

The Life of Mendelssohn.

A Study of the Great Musician.

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It seldom happens that one born of wealthy parents, enjoying the advantages of such a position, develops the independence and strength of character, which he who has had to battle hard for everything, possesses. This struggle endows his art with a depth and intrinsic worth, which the art of Mendelssohn did not enjoy. In easy, affluent circumstances the latter passed his life; in his music we find grace, refinement and facility, but great emotional depth is lacking.

Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg in 1809. His grandfather was the renowned philosopher Moses, and his father, Abraham, a banker. For reasons of convenience the latter decided to change his religion, and he and his family were baptised. They moved from Hamburg to Berlin, where their home became the meeting place of those distinguished in art and letters. In such an atmosphere young Felix grew up. He received a thorough all-round education, but his decided bent for music soon displayed itself both in his compositions and in his playing. In 1821 his music-master took him to Weimar to meet Goethe, then an old man, who was much impressed by the musical prodigy. At home a small orchestra performed his works, which the boy himself conducted, a privilege rarely enjoyed by any other composer at such an age. His work already showed the finish of the mature artist, while the output was great. He wrote operas and symphonies and at the age of seventeen the Overture to the "Midsummer Night's Dream," which he never surpassed for the freshness of its ideas, neatness of its expression and shape, and the finish of its orchestration.

At this period his life was passed amidst an incessant social whirl, of which he was the central attraction. The result was that the deeper, finer side of his nature was left uncultivated, while a certain superficial brilliance took its place. Still, his feeling for the noble in music showed itself in his devotion to the works of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. It was no easy matter at that time to produce the "St. Matthew Passion" of Bach, but he did so successfully and instituted a revival of the great cantor's works, which from that day to this has not ceased.

Wherever he went Mendelssohn made friends. In England his career as a composer, a performer and a man, was a triumph. The Philharmonic Society performed his works. On one occasion he re-wrote entirely from memory the score of

his "Midsummer Night's Dream" Overture, which had been lost. He travelled in Scotland and gained impressions for the "Scotch Symphony" and the "Hebrides" Overture. Nor did the grand tour end there, for he went to Germany through Nuremberg, Munich, to Vienna, and then on to Italy, where the beauty of its seacoast made an overwhelming impression on him. Here he commenced his "Italian Symphony."

In France the public appreciated his talent and skill, but were not deeply impressed. Mendelssohn did not think them capable of understanding the serious aspects of his art. To them Bach was "a mere old-fashioned wig stuffed with learning." Despite these drawbacks, however, he enjoyed his stay in France.

Germany did him honour. In 1835 he became the director of the Gewandhaus concerts in Leipzig, after having held an appointment as Musical Director at Düsseldorf. The latter appointment was not a success, because conditions were unfavourable. Of the band he wrote himself that "at the beat they all come in separately, not one with any decision, and in the piano the flute is always too loud; and not a single Düsseldorfer can play a triplet clearly, but all play a quaver and two semiquavers, and every allegro leaves off twice as fast as it began, and they carry their fiddles under their coats when it rains, and when it is fine they don't cover them at all. If you once heard me conduct this orchestra, not even four horses could bring you there a second time." There was nothing dull about his letter-writing.

Two years later he married Cecile Jaurenaud, the daughter of a French Reformed Church Pastor in Leipzig, with whom he lived very happily. Their home looked out upon St. Thomas' Church and School, at one time the scene of Bach's labours, a factor which definitely enhanced its charms in Mendelssohn's eyes. As if to commemorate his happiness the following year saw the commencement of the famous Violin Concerto and the "Elijah" oratorio.

Composing, attending to his professional and family obligations, mixing freely with his fellow-beings, he did not spare himself. There were frequent trips to England to conduct and to perform, until finally his health began to fail.

In 1843 he organised the Conservatorium of Music in Leipzig, which has remained a worthy monument to his labours. He also completed the music for the "Midsummer

Night's Dream" and the "Elijah" oratorio, which was written expressly for the Birmingham Musical Festival, where he conducted the first performance in August 1846. Writing to his brother, Mendelssohn said of the performance that "no work of mine ever went so admirably the first time, or was received with such enthusiasm by both the musicians and the audience."

"Elijah" was his requiem. As a result of this continuous strain his health gave way completely, and on November 4th, 1847, at the age of thirty-eight, he died—another musician to be cut off in the prime of life.

As a man Mendelssohn was lovable and gentle and conscientious in his work. He was ready for any social undertaking and excelled in many branches of sport. We do not look for tragic seriousness in his work, because his life was never tinged by these qualities. At least one man's life was free to develop happily in the sunshine and to leave us a heritage of work, in which we can forget the gloom and sorrow of the world. "Few instances can be found in history of a man so amply gifted with every good quality of mind and heart; so carefully brought up amongst good influences; endowed with every circumstance that would make him happy; and so thoroughly fulfilling his mission. Never perhaps could any man be found in whose life there were so few things to conceal and to regret." So wrote Grove, the historian.

Mendelssohn does not belong to Judaism alone, but to the world.

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