Reminiscences of Mendelssohn

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(To be continued.)

REMINISCENCES OF MENDELSSOHN.

IN December, 1849, two years after the lamented death of the composer, Sir Julius (then Mr. Jules) Benedict lectured at Camberwell on the life of his friend Mendelssohn. His lecture was shortly afterwards published by Mr. John Murray, but the pamphlet has long been out of print, and its interesting contents are practically unknown to the present generation of Mendelssohn lovers. The following extracts (reprinted by permission of Mr. Murray) record the personal relations between the two musicians. A few verbal alterations have been made, and some obvious errors corrected in the transcription from the original. The "additions" are intended to explain and amplify Benedict's pleasant reminiscences.

Mendelssohn was twelve and Benedict sixteen years old when the first of the following incidents occurred. The Mendelssohn family then resided at 7, Neue Promenade, Berlin. Weber was at Berlin for the production of his opera "*Der Freischütz*," which was first performed there, at the Schauspielhaus, on June 18, 1821 (the anniversary of the battle of Waterloo). Amongst the audience on that memorable occasion was "little Felix Mendelssohn, with his parents."

"It was in the month of May, 1821, when walking in the streets of Berlin with my master and friend, Carl Maria von Weber, that my attention was directed to a boy of about eleven or twelve years old, who, on perceiving the composer of '*Der Freischütz*,' ran towards him, giving him a most hearty and friendly greeting. 'Tis Felix Mendelssohn,' said Weber, introducing me at once to the prodigious child, of whose marvellous talent and execution I had already heard so much at Dresden. I shall never forget the impression of that day on beholding that beautiful youth, with his auburn hair clustering in ringlets round his shoulders, the look of his brilliant clear eyes, and the smile of innocence and candour on his lips. He would have it that we should go with him at once to his father's house; but as Weber had to attend a rehearsal, he took me by the hand and made me run a race till we reached his home. He went briskly up to the drawing-room, where, finding his mother, he said, 'Here is a pupil of Weber's, who knows a great deal of the music of the new opera. Do, mamma, ask him to play it to us'; and so, with irresistible impetuosity, he pushed me to the pianoforte, and made me remain there till I had exhausted all the store of my recollections. When I begged of him to let me hear some of his own compositions, he refused; but played, *from memory*, such of Bach's Fugues or Cramer's Studies as I could name. At last we parted—not without a promise to meet again."

"On my next visit I found him seated on a footstool, before a small table, writing with great earnestness some music. On my asking him what he was about, he gravely replied, 'I am finishing my new Quartet for pianoforte and strings.' I could not resist my boyish curiosity to examine this composition, and looking over his shoulder saw as beautiful a score as

if it had been written by the most skilful copyist. It was his first Quartet in C minor, afterwards published as Opus 1."*

"But while I was lost in admiration and astonishment at seeing the work of a master written by the hand of a boy, all at once he sprang up from his seat, and in his playful manner ran to the piano. He then played, note for note, all the music from '*Der Freischütz*,' which, three or four days before, he had heard me play. He asked, 'How do you like this chorus?' 'What do you think of this air?' 'Do you not admire the Overture?' and so on. Then, forgetting quartets and Weber, down we went into the garden, Felix clearing high hedges with a leap running, singing, or climbing up the trees like a squirrel—the very image of health and happiness."

In May, 1830, Mendelssohn started on a long journey through Italy and Switzerland, calling on Goethe, at Weimar, for the fourth and last time. He reached Naples at the beginning of April, 1831, and remained till about the end of May.† Benedict was then Conductor at the San Carlo at Naples.

"My joy when Mendelssohn called upon me at Naples was boundless. We had met in the interval under circumstances less cheering and agreeable than when in connection with Weber. But the passing cloud had now vanished; and as if to compensate for the blank of so many lost years, he unfolded to me all the treasures of his inexhaustible genius. I then heard for the first time his overtures, his numerous songs imbued with the impressions of fresh scenes, and, above all, one of his greatest works, the '*Walpurgis Night*,' a work full of solid grandeur and overflowing with the rich ideas of his teeming fancy. In two instances I had an opportunity of witnessing his almost marvellous facility of retaining—stereotyping, as it were, in his mind—any passages of music he had heard, even if only once. At an evening party at the celebrated vocalist's, Madame Fodor-Mainvielle, several airs of Donizetti and Rossini, French romances, and an instrumental duet by Moscheles were performed. Mendelssohn being subsequently invited to play, introduced, without a moment's hesitation, first one theme of the pieces just performed, then another, then a third and fourth, and worked them simultaneously in the most skilful manner. At first playfully mimicking the Italian style, and then adopting the severe forms of the old masters, he contrived to give a perfect musical form to all: and thus the inspiration of the moment seemed as though it had been the result of forethought and study."

