

Review: More about Mendelssohn

Source: *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 30, No. 551 (Jan. 1, 1889), pp. 9-12

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3360943>

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THE MUSICAL TIMES

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

JANUARY 1, 1889.

The Title-page and Index for Vol. XXIX. (1888) may be had on application gratis and post-free.

MORE ABOUT MENDELSSOHN.*

To the making of books on Felix Mendelssohn there is no end, and we shall by-and-by be able to say that very few men, and certainly no musician, has a larger individual literature. The process goes on, it will be observed, quite irrespective of the fact that Mendelssohn does not now occupy the position among composers which was once his own. Continuous development of the art, and changes in public taste, have undoubtedly had an effect upon his status, though among the masses of amateurs in this country he is still the favourite. We will not trouble ourselves to enquire how far this change is just, the point being that whatever Mendelssohn's position as a composer, he maintains his conspicuousness as a personality. It is always prudent to distinguish between the individual and his work. There are eminent men who scarcely have, for their fellows, a human side at all, being simply an intellectual force working out certain results. There are others who possess, so to speak, a dual celebrity, being famous both for what they do and for what they are, and it sometimes happens that the individual survives while the repute of his work languishes and expires. Mendelssohn is certainly one of the dual celebrities. We know him by music which, let us hope, will never die, and he is familiar to us no less by the fascinating personal qualities which have secured a commanding share of attention, esteem, and, it might even be said, of love. It is more because of the man than of the composer—though the composer made known the man—that Mendelssohn literature goes on increasing, and that a hearty reception has been given to the work now under consideration.

This most interesting volume has been waited for long. The intimate friendship of Mendelssohn with the Moscheles family is matter of history, and when Madame Moscheles' biography of her husband appeared, the great composer's admirers had good reason to know that behind it lay a rich store of material for future enjoyment. The "Life of Moscheles" told us a great deal about Mendelssohn; the correspondence with Moscheles would make known a great deal more. But years went on and nothing was heard of the letters. Indeed, they almost passed into oblivion, as far as concerned the public mind, or, if thought of, were connected with an idea that the Moscheles family preferred to retain the treasure as strictly private property. The more welcome on this account was the announcement that Mr. Felix Moscheles had at last given Mendelssohn's letters to the world, after whetting public appetite by publishing a choice selection in *Scribner's Magazine*. It may be asked: Why the delay? The editor: "If I have abstained from giving publicity to these letters for so long a time, it is because I thought such a delay was in accordance with the wishes of both writers. Many passages occur in which prominent musicians of those days are unreservedly criticised—passages which I felt as little authorised to suppress as to

publish during the lifetime of those alluded to." This is a valid excuse. On the one hand, it would have been an offence against decency to hurt the feelings of individuals by the publication of opinions never meant to be published; on the other, it would have deprived the correspondence of much of its value had any passages been eliminated. By waiting till it became possible to avoid both evils the editor showed as much good feeling as sound judgment.

The acquaintance of Moscheles with Mendelssohn began in 1824, when the future composer of "Elijah" was fifteen years old, and even then so accomplished that the man described the boy as "a master, not a pupil." Acquaintance soon ripened into friendship, so that the Moscheles family gladly received the youth when, in the course of his first ramble abroad in the world (1829), he paid a visit to London. In a letter anticipating this visit, the young Berliner declared that his intention was not "to appear in public, but rather to be musically benefited by my tour, to compare the various views and opinions of others, and thus to consolidate my own taste." Later, he wrote: "I want your advice as to whether I should really bring the scores of some of my compositions, and, if so, which would be the best to select. I was thinking of my Overture to 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,' do you think that suitable?" Moscheles replied "Yes," and added that he had secured rooms at 203, Great Portland Street—the street in which Weber died. Mendelssohn reached London, April 21, 1829. The correspondence of the two friends when residents in the same city is not very important, but contains a few characteristic and happy passages. Moscheles had expressed a wish to hear some of his young compatriot's new works, and Mendelssohn wrote to the professor's wife: "If he will let me know when he has had enough of them, I will one of these days bring a cabful of manuscript, and play you all to sleep." The Double Concerto in E was one of the works in question. This the two musicians tried together in Clementi's warehouse, and added a cadenza theretofore wanting. *Apropos*, it is curious to find them, in their capacity as *virtuosi*, consulting whether a little bit of solo following the cadenza should be left out, "since of course," wrote Mendelssohn, "the people would applaud the cadenza." "We must have a bit of *Tutti* between the cadenza and the solo," said I. "How long are they to clap their hands?" asked Moscheles. "Ten minutes, I dare say," said I. Moscheles beat me down to five. I promised to supply a *Tutti*, and so we took the measure, embroidered, turned, and padded, put in sleeves, *à la Mameluke*, and at last with our mutual tailoring produced a brilliant Concerto." The placid acquiescence of the two masters in the abominable practice of applauding *tours de force* during the course of a work forcibly illustrates the proverb that "Use is second nature."

