

## Mendelssohn and the English

In Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847), the Victorians found their ideal musician. He was arguably the greatest child prodigy in the history of music - even Mozart before the age of eighteen never produced as perfectly crafted and original a work as the Octet of the sixteen-year-old Mendelssohn. He was also a virtuoso pianist, organist and viola player, a tireless conductor and an enthusiastic promoter of the works of Bach which he helped to rediscover. At the age of twenty he revived and conducted the then-unknown St Matthew Passion; during the chorus rehearsals he played the orchestral parts on the piano from memory! And he was not only a fine musician; he was also an enthusiastic dancer, gymnast and swimmer, and an expert caricaturist. He was remembered for his modesty, charm, and unfailing tact and politeness in rehearsals. Queen Victoria herself liked him greatly, recording in her diary his impressive improvisation which simultaneously incorporated Rule, Britannia and the Austrian national anthem, and observing “such an agreeable, clever man & his countenance beams with intelligence and genius.”

So much for the character of the man - but to explain the particular appeal of his music to the Victorians one has to look further, and to a peculiarly English combination of circumstances. England's new concert halls, the largest ever built up to that time, did not owe their size to purely musical considerations - they were the result of the Victorian philosophy of Improvement and they encouraged the Romantically-inspired desire for Sensation. Music was seen by the civic authorities as a tool for the moral and social improvement of the expanding middle and working classes and was encouraged accordingly. Birmingham Town Hall was built to house large choral concerts, usually accompanied by the organ - an instrument which itself became hugely expanded and more popular. It has been said that the English “hate music, but love the noise it makes”, and it was the extreme sensation produced by huge contrasts in volume and sound that appealed to the Victorians. Similarly, they were ripe to enjoy the new music coming from Europe from such people as Liszt, Berlioz, and Chopin with its exciting virtuosity and exotic harmonies. But these figures were a problem for a culture which tied music and morals so closely together: there was suspicion attached to a virtuoso who made women swoon by arriving on the concert platform bound in chains, or a

composer who frequented the decadent Paris salons, and holidayed in Majorca with a woman who smoked cigars. The music of such people was enjoyed here but could hardly be promoted as an edifying influence - indeed, it might even be a force for moral decline. But Mendelssohn - on the conservative wing of the "new music" but still very much a Romantic composer, whose music was novel enough to stimulate but well short of decadence, a family man whose personal life and morals were irreproachable - was a different case altogether. When he stood on the rostrum of Birmingham Town Hall on the morning of 26 August, 1846 and raised his baton to conduct the first performance of *Elijah*, its success was assured. The audience could be excited by the tidal waves of sound and the daring harmonies (still thrilling today) of *Thanks be to God*, enthralled by the curses of the mob in *Woe to him!* and almost physically feel the sound of the 500 performers (not forgetting the mighty Organ) and remain happy in the knowledge that they were improving their minds and their morals.

Mendelssohn was born in Leipzig in 1809, the grandson of the famous Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Brought up a Lutheran by religion, his attitude to his ancestry seems to have been ambivalent. He hardly ever referred to it in his writings or recorded conversations, and in the subject-matter for his earlier oratorio *St Paul* he had chosen an explicit rejection of Judaism for Christianity. On the other hand, he reinstated the Jewish part of his name (his father had changed the family name to Bartholdy, but Felix adopted both names, to his father's displeasure), and in his later life he returned to an unequivocally "Old Testament" subject in *Elijah*. He had started to make plans for it as early as 1836 but differences with the librettist, the Revd Julius Schubring, over whether the work should emphasise the devotional or the dramatic, caused the project to be shelved. Then in 1845 the Birmingham Festival committee engaged Mendelssohn's services as conductor and commissioned him to provide an oratorio for the occasion - so *Elijah* was taken up again in earnest. He was refining and improving the work right up to the first performance, and even rewrote some numbers after it had taken place. But his appetite for hard work and life in general had worn down his fragile constitution; *Elijah* was to be his last major work and the crowning success of his career. The following year he was dead at the age of only thirty-eight.

After the first performance the Times wrote: "The last note of "Elijah" was drowned in a long-continued volley of plaudits, vociferous and deafening.....never was there a more complete triumph - never a more thorough and speedy recognition of a work of art." In Mendelssohn's native Germany however the work was not a success. The absence of really large concert halls may have been a factor, or the anti-Semitic backlash against Mendelssohn encouraged by Wagner and his circle; at any rate, the first performance in Leipzig was half-empty. But in England the work's enormous popularity continued to grow and its influence on English musical life was far-reaching. It boosted the already growing choral society movement and provided a focus for many musical festivals - it could be said that Mendelssohn's gift to the English was to bring religion into the concert-hall.

But its effect was not entirely positive - the success of the work was so complete that it encouraged countless English composers to imitate its model. The expression of religious feeling was difficult for many Romantic composers who often resorted to the archaic or saccharine to portray the divine while reserving the drama and vigour of Romanticism for the secular or profane. (Mendelssohn himself was aware of this problem in his own music - he wanted to cut "O rest in the Lord" because it was "too sweet"). But for many years the staple diet of English choral societies was Elijah, Handel's Messiah, and countless pale Mendelssohnian imitations by English composers which are now forgotten. Despite some fine works from the likes of Parry and Stanford it seemed that the English musical establishment was still under the shadow of Germany and of Mendelssohn in particular. To see the end of that shadow we must travel forward to 1900. The venue is still Birmingham Town Hall, and (astonishingly) there are one or two chorus members who sang in the first Elijah. But this time the figure on the rostrum is Hans Richter, conducting a new work by a composer from well outside the musical and religious establishment: The Dream of Gerontius by Edward Elgar. But the occasion was a sorry contrast to that of 54 years before. The audience was unmoved by the indifferent performance and suspicious of the work's Catholicism; ironically it was in Germany that it would find its greatest initial success. But English choral music had at last found a new voice and was ready to strike out on its own.