

Preface

This is the first book to be written about the composer Felix Mendelssohn's relationship with England in the nineteenth century. That it should be the first extensive study devoted wholly to this subject is perhaps surprising, given Mendelssohn's ten highly successful trips to England between 1829 and 1847, and the admiration that was lavished upon his music throughout the British Isles. Moreover, in the decades following his sudden death in 1847, Mendelssohn was idolized in England, and his influence was widely hailed as a boon to the nation's musical culture.

The Rev. H.R. Haweis wrote, in his widely read book of 1871, *Music and Morals*:

We may fairly date the present wave of musical progress in this country from the advent of Mendelssohn. It is now more than 30 years ago since he appeared at the Philharmonic, and, both as a conductor and pianist, literally carried all before him. He brought with him that reverence for art, and that high sense of the artist's calling, without which art is likely to degenerate into a mere pastime, and the artist himself into a charlatan. The young composer read our native bands some useful lessons. Himself the chevalier of music – *sans peur et sans reproche* – sensitive indeed to criticism, but still more alive to the honour of art, he could not brook the slightest insult or slur upon music.

The following year, Charles Horsley, a composer and former student of Mendelssohn, made a similar observation in the American periodical *Dwight's Journal of Music*:

... I have always considered it to his [Mendelssohn's] generosity and open-heartedness to my countrymen, as well as to his frequent visits to England, that the foundation of that large reaction in favour of classical music, especially as regards the whole of Sebastian Bach's work, and the later compositions of Beethoven, which has taken place within the last 40 years in the British Empire, may be traced.

Both Haweis and Horsley implicitly connected Mendelssohn to the development of classical music in Victorian England: an era of growth, marked by an increase in the number of orchestras, choral societies, concert series, music schools and music publishers – and especially by an expansion of audiences.

Yet in the late Victorian era, 'progressive' opinion began to turn against Mendelssohn. George Bernard Shaw, writing in *The Star* newspaper in 1888, famously denounced Mendelssohn for his 'kid glove gentility, his conventional

sentimentality and his despicable oratorio mongering'. And in 1902, one year after Victoria's death, the musical scholar J.A. Fuller Maitland, in his *English Music in the XIXth Century*, charged that indigenous English composition had been suppressed by 'foreign dominations'. Within this nationalistic view of musical history, Mendelssohn was portrayed as an unhelpful, even harmful, influence, and once this interpretation became an established tenet, little more was said on the subject during much of the twentieth century.

One notable exception, however, was an article published in *Music and Letters* by the musicologist Nicholas Temperley in 1962 entitled 'Mendelssohn's Influence on English Music'. He argued that previous claims made by British scholars concerning the influence of Mendelssohn on English music were 'greatly exaggerated':

First we are told that Mendelssohn's influence was exceptional and was the first force strong enough to break the 'sheer monopoly of Handelian influence'. In reality, it was just one of a series of foreign influences to which English music was particularly susceptible. Most of them, in their day, were as strong as Mendelssohn's and many of them lasted as long. J.C. Bach, Haydn, Dussek, Mozart, Rossini, Spohr, Mendelssohn, Gounod, Brahms, Wagner, Strauss – each of these in turn captured the allegiance of the xenophile English musician.

Temperley's views offered a refreshing departure from the 'foreign dominations' theory of the early twentieth century. Unfortunately, this article was written at a time when Mendelssohn scholarship was in a weaker position than it is today: since 1962, much information has come to light concerning Mendelssohn's visits to England, his reception within the musical community and other aspects of his relationship with the nation. Thus, the claim that Mendelssohn was no more prominent than many other continental composers falters in the face of current knowledge. None of the other composers mentioned by Temperley attained the widespread popularity and celebrity of Mendelssohn. And most of them did not make any serious attempt to integrate professionally and personally with England's musical culture, as did Mendelssohn.

To most continental composers, England was little more than a conveniently exploitable place to acquire wealth through performances, commissions and publishing ventures. By contrast, Mendelssohn cultivated what might be called a philanthropic interest in the country, and actively sought to aid the cause of English music and musicians by transmitting his own artistic values to England. In so doing, he assumed a role in its culture unlike that of any other leading continental composer. His efforts on behalf of musical England were acknowledged in these words of gratitude, appearing in *The Musical Examiner* in 1844:

Who helped to make the European reputation of Sterndale Bennett? – MENDELSSOHN! Who pronounced Mrs. Alfred Shaw and Miss Clara Novello the best singers in Germany? – MENDELSSOHN! Who has on all occasions spoken with enthusiasm of English musicians, and enforced a respect for them in Germany,

which but for him would perhaps *never* have existed in that prejudiced country?
– MENDELSSOHN!

The time has come for a fresh assessment of Mendelssohn's role in England's musical culture. In this book I have attempted to show how Mendelssohn became enormously popular and influential in England, and how he interacted with the socio-cultural forces that shaped the nation's musical values. As such, this book is a biographical work, yet it is not a biography in the conventional sense. On one hand, I have presented, in as much detail as possible, accounts of Mendelssohn's ten trips to Britain and his dealings with British musicians and other people he met. On the other hand, I have limited description of his activities in Germany to the minimum required for context and intelligibility. (In total, Mendelssohn spent less than two years, or about 10 per cent of his short adult life, in Britain, and the remaining 90 per cent of his time in continental Europe. Here, the ratio is reversed: 90 per cent of this book is concerned with his time in and relationship to Britain, and the remaining 10 per cent is devoted to the continent.) The final chapters of this book, which extend beyond Mendelssohn's life, are an examination of his posthumous reception in England to the end of the Victorian era.

Mendelssohn and Victorian England is the product of three years' research, during which time I examined many books, letters, diaries, memoirs, newspapers, magazines, concert programmes, scholarly journals and other documents in libraries in England, Germany and the United States. While the abundance of source materials was a blessing, it was also a curse, as the sheer volume of information available about Victorian England's musical culture can be daunting. Also daunting is the vast number of individuals who participated in this culture. As a result, this book contains many references to many people – some of whom are famous today and need little introduction, but many of whom have fallen into obscurity. As an aid to the reader, a Glossary of Names (Appendix A) may be found at the back, containing brief descriptive references to more than 100 named persons.

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