initiated with a meticulously rehearsed staging of *Don Giovanni* on 19 December 1833. Those that followed included Weber's *Oberon* and *Der Freischütz* and Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and *Die Zauberflöte*.

Mendelssohn appears to have taken genuine joy in the conducting of opera, recalling to his father the opening night of Cherubini's *Les deux journées* (in March 1834), "[i]t was the most pleasurable evening I have had in the theater in a long time, for I took part in the performance as a spectator, smiling and clapping along, and shouting bravos, yet conducting vivaciously all along."³⁷ But the administrative duties of the job he did not enjoy in the slightest. As plans for the new theater moved ahead through 1834, increasing turbulence in his relationship with Immermann and Mendelssohn's annoyance with the burdens of assembling a company of musicians from the meager available talent left him less enthusiastic than ever about his involvement in the whole enterprise. Matters came to a head on 2 November, less than a week after the official opening of the new theater, when – to the horror of his father – Mendelssohn cast professional decorum to the wind and summarily resigned all theatrical duties outside of occasional conducting.³⁸

He would probably never have taken such an extreme step had he not already arrived at the conclusion that he was meant for greater things than Düsseldorf could provide; he shortly began taking measures to withdraw

a year early from his three-year commitment there. The last concert of his tenure took place on 2 July 1835, by which time, however, the twenty-six-year-old had secured the post that would make his career.

In the course of his final winter in Düsseldorf, Mendelssohn had completed negotiations with Leipzig's town council that led to his appointment as that city's musical director and the conductor of its Gewandhaus Orchestra and Thomasschule. His first appearance with the orchestra took place on 4 October 1835, a wildly successful program that included his own *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* Overture and Beethoven's Fourth Symphony. Mendelssohn's work with this orchestra continued in one form or another to the last year of his life.

The city of Leipzig enjoyed a cultural influence well out of proportion to its population (around 45,000); it was home to one of Germany's premier universities, and its dozens of presses produced a substantial fraction of the books published in Germany, including much of its music. The Gewandhaus Orchestra – housed in a city-owned building and governed by a municipal board of directors – had been a noteworthy ensemble for over fifty years.³⁹ Mozart performed there in 1789, and the orchestra had played a leading role in the early promotion of Beethoven's symphonies. In Mendelssohn's hands, it became Germany's leading orchestra, and one of the most influential musical institutions in Europe.

It became clear at once that Mendelssohn's vision of the conductor's job involved a considerably higher degree of control over the ensemble than previous conductors had sought to exercise. Instrumental music, formerly led by the concertmaster from his desk, was now given over to direction by the conductor himself (though Mendelssohn's concertmaster, Ferdinand David, was one of Europe's most able, and routinely took over conducting duties during Mendelssohn's absences). Mendelssohn also insisted on personally overseeing the direction of as many rehearsals as possible. At the same time, he worked energetically behind the scenes toward insuring better pay for the musicians themselves. What emerged under his guidance was one of the early nineteenth century's clearest models for the modern professional symphony orchestra.

The Gewandhaus concert season, which ran from Michaelmas (29 September) to Easter, was built around twenty subscription concerts, supplemented by benefit concerts for visiting virtuosi, occasional concerts for charitable causes, and chamber concerts. Where repertoire was concerned, Mendelssohn's central objective appears to have been providing the Leipzig public sustained exposure to the music of Mozart and Beethoven; the work of these two proliferates among the overtures, symphonies, concertos,

and operatic excerpts (where Beethoven is, to be sure, at something of a disadvantage) that form the core of the orchestra's offerings.⁴⁰ In the realm of overture, Cherubini, Spohr, and Weber were also well represented, with Mendelssohn's own concert overtures emerging as perennial favorites. Where concertos were concerned, Mendelssohn was at his most adventurous in the reclamation of a number of J. S. Bach's works in the genre (he also programmed Bach's orchestral suites). At the same time, his commitment to supporting what he considered the worthiest of newer compositions – Ignaz Moscheles, Ferdinand Hiller, and Niels Gade were among those most enthusiastically promoted – yielded an especially impressive crop of symphonic premieres, including the newly discovered C major symphony of Schubert, and Schumann's First, Second, and Fourth. If the vocal components of these concerts tended to draw most heavily on the operas of Gluck, Mozart, Beethoven, Cherubini, and Weber, this did not preclude offerings from Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti as well. The orchestra also had the opportunity, through Mendelssohn's years, to share the stage with the most eminent touring virtuosi of the day, Franz Liszt, Sigismund Thalberg, Alexander Dreyschock, Clara Schumann, Ignaz Moscheles, and the young prodigy Joseph Joachim among them.