Everyone knows that Mendelssohn met with a carriage accident in London, after returning from his memorable Scottish tour with Klingemann; also that he travelled to Berlin before recovery and was there again obliged to "lie up." In the spring of 1830 he visited Italy and Switzerland, then went to Paris, and crossed to England in April, 1832. No letters to Moscheles of this period, if any were written, appear in the present collection, but, happily, there are plenty elsewhere. When the birthday of Moscheles (May 30) came round, his young friend sent him a drawing—one of a series which the editor gives in *fac-simile*. We cannot reproduce the sketch, but the artist's division of responsibility for it is available: "The writing is in Emily's hand, the poem by Klingemann, the design invented, and the ink blots executed by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy."

* "Letters of Felix Mendelssohn to Ignaz and Charlotte Moscheles." Translated from the originals in his possession, and edited by Felix Moscheles. [Trübner and Co.]

We are bound to say that the humour of the *jeu d'esprit* is essentially Teutonic and therefore mild, but the whole thing speaks volumes for Mendelssohn's genial good nature. On again returning to Berlin, in July, 1832, the composer addressed a charming letter to Mrs. Moscheles, wishing himself back again in Chester Place, and sketching a Moscheles interior in the happiest manner: "I merely long for a chat with you—a little innocent abuse of the world in general, and a special attack on phrenology; a weak-fingered pupil, down below in Moscheles' room, playing all the while a slow *presto*, and being suddenly startled by a few brilliant notes from another hand to relieve her dullness." In the same letter he wants verses for a song: "Haven't you got some German or English words for a song which I might compose? Of course, for a voice down to C and up to F², and I could play the accompaniment in 1833 on the Erard, with the slow *presto* coming up from below." Mendelssohn goes on to describe how a sister of Madame Moscheles, resident in Hamburg, received a communication with reference to the possible removal of the London household to Berlin. "She looked at me very angrily, and asked what was to be got in Berlin, and who took any interest in music there. I named myself, but found little favour in her eyes; I was detestable, growing more and more so, the very type of a 'Berliner' she thought; next, I became a stranger, then, yet more—a strange musician; and, lastly, she turned severely polite." This is delicious, and makes one almost wish that Mendelssohn had taken to novels of character in the manner of Mr. Howells. Continuing, Mendelssohn gives reasons why he did not go to hear the pianist, Madame Belleville, better known in England as Madame Oury: "She intended giving a concert, and the bills announced that Mr. Oury, her husband, was going to assist her, but the Berlin people would not be attracted, so she gave it up, and performed at the theatre between two comedies. People said there was no soul in her playing, so I preferred not hearing her, for what a Berliner calls playing without soul must be desperately cold. Take it all in all, I am *blasé* with Hummel's Septet and Herz's Variations, and the public was quite right to be *blasé* too." Madame Moscheles, in reply, appears to have rallied Mendelssohn upon not admiring Madame Oury's appearance, and he answered: "I was not influenced by any such reasons, although I must admit that there are certain faces that cannot possibly belong to an artist, and are so icily chilling that the mere sight of them sends me to freezing point. But why should I hear those Variations by Herz for the thirtieth time? They give me as little pleasure as rope-dancers or acrobats, for with them there is at least the barbarous attraction that one is in constant dread of seeing them break their necks, though they do not do so after all; but the piano-tumblers do not as much as risk their lives, only our ears, and that I for one will not countenance. . . . And then she played in the interval between two dramas: that, again, I cannot stand. First, the curtain rises, and I see all India and the pariahs, and palm trees and cactuses, and villany and bloodshed, and I must cry bitterly. Then the curtain rises and I see Madame Belleville at the pianoforte playing a concerto in some minor key, and I have to applaud violently; finally, they give me 'An Hour at the Potsdam Gate,' and I am expected to laugh. No, it cannot be done, and these are my reasons why I do not deserve your scolding." The same letter contains a reference to what the composer called his "Piano Songs" (originally "Melodies," and in the third place, "Lieder ohne Worte"), on behalf of which Madame Moscheles had written to Simrock, the publisher. Mendelssohn makes merry

