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The Great Composers, Sketched by Themselves. No. VI. Mendelssohn

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—and we are sure to do so, as the musical theory affection is in most cases incurable—we shall probably be informed of some modifications in his technical musical system as far as it has been carried in the “Sensations of Tone.”

Helmholtz as a critic once spoke of Beethoven as an outcome of revolution; and in the same narrow spirit of orthodoxy he deplored the “enharmonic modulations” of Spohr. The truth is, what we call “enharmony” is not only a natural result, but a very early result in a musical system. Its first appearance is in the diatonic scale itself—in the tritone $4\sharp$ or $5\flat$, taking it as an abstract interval $fa-si$ or $si-fa$. It is “a question” in the $6\flat$ 1 $3\flat$ $4\sharp$ in the common progression in Bach’s chorus in Ex. 1.

The $d\sharp$, to which allusion was made at the commencement of this article, is *diatonic* as 7 in $E\sharp$ major; *chromatic* as $2\sharp$ in $C\sharp$ major; and *enharmonic* as $4\flat$ in $A\flat$. The last-named interval, I venture to think, requires a new definition, as the “*augmented tritone*.” Theorists will find it an absolute necessity in pursuing the question from what Mr. Ellis calls the musical “*cell*,” $6\flat-1-3$, represented by the three scales just quoted $a\flat-c-e$; the beginning of *inversion*, upon which all latter-day musical theories are founded, consciously or unconsciously—and generally speaking unconsciously. A striking example of the want of systematisation of the principle of inversion is the theory of Von Oettingen, which explodes at the end in an example from Beethoven’s “Prometheus.” Von Oettingen, looking at it from his ordinary harmony point of view, simply gives it up. It is the more strange in that writer, as amongst his many “*icities*” as “tonicity,” “phonicity,” &c., is “reciprocity,” a principle represented in the “cell.” It must be noted that Mr. Ellis’s cell is a highly morphological one. The protoplasm of music is the *fifth* or its inversion. All chords can be reduced theoretically to that interval, perfect, chromatic or enharmonic,* the intervals themselves showing the various tonic relations. If we find the interval $c-f\sharp$ we may be pretty certain that the C is $6\flat$, and that the scale of $E\sharp$ or one of its modes enters into the combination.

THE GREAT COMPOSERS, SKETCHED BY THEMSELVES.

BY JOSEPH BENNETT.

NO. VI.—MENDELSSOHN.

For the first time in the course of these papers I have to deal with one who may be called a professed letter writer. Haydn and Weber, Mozart and Beethoven, were not, as we have seen, particularly gifted correspondents. They wrote to their friends, as most of us write, without much attention to graces of style, or literary interest of any kind. With Mendelssohn the case was very different. He could use the pen of the epistolar with almost as much effect as the pen of the composer, and he knew it. With him to be conscious of ability was always to exercise it in the best manner. Hence the finish, nay, the art of his letters, each one of which seems as though it had been put together for the public eye. A natural consequence of this fact is that Mendelssohn’s printed correspondence forms a part of universal literature. At any rate, few who take interest in musical matters are unacquainted with it, and, therefore, to make many long quotations, as I

have done from the letters of other composers, would be superfluous. Mendelssohn’s communications, however, suggest a good deal of remark with regard to himself, and may not prove the less a source of interest because they are generally familiar.

