



**Saturday, 28 April 2012**

### **Mendelssohn. A lightweight composer?**

**Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy** (1809 – 1847) made his first appearance as a pianist at the age of nine and by the age of eleven had begun composing. He died in 1847 at the age of only thirty eight with his opus numbered works alone running to 121. He wrote operas, oratorios, incidental music, church music, choral works, symphonies, overtures, piano concertos, violin concertos, a wealth of chamber music and piano music, organ music and songs.

Yet for all this he is still often considered a lightweight composer. It's true he wrote incidental music such as that for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that is considered to reflect this shallowness. It is also true that his most popular symphonies, No.3 'Scottish' and No. 4 'Italian' have a bright and breezy feel but does this make them any less for that?

Mendelssohn's father, Abraham Mendelssohn, a wealthy banker, was initially against his son taking up a career in music, preferring for him a more reliable profession. However, Mendelssohn continued his musical studies and wrote his first composition, a cantata, in 1820.

Between the ages of eleven and fifteen Mendelssohn wrote his thirteen string symphonies which already showed a remarkable maturity and craftsmanship.

By the age of only sixteen Mendelssohn had written what is perhaps his first fully mature work, the Octet for strings Op.20, a work that astonishes with its radiance and individuality of style.

Max Bruch wrote of the Octet and the overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, written at the age of just seventeen, '...both works have earned immortality, but to me the Octet will always remain the greater miracle.' Even his father had, by then, to admit that his son was a genius.

Despite these early successes, by 1831, he was still uncertain as to the direction he should take, especially after receiving a letter from a friend, Eduard Devrient, who wrote '...two and twenty, and nothing done for immortality..' A harsh judgment for someone so young.

Mendelssohn's father also had concerns about the direction his son's music was going, encouraging him to write an oratorio, though trying to dissuade him from writing opera on the grounds that too many composers had left numerous forgotten operas.

This didn't stop Mendelssohn from writing the comic opera '*Die Hochzeit des Camacho*' (Camacho's Wedding) (1825) or the operetta '*Die Heimkehr aus der Fremde*' (Son and

Stranger) (1829). He also left an unfinished opera 'Loreley' and five operas in manuscript. Sadly Abraham Mendelssohn was proved right and these operas are now forgotten.

Mendelssohn, nevertheless, tried to oblige his father and in 1836 came the oratorio 'St Paul'. Sadly Abraham Mendelssohn died in November 1835 and the oratorio was not performed until the following May at the Dusseldorf Festival. His second great oratorio 'Elijah' didn't come until the year before his own death.

Mendelssohn's music can stand on its own merits but often Choral Societies try to add more gravitas to Elijah than it needs, taking the work rather too seriously and performing it as a Victorian dirge rather than pointing up the Mendelssohnian sparkle and bounce. Surely it is this joy in Mendelssohn's music that, at least in part, makes it great.

Yet it is in his symphonies, chamber music and the famous E minor Violin concerto that Mendelssohn really showed his genius. The E minor concerto is among the best loved violin concertos of all time. Even that most modern of composers, Peter Maxwell Davies, a great admirer of Mendelssohn, is said to have modelled his first violin concerto on the Mendelssohn.

I find in **Mendelssohn's chamber music** some of the most attractive music he ever wrote. Mendelssohn's chamber works may not be of the proportions of Beethoven but they are no less great for that.

Of the chamber works, the Octet must stand particularly high, but of his seven string quartets, the three Op.44 quartets and Op.80 quartet stand out as great works.

I particularly like the Talich Quartet who have recorded all the quartets as well as the Pieces for String Quartet Op.81 for Calliope. These are still available from Amazon [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)

The two piano trios Op.49 and Op.66 are particularly fine works especially in performances as accomplished as those on a recent release from Audite [www.audite.de](http://www.audite.de)



The Swiss Piano Trio brings all the poetry, sparkle and virtuosity to what is some of the greatest of Mendelssohn's music. With the Piano Trio No.1 in D minor Op.49 they give us an emotionally charged *molto allegro e agitato* followed by a beautifully paced *andante con moto tranquillo*. The third movement *scherzo* is immaculately played and the work ends on an exuberant *finale*, played with passion and precision.

In the second Piano Trio in C minor Op.66 the Swiss Trio give all the power and thrust of the *allegro energico e con fuoco* that could be wanted, which is beautifully offset by the poetic playing of the following *andante espressivo*. The third movement *scherzo* is spectacularly played and the work ends with an *allegro appassionato* full of feeling and passion.

These trios can match anything that Beethoven or Schubert did in that medium and, in performances such as these, with well a balanced recording; I can only give this issue the strongest recommendation.

A lightweight composer? Not on this showing.

Posted by [Bruce Reader](#)