over them:—"The work will certainly go through at least twenty editions, and with the proceeds I shall buy the house, No. 2, Chester Place, and a seat in the House of Commons, and become a Radical by profession. Between this and that, however, I hope we shall meet, for possibly a single edition may prove sufficient."

About this time Mendelssohn suffered a good deal from what our fathers called the "spleen." He confessed to a "ferocious mood," and some of his remarks should be taken with that fact in mind. Hear him growl: "Well, Meyerbeer is formally invested with his title! Were there not a distance of several miles between a Court Kapellmeister and a real Kapellmeister, it might vex me. The addition of the little word 'Court,' however, indicates that he has nothing to do, and that again proves the extreme modesty of our nobility; for whenever the word 'Court' is put in conjunction with a title, it means that the recipient has the distinction only, not the office, and that he is expected henceforth to rest and be thankful. If they were to make a Court Composer of me to-morrow, I should be bound not to write a note as long as I live." The Moscheles had a son and heir born to them, and Mendelssohn accepted the dignity and responsibility of godfather. He writes in January, 1833: "I rejoice like a child at the thought of next spring, of my dignity as a godfather, of green England, and of a thousand things besides. My melancholy is beginning to vanish. I have again taken a lively interest in music and musicians, and have composed some trifles here and there; they are bad, it is true, but they give promise of better things; in fact, the fog seems lifting, and I again see the light. Whether I shall be able to bring some creditable work with me to London, heaven only knows, but I trust I may, for I would like to figure not only as a godfather, but as a musician. The former, however, comes first and foremost. I will make the most serious face possible, and bring the very best wishes and all the happiness I can gather together to lay down as a gift at the christening." Godfather Felix did not wait for his arrival in England before formally recognising the child. He sent a sketch of a cradle surrounded by all manner of instruments, and a letter beginning: "Here they are, wind instruments and fiddles, for the son and heir must not be kept waiting till I come. He must have a cradle song, with drums and trumpets and janissary music; fiddles alone are not nearly lively enough. May every happiness and joy and blessing attend the little stranger: may he be prosperous; may he do well, whatever he does, and may it fare well with him in the world. So he is to be called Felix, is he? How nice and kind of you to make him my godchild *in formâ*. The first present his godfather makes him is the above entire orchestra, it is to accompany him through life—the trumpets when he wishes to become famous, the flutes when he falls in love, the cymbals (basins) when he grows a beard; the pianoforte explains itself, and should people ever play him false, as will happen to the best of us, there stand the kettle-drums and the big drum in the background." As may be gathered from the above, Mendelssohn entered with most affectionate interest into the happiness of the Moscheles family, and that at a time when most men are frankly indifferent to, or only by courtesy concerned about, such events. He wrote to the proud mother: "How pleased I am that I shall soon see the little stranger and that he will bear my name! Do wait till I come, that I may accept your first invitation and be present in person at the christening." He goes on, in his own lively fashion, to speculate concerning the boy's future: "I see already how his two grown-up sisters, Misses Emily and Serena, will tyrannise

over him when he is about fourteen years old. He will have to put up with a good deal; his arms will be voted too long, his coat too short, and his voice wretched. But presently he will become a man and patronise them, doing them many a good turn, making himself generally useful, and submitting to the boredom of many an evening party as their chaperon."