In May, 1830, Mendelssohn, being then just of age, started from Berlin on a grand tour, the first stage of which was Weimar, the home of Goethe, with whom the young musician was acquainted. At this point the letters begin; but, to understand the earlier of the series, it is necessary to know somewhat about the writer’s personality. For this we cannot go to a better authority than Edward Devrient, the master’s constant and intimate friend. The following is what, amongst other things, Devrient says of Mendelssohn: “Of middle height, slender frame, and uncommon muscular power, a capital gymnast, swimmer, walker, rider, and dancer, the leading feature of his outward and inner nature was an extraordinary sensitiveness. . . . Moreover, he would take no repose. The habit of constant occupation, instilled by his mother, made rest intolerable to him. To spend any time in mere talk caused him to look frequently at his watch, by which he often gave offence; his impatience was only satisfied when something was being done, such as music, reading, chess, &c.” He had “large expressive dark eyes, with drooping lids, and a peculiar veiled glance, through the lashes; this, however, sometimes flashed distrust and anger, sometimes happy dreaming and expectancy.” Although attached to his friends, “he loved only in the measure as he was loved. This was the solitary dark speck in his sunny disposition. He was the spoiled child of fortune. Unused to hardship or opposition, it remains a marvel that egotism did not prevail more than it did over his inborn nobleness and straightforwardness. The atmosphere of love and appreciation in which he had been nurtured was a condition of life to him; to receive his music with coldness or aversion was to be his enemy, and he was capable of denying genuine merit in any one who did so. A blunder in manners, or an expression that displeased him, could alienate him altogether; he could then be disagreeable, indeed, quite intolerable. . . . But his irritability, his distrustfulness, even to his most intimate friends, were sometimes quite incredible. A casual remark, a stupid jest, that he often accepted from me with perfect good temper, would sometimes suddenly cause him to drop his lids, look at me askance, and ask, doubtfully, ‘What do you mean by that? Now I want to know what you wish me to understand by this?’ &c., and it was difficult to restore his good humour.” Such was the handsome, cultured, sensitive, spoiled and somewhat petulant young gentleman, who, on perfectly good terms with himself and an applause world, sallied forth to make a tour of which he became the brilliant historiographer. One other glimpse of him, and then we shall know the man sufficiently well for our purpose. Devrient had agreed to take part in the first performance of Mendelssohn’s “Son and Stranger” at a family fête, but was commanded to a royal concert on the same evening. This would necessarily interfere with the arrangements, and, says Devrient, “Felix was dreadfully put out at the tidings; he was really angry. Unaccustomed to be crossed in any of his undertakings, he quite lost, in the maze of vexations he saw before him, his usual sense of what was due to the position of others. He required me to give up the court concert, which, after all, was no part of my regular engagement, &c.; in short, the performance of his operetta appeared to him at that moment the one important thing of the world. I tried to comfort him with the promise,” &c. “All this, however, marred the fête as it was to have been,

* Within the last thirty or forty years a most unhappy innovation patronised by the Germans has been attempted in the nomenclature of musical intervals. It is a thoroughly key-board innovation, and curiously enough adopted by Chevê, the disciple and successor of Galin. We are taught to call fifths *major* and *minor*; so that the inversion of a major fifth is a *minor fourth*! A *minor fourth* is a diminished fourth, the inversion of an *augmented fifth*. The innovation cannot be too soon removed from our recollection.

and his excitement increased so fearfully, that when the family was assembled for the evening, he began to talk incoherently, and in English, to the great terror of them all. The stern voice of his father at last checked the wild torrent of words; they took him to bed, and a profound sleep of twelve hours restored him to his normal state." To this picture not a touch need be added. We start with our young and splendid traveller perfectly assured that in the eyes of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy nothing than that same Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy was more important.