"At a party given by Mr. Craven, he performed, from memory, some of the finest choruses in Handel's '*Israel in Egypt*,' '*The Messiah*,' and some of his '*Suite de pièces*' for the clavecin, thus showing his mastery over that school of composition among the rest."

"In society, apart from musical subjects, nothing could be more entertaining or animated than Mendelssohn's conversation on literary topics. The works of Shakespeare and other eminent British poets were quite as familiar to him as those of his own country; and, although his accent was slightly tintured by his German origin, he spoke as well as wrote the English language with great facility and purity. He sketched from nature and also painted very well; and, indeed, he might be said to possess every social accomplishment."

* This may have been an early version of Op. 1, as the autograph MS. of that work states: "*Begun* at Secheron, 20 Sept., 1822; *ended*, Berlin, Oct. 18, 1822"; or Benedict's memory may have failed him as to the time of this particular incident.

† See Mendelssohn's "*Letters from Italy and Switzerland*," translated by Lady Wallace (Longmans), for a graphic account of his travels.

Benedict might have subsequently added "as well as novelists" to "British poets," in the above reminiscence. When Arthur O'Leary, now the well-known pianoforte professor, entered the Leipsic Conservatorium, early in January, 1847, he had an introduction to Mendelssohn, who encouraged the young student to call upon him from time to time. On one of these occasions Mendelssohn, who had been showing him portraits of his children which he had recently finished, asked O'Leary if he would like to read an English book. As he was only just beginning the German grammar, he readily replied in the affirmative. Mendelssohn then took a copy of the "Pickwick Papers" from a book-case and handed it to O'Leary, saying, "Be sure to take care of this, for I value it very much, as it was given to me by my mother." (This interesting incident is kindly communicated by Mr. Arthur O'Leary specially for the "additions" to Benedict's narrative.)

"Early in 1835 Mendelssohn was invited to Cologne in order to direct the Lower Rhenish Musical Festival. Here we met again, and, thanks to his kindness, I had the pleasure of being present at one of the general rehearsals when Mendelssohn conducted Beethoven's Eighth Symphony. It would be difficult to decide in which capacity Mendelssohn most excelled, whether as a composer, pianist, organist, or conductor of an orchestra. Nobody certainly ever knew better how to communicate, as if by an electric fluid, his own conception of a work to a body of performers. It was highly interesting on this occasion to notice the anxious attention shown by a body of over five hundred performers watching every glance of Mendelssohn's eye, and following, like obedient spirits, the magic wand of this musical *Prospero*. The admirable *Allegretto* of this Symphony (Beethoven's Eighth) not going to his liking, he smilingly remarked that 'he knew every one of the gentlemen engaged was capable of performing, and even of *composing* a Scherzo of his own, but that, *just now*, he wanted to hear Beethoven's, which he thought had some merits.' It was cheerfully repeated. 'Beautiful, charming!' cried Mendelssohn; 'but still too loud in two or three instances. Let us take it again from the middle.' 'No, no,' was the general reply of the band, 'the whole movement over again, for our own satisfaction.' The orchestra then played it with the utmost delicacy and finish, Mendelssohn laying aside his *bâton* and listening with evident delight to the improved execution. 'What would I have given,' he said, 'if Beethoven could have heard his own composition so well understood and so magnificently performed?' By thus giving, alternately, praise and blame, spurring the slow, checking the too impulsive, he obtained orchestral effects seldom equalled. He was able to detect at once, even among a large number of performers, the slightest error either of note or accent."

Two important events are connected with Mendelssohn's seventh visit to England in 1842: the performance (for the first time in England) of his "Scotch" Symphony at the Philharmonic Concert of June 13, and his second visit to the Queen and Prince Albert at Buckingham Palace on July 9. Mendelssohn has given a most charming account of his royal and kindly reception in a letter to his mother, printed in "Goethe and Mendelssohn" (Macmillan), p. 143. But Benedict records another interesting event of this time:—

"At his seventh visit to London Mendelssohn was accompanied by his wife (her first visit to England), and they resided at the house of her aunt, Mrs. Benecke, on Denmark Hill. One fine morning an excursion to Windsor had been arranged by Mendelssohn's kind host. Everything was prepared, the

carriage was at the door, when at the last moment Mendelssohn excused himself for not going, and he remained at home with the children, with whom he was a universal favourite. When his friends returned from Windsor he played to them a sparkling and delicious melody, the offspring of that day—No. 30 of his 'Lieder ohne Worte' (Book V., No. 6), perhaps one of the most popular of them all."

