A Classical Composer in a Darkening Age

This book previews the festivities planned in 1997, which will honor the man some musicians regard as the “first German composer,” on the 150th anniversary of his death at the age of only thirty-eight. Part I, essays by academic authorities, varies widely in quality. Parts II-IV present source materials with short introductions, many of them never translated before. Especially useful in Part II (Memoirs) is an essay by J.C. Lobe, based on diary entries recording conversations with the composer between 1842 and 1847.

Felix Mendelssohn was born in 1809 into the most prominent Jewish family in Berlin. His father’s father was the famous Moses Mendelssohn, who, as a Jew, had “barely gained entrance” to the royal city of Berlin in 1743, but became known as one of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment. Moses’ son Abraham arranged for his

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family to convert to the state Evangelical Church when Felix was a boy, and adopted the Christian surname, Bartholdy. Felix insisted on keeping both names.

His mother, née Lea Salomon, was the granddaughter of Isaac Daniel Itzig, the court banker and probably the wealthiest man in Berlin, one of the first Jews to receive the rights of citizenship. Among Itzig’s five sons and eleven daughters—all talented musicians—were Fanny von Arnstein, Sara Levy, and Bella Salomon. His grandmother Bella or great-aunt Sara gave Felix Mendelssohn the handwritten score of the St. Matthew Passion of J.S. Bach, which led to the famous revival of this long-forgotten oratorio, which he conducted in Berlin in 1829, at the age of only nineteen.

According to Nancy B. Reich’s essay on Felix’s gifted composer-sister Fanny, all the Itzig sisters were well acquainted with the music of J.S. Bach “at a time when little of it was published and still less performed publicly.” A key figure in introducing Mozart to that music in the 1780’s in Vienna, was Felix’s great-aunt, Fanny von Arnstein [see article this issue, page 30].

Mendelssohn drew upon the entire Classical vein, from J.S. Bach to Beethoven. Franz Brendel, who took over Robert Schumann’s Neue Zeitschrift für Musik and oriented it to the “progressive” (Romantic) direction of Liszt and Wagner, in his 1845 article about Schumann and Mendelssohn (both then living), describes them as representing the “classicist” school, which he believed could not express German national aspirations in the pre-1848 revolutionary period. Mendelssohn, who loathed Jacobinism, recoiled from that idea of a politicized art.

In Felix’s early works, of the 1820’s, he modeled his compositions on Beethoven in form and content. One early piano sonata takes the opening recitative from the Florestan aria in the opera Fidelio, and unfolds a brilliant fugue on this theme. Unfortunately his later works, although they have moments of great beauty, seem to lack that driving creative force.

Lobe’s memoir sheds light both on Mendelssohn’s integrity, and also on why he flinched from confronting the late Beethoven—a failing which Richard Wagner relished throwing in Mendelssohn’s face. Mendelssohn beautifully described the Classical method to Lobe: “What I understand by ‘new ground’ is creations that obey newly discovered and at the same time more sublime artistic laws. In my overture, I have not given expression to any single new maxim. For example, you will find the very same maxims I followed, in the great overture to Beethoven’s Fidelio. My ideas are different, they are Mendelssohnian, not Beethovenian, but the maxims according to which I composed it are also Beethoven’s maxims. It would be terrible indeed if, walking along the same path and creating according to the same principles, one could not come up with new ideas and images.”

Through Lobe we also gain insight into Mendelssohn’s weakness. He was right in insisting, against Romantic notions of the Weltanschauung, that “the artist should be objective and universal,” not determined by his time. But he was wrong in stating that Beethoven’s music developed as it did, on the basis of the prior work of Mozart and Haydn alone, “no matter how the world might have looked from a political or religious standpoint. Whether we have this dogma or that political belief, war or peace, absolutism, constitutionalism, or a republic, it has no effect whatsoever on the evolution of the art of music.” In this quote we see Mendelssohn trapped by the cruel dichotomy imposed by Hegel and Savigny, who ruled intellectual life in Berlin at the time, and who had severed the “spiritual” from the “natural” sciences—politics from culture. The moral and intellectual impoverishment of our own age is traceable to this very dilemma.

—Nora Hamerman

New Textbook Proves Classical Music Composition a Science

On September 8, the Schiller Institute released A Manual on the Rudiments of Tuning and Registration: Book I, a new textbook on the composition of Classical music, commissioned by Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr.

The text is aimed both at serious music students on the advanced junior high, high school, and college levels, and at teachers and musicians.

Using over three hundred musical examples, the book proves that Classical music must be pitched at C = 256 Hz (A = 427.432 Hz), as proposed in the Schiller Institute petition to the Italian Parliament to this effect, now signed by hundreds of famous musicians.

It does this by demonstrating that all music is based upon the human singing voice, whose physiological registers only function at the lawful C = 256 pitch.

As the manual documents, the