Our hero set out from Berlin in that happy state of mind which leads a man to think that everybody envies him. He saw envy in the looks of all he met. Lounging students, bustling fellow-travellers, and especially the drivers of "slow coaches" wished themselves in his place as he sped gaily along through the May landscape. No wonder that he was in a good temper, and at Eckartsberge felt disposed to join the street children in a merry-go-round! Presently he reached Weimar, and wrote home his impressions of the "old gentleman"—Mendelssohnian for the great philosopher and poet. The naïve self-assurance of the Weimar letters is wonderful. "I shall probably remain here for a couple of days more," writes Mendelssohn in his first message home, "which is no sacrifice, for I never saw the old gentleman so cheerful and amiable as on this occasion, or so talkative and communicative." The idea of any time spent with such a man being a sacrifice, even though he were surly as a bear the while, is exquisite, but let us follow the writer further: "I don't in the least regret this (a detention of two days), for, as I have told you, I live a most agreeable life here, and thoroughly enjoy the society of the old poet. . . It is quite delightful to hear him conversing on every subject, and seeking information upon all points." By the way Goethe's thirst for "information" seems to have struck his young friend immensely. It was, perhaps, an ordinary compliment for the author of "Faust" to seek musical knowledge from the future composer of "Elijah." "Then he begged me to play to him," we read, "and said it seemed strange that he had heard no music for so long; that the art had greatly advanced without his marking its progress, and therefore he wished me to tell him a great deal on the subject." All this was, for Mendelssohn, a common experience, but Goethe did not stop at this, although we may doubt if he quite bargained for the readiness of his youthful visitor to impart general information. "Yesterday I told him a great deal about Scotland, and Hengstenberg, and Spontini, and Hegel's 'Æsthetics.'" No doubt the "old gentleman" was amused as well as instructed, but Mendelssohn adds: "He sent me to Tiefurth with the ladies." There can be no doubt at all that Goethe had a great liking for the society of the brilliant Berliner, and found pleasure in contemplating his radiant youth. But surely one may trace a dash of good-humoured sarcasm in some of the remarks which Mendelssohn complacently quotes: "I am not devoid of tact, so I contrived to have him asked yesterday whether I did not come too often; but he growled out to Ottilie, who put the question to him, that he must now begin to speak to me in good earnest, for I had such clear ideas that he hoped to *learn much from me*. I became twice as tall in my own estimation when Ottilie repeated this to me. He said so to me himself yesterday, and when he declared that there were many subjects he had at heart that I must explain to him, I said, 'Oh, certainly!' but I *thought*, 'This is an honour I can never forget.'" So matters went on until the day of parting came, and then Goethe seems to have gathered up his powers to

show Mendelssohn how *he* could talk and what he had to talk about: "He began to converse on various subjects, passing from the 'Muette de Portici' to Walter Scott, and thence to the beauties in Weimar, to the 'Students' and the 'Robbers,' and so on to Schiller; then he spoke on uninterruptedly for more than an hour with the utmost animation about Schiller's life and writings, and his position in Weimar. . . . He proceeded to relate various anecdotes of the time when he was director of the theatre, and when I wished to thank him he said, 'It is mere chance, it all comes to light incidentally—called forth by your welcome presence.' These words sounded marvellously pleasant to me; in short, it was one of those conversations that a man can never forget as long as he lives." We should all dearly like to know something of what Goethe said on the interesting subjects to which he referred, but Mendelssohn's memory appears to have retained only words applicable to himself, save, it is true, a few sentences uttered by the sage when his young friend insisted on playing Beethoven's Symphony in C minor. These, however, are sadly disappointing because, truth to tell, somewhat commonplace. "It is very grand, very wild; it makes one fear that the house is about to fall down, and what must it be when played by a number of men together!" Thus Goethe on the "C minor." Mendelssohn had better have committed to paper the old giant's remarks about Schiller.

On the whole the Weimar letters are hardly to be accounted satisfactory. Approaching them for the first time, one would expect to find them full of Goethe, but they are full of Mendelssohn instead. In one, for example, the writer uses the first personal pronoun sixty-three times, as against forty-nine nouns and pronouns referring to his illustrious host. This, however, is but a clumsy test. Students of human nature will pay more heed to the spirit and tone of the young master's words, and be struck with the effect wrought upon his essentially fine nature by years of adulation. The whole episode in Mendelssohn's career harmonises with the fact that he never forgave Bernhard Klein because, when sitting with him—who was then a boy—in an opera-box, he said, "Cannot that lad keep his feet from dangling?" As keen as the humiliation so inflicted must have been the pleasure of instructing Goethe in Hegel's "Æsthetics" at the age of twenty-one.

Away from Goethe, Mendelssohn becomes pleasantly saucy. It is not, perhaps, quite in good taste to sneer at people who do their best to entertain one, but we can forgive much for the humour of such a passage as this—the reference is to a relative at Gratz. "How can a traveller who knows the mother and sister to be charming, put up with a brother, who is also an ensign, in their stead? In short, the man did not know what to do with me, for which I freely forgave him, and shall not defame him to his mother when I perform my promise and write to her, but I do not forgive him for taking me to the theatre to see the 'Roebuck,' the most wretched, trashy, objectionable piece that that precious Kotzebue ever wrote, and, moreover, for pronouncing it very clever and piquant, for this 'Roebuck' is so high flavoured as to be scarcely fit for a cat." This is in the true Mendelssohn vein, and so is the description of a vehicle and driver which the young traveller had to employ: "You would certainly have gone wild with impatience, and possibly assaulted the coachman too, for at every little declivity he got slowly off the box, put on the drag, and crept up the smallest hill at a snail's pace; then he thought fit to walk beside his horse for a time to stretch his legs. Every possible conveyance passed us on the road, even when drawn by dogs or donkeys, and when at last, at a steep hill,