I may perhaps be allowed to supplement this incident, as recorded by Benedict, by some further details which Mendelssohn's hostess, Mrs. Benecke, kindly gave me when I visited her in 1885. We were seated in the room which Mendelssohn used as his study, overlooking the beautiful garden, and in which he wrote the *Lied* above referred to. Over the old grand pianoforte, upon which he had often played, was a beautiful oil-painting of him. In the course of a most interesting conversation, Mrs. Benecke said that Mendelssohn and his wife intended staying only a few days till they should find apartments near the concert rooms, as Mendelssohn had engagements with the Philharmonic Society, &c. One day on his return from town he said, "Those lodgings in London are so stuffy after this pleasant house: may we stay *here* all the time?" The request was readily granted, and the sojourn of a few days extended to one of six or seven weeks. As to the pic-nic, Mr. Benecke thought at the time that the reason of Mendelssohn's absence from the party was owing to some previous musical engagement in London. On the long drive to Windsor Mrs. Benecke said to Frau Mendelssohn: "Why did not Felix come with us to-day?" She replied, "I think he has something in his mind that he wants to write down." "But," said her hostess, "there is nothing for his dinner, only cold meat and rice milk—just the children's dinner." "Oh, never mind," replied Frau Mendelssohn; "he likes nothing better than rice milk. He will be all right." On their return home, Mendelssohn, full of spirits, was waiting in the garden-drive to receive them, and greeted them with a hearty welcome. When they were all assembled in his temporary study he played the lovely "Lied in A" (No. 30), saying, "This is what I have been doing while you have been away." He was very fond of romping with the children, and they with him; and the quaver rests in the bass of this *Lied* and the frequent staccato notes in the treble, represent the constant withdrawal of his hands from the pianoforte in order to defend himself against the repeated attacks of the little ones, who, being alone with him, wanted to drag him away from the pianoforte and into the garden for a romp. The autograph MS. is dated "London, June 1, 1842," the day of the pic-nic.

Mrs. Benecke told me of other incidents of this visit. She gave a small musical dinner party, at which William Horsley (the glee writer), Moscheles, Benedict, and others were present. After dinner one of the guests suggested that there should be "some playing" (pianoforte). "Oh, yes," said Mendelssohn, "we'll have some playing!" And he at once marched the musicians off to play—not the pianoforte—but the game of "Hen and chickens" in the garden. Horsley, who was not so young as the others, was in fits of laughter as he stood at the window watching the overgrown boys at their "play," Mendelssohn being the life and soul of the game.

Although Mendelssohn was thirty-three at the time of his visit to Denmark Hill, he revelled in a game of leap-frog, played with the tutor to Mr. Benecke's sons; and he once practised the horizontal-bar so vigorously as to take the skin off his hands. He composed for the children a very humorous "Bear's dance" with the following title: "The real, genuine, warranted Barentanz, as performed with unbounded

applause at the Denmark Hill Chamber Concerts, composed and dedicated (by permission) to the Gooseberry-eaters at Bencke Castle, by their humble colleague and servant, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, usually called Peter Meffert." This comical little piece, dated "London, 11th July, 1842," is on a rapidly reiterated pedal bass (the lowest F on the pianoforte), and each hand plays at the extreme ends of the keyboard throughout. At the end is the direction: "Da capo, very often." No wonder that Mendelssohn's hostess said: "I am very fond of speaking of that happy time"; and that her daughter, one of the "gooseberry-eaters," adds: "we were all devotedly fond of him."

On his next and eighth visit to England, Mendelssohn arrived in London early in May, 1844, and remained till July 10. He had a most exciting time, and it is no wonder that he was glad to rejoin his wife and children at Soden (near Frankfort) after the ceaseless rush of his visit to England. He thus writes to his sister, Fanny Hensel, from Soden, on July 22, 1844: "After my mad, most mad, life in England—for never before was anything like this season—we never went to bed before half-past-one, every hour of every day was filled with engagements three weeks beforehand, and I got through more music in two months than in all the rest of the year—this life at Soden, with its eating and sleeping, without dress coat, without piano, without visiting cards, without carriage and horses; but with donkeys, with wild flowers, with music-paper and sketch-book, with Cécile and the children—this life is doubly refreshing." In this happy state of *dolce far niente* Benedict found his friend.