Mendelssohn reached London in April, 1833, but we have only one note of many which, no doubt, passed between him and Moscheles. It refers to the first and third books of the "Songs without Words," then called "Melodies for the Pianoforte." These had been published by Novello, in 1832, on the royalty plan, and, a year having elapsed, the composer wished to touch some coin. Hence he wrote:—"This morning I again forgot to mention, my dear Moscheles, what I have often intended asking and have as often forgotten—how matters stand in reference to that publication of mine, and whether there has been any practical result. I have an appointment with V. Novello to-morrow morning, and if he has only sixpence to give me as my share I would rather not broach the subject. So please leave word at my house whether you think I ought to mention the matter, or whether it had better rest in eternal oblivion. I return home to-morrow at eleven o'clock to know which way you decide, the saying is, 'Merit hath its crown,' so I scarcely expect I shall get as much as half-a-crown." Mendelssohn's modest expectations were quite in keeping with the fact. A settlement up to date was made in June, when it appeared that forty-eight copies had been sold, the composer's share of the proceeds being £4 16s. ! An inspection of Novello's books shows that in 1836 the public had purchased only 114 copies, and, as it was not worth while to keep open so unfruitful an arrangement, the composer, in 1837, sold the copyright together with three preludes and fugues for the organ, and three chorales for female voices, in consideration of the sum of £35. What an idea all this gives us of the state of music at the time ! It seems incredible to us that the lovely "Songs without Words" did not run like wildfire through the land, and we think it monstrous that Mendelssohn should have been content to part with them and the companion works for so small a sum. But the price was a fair one under the circumstances which, and not the intrinsic merits of the music, determined their commercial value. Shortly after returning to Germany Mendelssohn became "music director" at Düsseldorf, and from that place kept up a lively, though not over-frequent, correspondence with his London friends. In most of his letters we find pregnant remarks. He says: "In general, I am not very partial to dedications, and have seldom made any, but in this case they are to convey a meaning," &c. Again: "My own poverty in shaping new forms for the pianoforte once more struck me most forcibly whilst writing the Rondo (Brilliant). It is there I get into difficulties and have to toil and labour, and I am afraid you will notice that such was the case. Still, there are things in it which I believe are not bad, and some parts that I really like, but how I am to set about writing a calm and quiet piece (as you advised me last spring) I really do not know. All that passes through my head in the shape of pianoforte music is about as calm and quiet as Cheapside, and when I sit down to the pianoforte and compel myself to start improvising ever so quietly, it is of no use—by degrees I fall back into the old ways." In the same letter we find a description, half funny, half indignant, of a mild sort of O. P. riot in the Düsseldorf Theatre, at the production of "Don Juan," under Mendelssohn's direction. "The opposition," he adds, "consists mainly of beer-shop-keepers and waiters; in fact, by

four o'clock p.m. half Düsseldorf is intoxicated. . . Now, what do you think of such a discreditable state of things, and can you have anything more to say to such boors as we are?" Further on we read: "Blagrove was here. I took him to our Choral Society, where we were just rehearsing the choruses from 'Alexander's Feast.' Our performance produced the most excellent effect on him—it sent him to sleep."

Early in 1834 Moscheles produced his friend's Overture "Melusina" in London, and also that of Berlioz, "Les Francs Juges." Writing to Mendelssohn, he criticised the Frenchman's work severely, and Mendelssohn, in reply, took up the same strain: "What you say of Berlioz's Overture I thoroughly agree with. It is a chaotic, prosaic piece, and yet more humanly conceived than some of his others. I always felt inclined to say with *Faust* :—

He ran around, he ran about,
His thirst in puddles laving;
He gnawed and scratched the house throughout,
But nothing cured his raving;
And driven at last in open day
He ran into the kitchen.