the fellow put on two oxen as leaders, whose pace corresponded with that of his horse, I had the greatest difficulty in not belabouring him, indeed I did so more than once, but he then gravely assured me that we were going at a capital pace, and I had no means of proving the contrary." This "had no means," &c., is charming—a bit of most excellent humour.

The critical spirit indulged towards his friend at Gratz was, naturally, much more sharp when art and artists were its object. It belonged to Mendelssohn as a youth. Hear him, for example, talking about the English in 1830, while still a guest of England. "May the devil take all rogues! here not a few run about unchanged, without counting pickpockets. Strange it seemed the other evening when I heard the 'Messiah,' how all the notes were the same; how the entry of every part was precisely in English as in German; how the music speaks the same universal language, and yet every note spoke loudly that an Englishman played it, and that he did not care overmuch about it. The letter was there, but the spirit was absent, and, inasmuch as the letter kills, life was everywhere wanting. About the English style of singing I will say nothing, but will give you a specimen in December; you will fall from your chair with laughing; indeed, you must introduce an English singer on the stage." The British artists of fifty years ago did not know that their nineteen-year-old censor suggested turning them into ridicule for Teutonic amusement, or they would, doubtless, have amended their ways, upon the model of the mellifluous vocalism for which, as everybody knows, German singers are famous. Exactly the spirit shown in the above extract appears in some remarks upon Munich: "You know that when I begin to abuse I go on at it for some time, and so I will take this opportunity to tell you that I was little pleased with the painters at Munich. They are wanting in the first quality that I think a painter ought to have, and that is reverence. They speak about Peter Paul Rubens as if he were one of them, or, indeed, scarcely so high; and think they glorify Cornelius when they arrogantly disparage another great artist, whose worst picture they will never understand. I wish the devil would take the odious vanity that is the order of the day now. By heaven! these people do not know anything beyond their tiresome 'I,' and that is the reason they are so faint-hearted. There is Czerny, for instance; he thinks of nothing in the world but himself, his credit, his fame, his money, his popularity. What is the consequence? He is thought little of in Vienna, no longer considered even as a pianist, and although he has constantly, even whilst giving his lessons, music paper and pen and ink at his side to give forth his ideas when he cannot retain them any longer, even the publishers shrug their shoulders and think, 'The public is no longer so responsive as it used to be!'" This is severe, but it could not be said of Mendelssohn that he was nothing if not critical. His first letters from Italy are full of genuine enthusiasm for the people and country, excited, no doubt, by the idea of being for the first time in that renowned though faded land of arts and arms. We seem to hear the tumult of his feelings as we read: "It happened to be Sunday, and on every side people were coming along in bright southern costumes and flowers, the women with roses in their hair. Light, single-horse carriages drove past, and men were riding to church on donkeys. At the inns groups of idlers were to be seen, in the most picturesque, indolent attitudes; among others, one man placed his arm quietly round his wife's waist and swung round with her, and then they went on their

way. This sounds trivial enough, and yet it had a pretty effect. . . . The whole country had such a festive air that I seemed to feel as though I were myself a prince making his grand entry, and the vine branches, with their rich purple grapes, hanging in festoons from the trees, made the most lovely of all festive wreaths." By the way, careful readers will hardly fail to note, as evidence of character, the fact that even here Mendelssohn made himself the central figure of the scene. He was the prince; the people were paying him homage, the vine wreaths were decorations in his honour.