A highlight of Mendelssohn's years in Leipzig were three cycles of "historical concerts," offered during the winters of 1838, 1841, and 1847 (by which time declining health forced him to share some of his conducting duties with Niels Gade). Though each series unfolded chronologically, these were intended not so much to survey the entire consequential history of music as Mendelssohn understood it, but, in Donald Mintz's words, "to demonstrate the continuity of the tradition."⁴¹ Thus Italian polyphony is passed over altogether in favor of a coherent three- or four-concert trajectory that moves from an opening instrumental work of Bach to a symphony of Beethoven and beyond.⁴² The 1838 series cast its net wide, sampling the work of Bach, Handel, Gluck, Viotti, Righini, Cimarosa, Haydn, Naumann, Mozart, Salieri, Romberg, Méhul, Vogler, Weber, and Beethoven. While the 1847 series followed a similar design, the four concerts of the 1841 series focused on five canonical composers alone, the first dedicated to Bach and Handel, the next three devoted exclusively to Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven in turn. In keeping with the spirit of these concerts was Mendelssohn's 6 August 1840 organ recital at the Thomaskirche, comprised entirely of Bach's work (apart from a concluding "*Freie Phantasie*");⁴³ the proceeds of the event went toward the erection of a new Bach monument.

Though the death of his father only a few weeks into Mendelssohn's Leipzig tenure came as a devastating blow, his first years in the city appear

to have been among his life's happiest. During the summer of 1836, while temporarily relieving his ailing friend Johann Nepomuk Schelble of the direction of Frankfurt am Main's Cäcilienverein, Mendelssohn undertook the courtship of Cécile Jeanrenaud, whom he would marry on 28 March of the following year. The marriage produced five children, and appears to have been a remarkably happy one, routinely depicted as flawless in the memoirs and biographical sketches of Mendelssohn's sympathetic contemporaries (Charles Edward Horsley would later enthuse, "In all relations of life, as a son, a husband, and a father, he was humanly speaking perfect."⁴⁴ Though recent scholars tend to look with a kind of patronizing smile toward the image of the Mendelssohns' family life as one of unsullied domestic *Gemütlichkeit*, it has not been proven substantively false.

The June 1840 coronation of Prussia's King Friedrich Wilhelm IV was the first in a series of events that would ultimately pull a reluctant Mendelssohn away from his fortunate situation in Leipzig. Christian Karl Josias von Bunsen, the scholar and diplomat who acted as adviser in the development of Friedrich Wilhelm's grandiose plans for Prussia's intellectual and artistic revitalization, soon arrived at a three-tiered scheme for "reintroducing the most beautiful and noble music into life," calling for a new educational institution, for "really appropriate music for the Divine Services," and for performances of great oratorios, old and new.⁴⁵ Bunsen names Mendelssohn as the only logical choice for the job.

A first step in the execution of these plans came that November, when Mendelssohn was offered the directorship of music at the Academy of Arts, together with an invitation to conduct several concerts annually.⁴⁶ Though the plan called for the development of a full-blown conservatory from the music section at the Academy, Mendelssohn was skeptical, and dragged his feet in the matter. The following August, he at last moved to Berlin to begin a "trial year," on the understanding that if nothing of consequence had happened by the end of that period – and Mendelssohn strongly doubted that anything would – he would be free to return to Leipzig.⁴⁷ He received the title of Kapellmeister in September, by which time he still had only the sketchiest sense of what he had been hired to do.

As Mendelssohn had anticipated, the conservatory failed to materialize in the course of the year that followed. The most rewarding event of his tenure had been the commission to produce incidental music for a staging of Sophocles' *Antigone* (op. 55), premiered in Potsdam on 28 October (the incidental music to Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* would follow two years later). By June 1842, Friedrich Wilhelm – aware of Mendelssohn's mounting dissatisfaction – had shifted his focus from his educational agenda to the matter of sacred music, proposing that Mendelssohn be placed "in

charge of all Evangelical Church music in the monarchy.⁴⁸ Mendelssohn had no interest whatever in such a post, and had resolved, by October, to quit the city once and for all.⁴⁹ The king responded to Mendelssohn's resignation with an offer the composer could not bring himself to refuse: a choir and small orchestra were to be assembled to provide music for services in the cathedral, and Mendelssohn was to lead them, but was free to return to Leipzig until this ensemble was actually established. In exchange for this freedom, Mendelssohn happily surrendered half of his 3,000-thaler salary. He wasted no time in quitting Berlin and returning to his duties at the Gewandhaus (where he had little immediate use for his new title of *Generalmusikdirektor* for church music).

Through the summer of 1843, by which time the choir had indeed been organized, negotiations still dragged on as to Mendelssohn's precise duties, particularly as they bore on the musicians of the royal orchestra. In November, he at last moved his family once more to Berlin, where he was charged both to work with the cathedral choir and to share the conducting of symphony concerts with opera director Wilhelm Taubert. Striving to make sense of the musical stipulations of the newly revised Prussian liturgy – Mendelssohn would shortly run afoul of ecclesiastical authorities on the particular question of the orchestra's appropriateness in church music – he provided a number of works for the choir's Christmas, New Year's Day, Passion Sunday, and Good Friday performances, chief among which were several *a cappella* Psalms (published as op. 78) and verse settings (four of which are included in op. 79), and a setting of Psalm 98 with orchestra (op. 91).⁵⁰ After Holy Week, Mendelssohn disembarked for several months of travel, including a good deal of concertizing in London through the late spring. When he returned to Berlin in September, it was to chiefly to negotiate for his immediate withdrawal from the city's musical life. Requesting no more than the fulfillment of occasional commissions, and reducing Mendelssohn's salary to 1,000 thaler, Friedrich Wilhelm released the composer from his duties; Mendelssohn left the city at the end of November.