For his orchestration is such a frightful muddle, such an incongruous mess, that one ought to wash one's hands after handling one of his scores.* Besides, it really is a shame to set nothing but murder, misery, and wailing to music; even if it were well done, it would simply give us a record of atrocities. At first he made me quite melancholy, because his judgments on others are so clever, so cool and correct, he seems so thoroughly sensible, and yet he does not perceive that his own works are such rubbishy nonsense." The "Melusina" Overture was, it appears, not much appreciated by the Philharmonic audience, so Mendelssohn wrote: "Never mind, that won't kill me. I felt sorry when you told me, and at once played the Overture through, to see if I too should dislike it; but it pleased me, and so there is no great harm done. Or do you think it would make you receive me less amiably at my next visit? And perhaps it will be liked somewhere else, or I can write another one which will have more success. The first desideratum is to see a thing take shape and form on paper, and if, besides, I am fortunate enough to get such kind words about it as those I had from you and Moscheles, it *has* been well received, and I may go on quietly doing more work." On the whole, these are fairly philosophical comments. There is in them, however, the ring of a little natural mortification. A subsequent letter (June, 1834) contains another reference to the Philharmonic, and leads up to a fling at Herz: "Many thanks to you and the Philharmonic for playing so much of my music. I am sure I am delighted, if only the public does not grumble. But what do you say to their hissing little Herz? Why, that implies a high degree of culture! Has he consoled himself with guineas and pupils, or was it too crushing? . . . Well, if he will only abstain from writing Variations for four hands, or, if that is too much to ask, if he will only avoid winding up with those Rondos that are so frightfully vulgar that I am ashamed to play them to decent people, then, for aught I care, let him be made King of the Belgians, or rather Semiquaver King, just as one says 'Fire-King.' After all, I like him; he certainly is a characteristic figure of these times, of the year 1834; and as Art should be a mirror reflecting the character of the times—as Hegel, or someone else, probably says somewhere—he certainly does reflect most truly all salons and vanities, and a little yearning and a great deal of yawning, and kid gloves and musk—a scent

* Wagner knew nothing of this remark when, in 1855, at the Hanover Square Rooms, he put on gloves before handling one of Mendelssohn's.

I abhor. If in his latter days he should take to the romantic and write melancholy music, or to the classical and give us fugues—and I should not be surprised if he did—Berlioz can compose a new symphony on him, ‘De la Vie d’un Artiste,’ which I am sure will be better than the first.” Poor Herz! It seems strange that Mendelssohn should devote so many words to a musician who at the present time is not only dead, but altogether extinct. Yet Herz was a man of mark fifty-four years ago. So one generation sits in judgment on the idols of its predecessor, and condemns them to be broken up like old ships. Mendelssohn did but anticipate the verdict.

Referring to the failure of the “Melusina” Overture, Mrs. Moscheles tried to cheer up the composer. He answered her thus: “You say, too, I am not to care for public and critics, and that is just as bad. Am I not by trade an anti-public-caring musician, and an anti-critic-caring one into the bargain? What is Hecuba to me, and what the press (I mean the press that depresses)? And if, this very day, I had an idea for an Overture to Lord Eldon, in the form of a canon *alla rovescia*, or of a double fugue with a *cantus firmus*, write it I would, although I knew it could never become popular; how much more the lovely Melusina—a very different subject! Only it certainly would be annoying if one never had a chance of hearing one’s things performed; but as you say that is not to be feared, let us wish the public and critics long life and happiness—and me too—and let me live to go to England next year.” Evidently, from this genial extract, the little soreness about the “Melusina” had passed.

(To be continued.)

THE GREAT MUSICAL REFORMERS

By W. S. ROCKSTRO.

I.—HUCBALD DE ST. AMAND.