Once fairly in the art-world of Italy, Mendelssohn abandoned himself to its influences, and not to those of music alone. His letters are full of eulogy respecting the old masters of painting, whom he evidently did not look upon, as do so many now, in the light of vastly overrated people. Mendelssohn, so to speak, took them all in, and appears to have regarded them more in a sentimental than a critical mood. Thus he wrote: "I was gazing at Titian's 'Martyrdom of St. Peter,' in the Franciscan Church. Divine service was going on, and nothing inspires me with more solemn awe than when on the very spot for which they were originally designed and painted, those ancient pictures in all their grandeur gradually steal forth out of the darkness in which the long lapse of time has veiled them." But the young master had other experiences than these, and he gives an amusing account of a rough journey through the Apennines, where he found vile accommodation and plenty of cheating. He was, however, though a foreigner in a strange land, equal to the occasion. As to the cheating he says: "I therefore, once for all, protested against every demand they made, and declared that I would not pay at all if they asked more than I chose to give; so in this way I managed very tolerably." As to the cooking: "I made them prepare the soup under my own eyes, giving, moreover, good advice on the subject, but, after all, it was not eatable." As to the people: "I entered into conversation with my subjects from my throne on the hearth" (by this time Mendelssohn had promoted himself from prince to king); and as to the vetturino, who is generally a traveller's superior on his own ground: "I corrected many a fault in his pronunciation." Mendelssohn in due course reached Rome, and one may imagine his exaltation on entering that historic city and first comprehending the extent of its treasures. Over the expression of these feelings—so natural to every man, and not distinctive of any one—we may pass, as also over a good deal of gossip respecting persons and places. But one letter written at this time should be noted. Mendelssohn had reason to believe, from the irritated tone of his father's communications, that matters were not quite smooth at home. Wherefore he addressed to his brothers and sisters an epistle full of sage counsel, and marked by a degree and kind of shrewdness surprising in one so young. After asking whether some domestic recipe for cheering the head of the house could not be concocted, he went on: "I mean by forbearance and concession, and especially by dwelling on the cheerful rather than the depressing side of things; by avoiding all disagreeable topics; instead of calling things 'shameful,' say 'unpleasant'; or instead of 'superb,' 'passable.'" He then recalled his own experience at home—how, when he took an independent course in musical studies, his father retaliated by constantly abusing Beethoven. "So long then as I persisted in upholding and exalting my Beethoven, the evil became daily worse, and one day, if I remember rightly, I was even sent out of the room. At last it occurred to me that I might speak a great deal of truth and yet avoid the particular truth

obnoxious to my father, so the aspect of affairs speedily began to improve, and soon all went well." This course Mendelssohn strongly recommended to his brothers and sisters: "My father considers himself both much older and more irritable than, thank God, he really is, but however much we may be in the right it is our place to yield to him as he has often done to us. Strive, then, to praise what he likes, and do not attack what is implanted in his heart, more especially ancient established ideas. Do not commend what is new till it has made some progress in the world and acquired a name, for till then it is a mere matter of taste. Try, then, to charm my father into your magic circle, and be playful and kind with him." Here speaks the good son and wise brother, and in these words, perhaps, we may find some clue to the popularity of Mendelssohn in after-life, when his brilliant gifts were supplemented by more worldly wisdom than quick and impetuous feeling allowed him to show—though we now see that he possessed it—in youth. That a man may utter a great deal of truth while evading that which is obnoxious to his hearers is a fact worth remembering by most people; though, of course, there are occasions in every life when the truth must be told though the heavens fall.