"Here we met (at Soden) once more; and during the fortnight I had the happiness of spending with him it was my good fortune to hear for the first time his six Sonatas for the organ—perfect specimens of his thorough knowledge of that instrument. But another and still greater treat for me was his playing of the music he had just composed for Racine's tragedy of 'Athalie,' a work which, though conceived in a different style from his 'Antigone,' is quite worthy to rank with it. As a proof of the great purity of his taste, it may be mentioned that no French composer ever observed so strictly the rules of prosody in his own language as Mendelssohn has done in 'Athalie,' his first and only composition to French words."

"An interesting episode of our sojourn at Soden was our assisting at the performance of Cherubini's 'Medée,' at Frankfort. Mendelssohn's remarks on the peculiarities of Cherubini, his comparisons between his earlier operas 'Faniska' and 'Lodoïska' with 'Medée,' struck me with amazement. How, with the inexhaustible stock of his own ideas, he found room in his memory for so many works of other composers, dead and living, is only to be explained by the fact of his rare gifts and exceptional organization."

"But our errand to Frankfort was not limited to Cherubini's opera; other and weightier objects occupied Mendelssohn's mind. The birthday of a child of one of his friends was to be celebrated at Soden, and so he wandered from toy-shop to toy-shop, buying walnuts, gold-leaf, penny trumpets, and, more important than all, a small fir tree, to be ornamented with sugar-plums, toys, tapers, etc., hanging from every branch. On returning to Soden, Johann, his faithful and attached servant, was first consulted, and then the whole family set to work decking out the tree, till it looked right cheerful and brilliant. At night-fall the carefully locked door of the drawing-room was opened, and in poured the happy little folks, screaming with joy. 'Let's have a march,' said Carl—Mendelssohn's eldest son, aged

six—and they all paced round the tree to the same strains I had heard a few months before at the Hanover Square Rooms, in the presence of the Queen, Prince Albert, and the *élite* of London society; for it was the Wedding March from 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' that Mendelssohn played."

Benedict's last recorded reminiscence of his gifted friend is as touching as it is brief. In the afternoon of the 9th of October, 1847, Mendelssohn visited his friend Frau Frege, a distinguished amateur singer, and consulted her as to the arrangement of his songs in Op. 71. "I really feel miserable," he said, on entering the room, "so much so that lately I actually cried over my Trio." Frau Frege sang his songs through to him several times, and then he said, "If you are not tired, let us try the last quartet out of the 'Elijah.'" She left the room for lamps, and during her absence Mendelssohn was seized with the first attack of what proved to be his fatal illness. He immediately returned home to be nursed by his anxious wife.

"Three days later, arriving myself at Leipsic, I was permitted to approach him, but only stayed in his presence a moment. Outside of his house, in the König-strasse, there was the din and noise of the fair then going forward. Within was a noble nature struggling against its fearful enemy, which had already taken a fatal hold upon his earthly frame. What a painful contrast! On the following day he felt better, and earnestly desired to see me. He got up and spent almost two hours with me. By way of cheering him, I spoke of all the preparations and rehearsals of 'Elijah' at Vienna, where he was himself engaged to superintend the first performance. Mendelssohn seemed much concerned at not being able to keep his promise with the King of Prussia about the production of his Oratorio at Berlin, which stood for the 15th or 18th, and begged me to convey his apologies to the proper authorities. He hoped to be able to follow me thither soon; and, he added, 'if I could only see Schönlein' (his former physician) 'he would soon restore my health.' In the midst of our conversation he would frequently stop, exclaiming 'Oh! my poor head!'"

"The next day I saw him again, and for the last time. He seemed more cheerful, and said 'I have had a narrow escape, but shall never be well unless I spend a winter in Italy.' We discoursed upon future plans, and I left him with the sanguine hope of hearing soon of his perfect recovery."

Benedict's hope was not to be realised. Almost within three weeks after he had bid his friend a last farewell, the music-loving soul of Felix Mendelssohn passed peacefully away.

F. G. EDWARDS.

"If, however, the charm of novelty be an absolute necessity, then pardon me if I confess that I fail to properly appreciate, or have no particular sympathy with such a distinction." Thus the closing sentence of a letter written by Brahms in 1887 to the Hon. Secretary of the Leeds Musical Festival, which appears in the recently published "History of the Leeds Musical Festival." The eminent composer had been requested to write a new work, but declined the honour. The sentence, indeed, seems to throw cold water over a policy which has brought fame to composers and honour to the Leeds directors. Bearing such an illustrious signature, it might easily prove a powerful weapon in the hands of those who are opposed to novelties and who look upon them with a jealous eye, as taking up time and attention which could better be employed on the "old masters," and it therefore demands a moment's consideration. Brahms's expressed lack of sympathy with regard to