THE difficulty of tracing to their origin even the simplest forms of technical expedient with which, for centuries past, whole generations of musicians have been made familiar in the nursery, is so great, that it may well be doubted whether the most careful historian or the most learned antiquary has ever, in so much as one single instance, succeeded in satisfactorily overcoming it. Up to a certain point the task is by no means a laborious one. Abundant written evidence, of unimpeachable authority, may be brought forward to prove that a certain well-known device was in common use at a certain definite period; that, in an earlier century, its employment was far less general; while, in a still earlier one, examples of its occurrence are so rare as to render the extremest caution necessary in dealing with them. But at this point further elucidation of the subject becomes so difficult that by no amount of research, however diligent or however comprehensive, are we able to arrive at anything more satisfactory than a purely negative conclusion. Who invented the device? No one can tell. We have absolutely no means of ascertaining who first used so simple a sign as the *guidon*, or “direct,” placed at the end of a stave to indicate the note with which the next stave begins. Go back as far as we may, we can never feel sure that a record may not some day be found of earlier date than the MS. on which we based our conclusion. And, so long as the history of art continues to engage our attention, the difficulty will be ever present with us.

This state of uncertainty has, not unnaturally, given rise to a school of criticism, the distinguishing characteristic of which is universal distrust; an everpresent and unconquerable element of suspicion;

suspicion, often justifiable, and not unfrequently justified by facts; but, none the less, often unreasonable and sometimes even unreasoning. It is, too often, only necessary to bring forward what seems to be a fairly conclusive proof that a certain mediæval student invented a certain symbol, in order to provoke the retort that such a theory is absolutely untenable, since it cannot be proved that no earlier student was acquainted with its use. It is by no means desirable that this suspicious phrase of criticism should be allowed to die out. It is a valuable safeguard against hasty conclusions. But let us not abuse it. The truth is as often obscured by vulgar incredulity as by vulgar credulity; and the *via media* which separates these two dangerous errors of judgment will undoubtedly be found to be the *via tuta* also.

But however formidable may be the difficulties with which questions of this nature are surrounded, it is incontestable that conscientious investigation is never thrown away. And we believe that a great step may be made in the right direction, by careful consideration of the work performed by men whose names form universally recognised landmarks in the history of art; men who, rightly or wrongly, enjoy the credit of having invented the alphabet of music while it was yet in its infancy; later geniuses who, during the period of its adolescence, founded its earliest schools of composition; still later ones who, sweeping away the dust of ages in search of artistic truth, brought it to light in new and unexpected forms, so strange, sometimes, that the world rebelled, at first, against their introduction.

Reformers such as these have existed in every age, and the world has rarely abstained from protesting against the doctrines they preached, before it decided, first, upon treasuring them among its most precious possessions, and then, when their novelty had worn off, upon relegating them to the domain of antiquated rubbish. Forms that were opposed, in the sixteenth century, as revolutionary innovations, were regarded, in the seventeenth, as priceless heirlooms, and, in the eighteenth, cast to the moles and to the bats.* But they all served their turn; and, as we believe that a great lesson may be learned by a careful inquiry into the life and life-work of the men by whom some of these forms were, or are believed to have been, introduced, in so far as the facts are accessible to us, we propose to say a few words upon, and draw a few not unnecessary deductions from, the history of some of the most prominent among these great Musical Reformers.

And first, let us see how far the progress of art was advanced by one of the earliest writers on music, whose works have been preserved to us since the time of Boëthius.

Hucbald de St. Amand—Hugbaldus, or Hubaldus de St. Amando—was born, in or about the year 840, at the town of St. Amand sur l’Elnon, in Flanders, whence he derives his patronymic.

Of the details of his early life very few have reached us, save the broad facts that he was admitted, like most other learned men of his time, to Holy Orders; became a monk in his native town; was a disciple of St. Remi of Auxerre, and enjoyed the intimate friendship of St. Odo of Cluny—who was born in 878 and died in 942, and was therefore very much his junior—and devoted himself to the study of music with all his heart and soul.

But, however strong may have been his predilection for art, he was not celebrated for his knowledge of music alone. His title to eminence, in his sacerdotal character, is sufficiently vindicated by his friendship

* Witness the discords tentatively employed by the Prince of Venosa.