All these Roman letters show with what intense earnestness Mendelssohn regarded art. His whole soul turned against the frivolity and heedlessness of the Italians concerning matters than which, to him, none were more sacred. "The fact is that the people are mentally enervated and apathetic. They have a religion which they do not believe; a Pope and a Government which they ridicule; a brilliant and heroic past which they disregard. It is thus no marvel that they do not delight in art, for they are indifferent to all that is earnest." Wherefore the young musician's wrath blazed up when he saw the Loggie of Raphael defaced "with inconceivable recklessness and disgraceful barbarity;" when he read the inscription "Christ" beneath the Apollo Belvedere; when he could not see a portion of Michael Angelo's "Last Judgment" for a huge altar erected before it; and when he found cattle driven through saloons decorated by the hand of Giulio Romano. It was natural under these circumstances that he should be prejudiced against what he must have regarded as the effete artistic society of Rome; but there were other reasons, above all in the case of the painters. Mendelssohn, the adored of polite society, the hero of numberless drawing-rooms, the gentleman *jusqu'au bout des ongles*, possessed little in common with the uncouth Bohemians of the Eternal City. Indeed, something of wonderment as well as contempt pervades his clever description of these people: "They are a formidable race to look at as they sit in their Café Greco. I scarcely ever go there, for I dread both themselves and their favourite place of resort. It is a small dark room about eight yards square, where you may smoke on one side, but not on the other. Round this they sit on benches, with sombrero hats on their heads and huge mastiffs beside them; their cheeks and throats and the whole of their faces covered with hair, puffing fearful clouds of smoke (only on one side of the room), and saying rude things to each other, while the mastiffs provide for a due distribution of vermin. A neckcloth or a coat would be here quite innovations; spectacles hide any portion of the face left visible by the beard, and so they drink their coffee and talk of Titian and Pordenone just as if they were sitting beside them, and wore beards and sou'westers like their own. Moreover, they paint such sickly Madonnas, such feeble saints, and such milkop heroes, that I feel the strongest inclination to knock them down. These infernal critics do not

even shrink from abusing Titian's picture in the Vatican, about which you asked me, saying it has neither subject nor meaning; yet it never seems to occur to them that a master who had so long studied a picture with due love and reverence must have had as deep an insight into the subject as they are likely to have, even through their coloured spectacles." The musicians were no better, in Mendelssohn's eyes, than their brothers the painters, and he mentions them with scorn: "The orchestras are worse than any one could believe; both musicians and a right feeling for music are wanting. The two or three violin performers attack in different styles, and join in when they please; the wind instruments are tuned either too high or too low, and they execute flourishes in the subordinate parts like those we are accustomed to hear in the streets, but hardly so good; in short, the whole forms an absolute caterwauling, and this applies even to compositions with which they are familiar. . . . I heard a solo on the flute where the flute was more than a quarter of a tone too high; it set my teeth on edge, but no one remarked it, and when at the end a shake came they applauded mechanically. If it were even a shade better with regard to singing! But the great singers have left the country . . . and the pigmies who remain copy their finest points, which they turn into intolerable ridicule." One cannot read the foregoing without being conscious of exaggeration. Mendelssohn made the worst rather than the best of what he saw and heard, but the fact is only another testimony to the intensity of his feeling on all such matters. He was a zealot in the cause of art, and, perhaps, his onslaughts were more vigorous than discriminating, but, happily, he never pointed the moral of Dobell's lines:—

'Tis a zealot's faith
That blasts the shrines of the false gods, but builds
No temple to the True.

Mendelssohn's "Temple to the True" is amongst us, beautiful and enduring.

While thus irritated by much around him in Rome, Mendelssohn found plenty of consolation. Monuments of ancient greatness and of the genius of the past appealed to his imagination and his keen sense of artistic verity, while the natural beauties of the country gave him exquisite pleasure. "Why should Italy," he exclaims, "still insist on being the Land of Art, while it is in reality the Land of Nature, thus delighting every heart! . . . I went lately with the Vollaris to Ponte Nomentano, a solitary dilapidated bridge in the spacious, green Campagna. Many ruins from the days of ancient Rome, and many watch-towers from the Middle Ages, are scattered over this long succession of meadows, chains of hills rise towards the horizon, now partially covered with glittering snow, and fantastically varied in form and colour by the cloud-shadows. And there is also the enchanting vapoury vision of the Albanian Hills, which change their hues like a chameleon as you gaze at them—where you can see for miles little white chapels glittering on the dark ground of the hills, as far as the Passionist Convent on the summit, and whence you can trace the road winding through the thickets, and the hills sloping downwards to the Lake of Albano, while a hermitage peeps through the trees. . . . That it is a lovely vision I say in earnest. No lack of music *there*; it echoes and vibrates there on every side; not in the vapid, tasteless theatres."

(To be continued.)

MUSICAL HONOURS.

By HENRY C. LUNN.

FALSTAFF says, "Will honour set a limb?" but assuredly those who fully acknowledge the sarcasm involved in the question will admit that much of the