If the situation in Berlin had yielded almost ceaseless frustrations, these years witnessed a much more fortunate series of events in Leipzig. Lawyer Heinrich Blümner had died in February 1839, leaving in the hands of Saxon King Friedrich August II a 20,000 thaler bequest which Blümner had stipulated must go toward the founding or maintenance of a national institute of arts or science. On 8 April 1840, Mendelssohn submitted a petition that the bequest be used for the founding of a music academy.

The petition itself is a rhetorical tour de force, in which Mendelssohn – with the vaguest undercurrent of self-congratulation – takes the full measure of Leipzig's position in the European musical landscape:

[F]or that branch of art that will always remain a principal foundation of musical studies, for the most elevated instrumental and sacred compositions in their very numerous concerts and performances in church, Leipzig has material for the formation (*Bildungsmittel*) of young musical artists in a supply few other German cities can offer. Through the lively interest with which the major works of the great masters have, for the last fifty years, been here (often for the first time in Germany) recognised and taken up, through the care with which they have continually been brought forth, Leipzig has assumed an eminent position among the musical cities of the fatherland . . .

[The academy] would give musical activities here an impetus whose influence would very soon and for ever after be most beneficially disseminated.⁵¹

The petition was ultimately granted, and a two-story house erected for the purpose in the courtyard of the Gewandhaus.⁵² In the first week of April 1843, the conservatory officially opened.

The three-year course of study it provided was intended, as the conservatory's prospectus put it, to comprise "all practical and theoretical branches of music viewed both as an art and as a scholarly discipline."⁵³ Regular attendance at rehearsals and performances of the Gewandhaus orchestra and other local music organizations – the *Bildungsmittel* of which Mendelssohn was so justly proud – was required of all students, symbolically uniting the specific educational agenda of the conservatory with the broader, public educational agenda the ensembles had always, in Mendelssohn's view, been meant to serve.

The faculty was itself a distinguished group, including Robert Schumann (who taught piano and score reading), Ferdinand David (who taught violin), and the choirmaster of the Thomaskirche, Moritz Hauptmann (who offered instruction in harmony and composition). Mendelssohn himself took an active role in the teaching of composition, singing, and instruments, though, as Donald Mintz points out, the bulk of his duties where performance was concerned probably resembled "master classes," in modern parlance, more than systematic instruction.⁵⁴ In the years that followed, Clara Schumann, Ferdinand Hiller, Niels Gade, and Ignaz Moscheles would join the ranks of the school's instructors.

After his November 1844 departure from Berlin, Mendelssohn took up residence in Frankfurt for what amounted to an extended vacation from professional commitments. His health was declining, and it had become clear by the time of his August 1845 return to his Gewandhaus duties that he could no longer sustain his former level of activity. He shared the conducting of the orchestra with Niels Gade through this season and, acting on the advice of his physician, retired from piano performance early in 1846. Yet other

conducting obligations continued to press: the end of May found him in Aachen conducting the Lower Rhine Music Festival; two weeks later came the German-Flemish Festival in Cologne; on 26 August, the premiere of *Elijah* in Birmingham.

The conducting of the 1846–47 Gewandhaus concerts was once more divided between Mendelssohn and Gade, though it was clear to all by now that the older man's health was failing. In April, at the season's close, Mendelssohn gathered his remaining strength for a trip to England, where he conducted a series of performances of *Elijah*. In May, in the course of his journey home, he received word of the sudden death of his sister, Fanny, a blow from which he would not recover. Mendelssohn suffered a small stroke on 9 October, another on the 28th, and a third on 3 November; he died the following evening.⁵⁵

In a letter of 28 March 1834, the 25-year-old Mendelssohn had offered his father a glimpse of the optimism that had carried him through his first months in Düsseldorf, and a kernel, surely, of the credo underpinning the brilliant career that was just then beginning to unfold:

A good performance in the Dusseldorf theater does not, to be sure, spread throughout the world, and scarcely, no doubt, beyond the *Düssels*; but if I please and delight both myself and all those in the house through and through in favor of good music, that is something attractive!⁵⁶

Few manifestations of the moody, depressive behavior to which Mendelssohn fell increasingly prone in the final stage of his life are quite as tragic as those intermittent signs that he had fundamentally ceased believing what he once had about the significance of musical performance, or, more broadly speaking, of the institutions he had so labored to build up. As he wrote to his friend, pianist Ignaz Moscheles, on 7 March 1845, "From all this directing and these public musical performances so little is gained even by the public itself, – a little better, a little worse, what does it matter? how easily is it forgotten!"⁵⁷

These final words sound, indeed, like the voice of despair. But where Mendelssohn's own stunning professional achievements are concerned, they could hardly be more wrong.