

The Great Composers, Sketched by Themselves. No. VI. Mendelssohn (Concluded)

Author(s): Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Joseph Bennett

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reckoned essential to the melody, but are considered only as grace-notes introduced according to the fancy of the singer, where the only limitations by which the performer is bound are the notes peculiar to that particular melody, and a strict regard to time."

In order to enable the reader to judge for himself in how far this description of the Hindu musical performances is applicable to those of the Gipsies, I shall presently give some examples in notation, which were committed to paper in Hungary and Transylvania.

(To be continued.)

THE GREAT COMPOSERS, SKETCHED BY THEMSELVES.

By JOSEPH BENNETT.

No. VI.—MENDELSSOHN (concluded from page 167).

CONTINUING the brief glimpses of Mendelssohn's nature afforded us by his last letters, we discover him, in the first place, deprecating too much fuss about individual artists. In December, 1842, the Bach monument at Leipzig approached completion, and our master, writing to his mother, describes it in glowing terms: "The whole structure, with its numerous elegant decorations, is really typical of the old fellow. It is now covered up again, and will remain so till March, when it is to be inaugurated on his birthday by one of his motetts. Cedars are to be planted round the monument, and a Gothic seat placed in front of it. We are anxious, however, not to make too much fuss on the subject, and to avoid the present pompous style of phraseology, and the worship of art and artists which is now so much the fashion. The outward aspect of things with us is now as much too flourishing as it formerly was too miserable, which would be very pleasant for us, but it does harm to the cause. Art is becoming spoiled and sluggish, so that we should rather be grateful to our present enemies than angry with them." From Mendelssohn, of whom all things combined to make a "spoiled child," this testimony is remarkable, and proves that whatever influence the favours of fortune may have exerted upon him, he was never blind to the fact that great things are done in storm and stress, and that when a cause has to struggle for life it is most alive, in this resembling the oak, which takes a firmer grip of the soil as the winds of heaven blow upon it in anger.

The letter from which the foregoing extract is taken was, apparently, the last Mendelssohn ever wrote to his beloved mother. In the same month she died, and we now find her son addressing his brother Paul, with reference to the event, in terms that, for unstudied pathos, command warmest sympathy. The fact had dawned upon him, in the midst of a deep sense of bereavement, that he and his brother and sisters were no longer children, and it added to the grief of his sensitive nature: "I wrote to you the day after my arrival here that we were all well, and living in our sorrow as we best could, dwelling on the happiness we once possessed. My letter was addressed to Fanny but written to you all, though it seems you had not heard of it; and even this trifle shows what will daily be more deeply and painfully felt by us—that the point of union is now gone at which we could always know ourselves to be children, though no longer so in years. When I wrote to my mother I knew that I wrote to you all, and you knew it too. We are children no longer, but we have enjoyed what it is really to be so. Now this is gone for ever. At such a time we cling to outward things from hour to hour, like people in a dark room groping to find the way. . . . My next visit to Berlin will be a severe trial to me; indeed,

all I say and do is a trial to me—anything in short that is not mere patient endurance. I have, however, begun to work again, and that is the only thing which relieves me a little. Happily, I have some half-mechanical work to do—transcribing, instrumentation, and similar things. This can be accomplished by a kind of animal instinct, which we can follow, and which does us more good than as though we had it not. But yesterday I was obliged to conduct. That was terrible. They told me the first time would inevitably be so; but sooner or later it must be done. I thought so too, but would fain have waited a few weeks. The first thing was a song of Rochlitz's, but when the altos sang, *piano*, 'As the hart pants,' I was so overcome that I was obliged afterwards to go out of the room to give free vent to my tears. . . . Farewell, dearest brother. Continue to love me." Words like these speak for themselves to all who have passed through like experience. A few days later Mendelssohn was requested by his friend, Professor Köstlin, to be the godfather of his new-born son. Köstlin did not then know of the master's loss, and with infinite consideration Mendelssohn began a letter of reply, determined to say nothing calculated to damp the parent's joy. What a lovable affectation of gaiety runs through his words! "That I am to be godfather is then settled; but there are a thousand things I still wish to know, and if, when the christening is over, you do not write to me all the details omitted in this letter, you must expect a good scolding. You forget I have myself three children, so I am doubly interested in such things. You do not even mention the name the boy is to have, nor whether he is dark or fair, or has black or blue eyes. My wife is as desirous as I am to know all this, and we hope that after the christening you will write to us every particular." The heart of the master was too full to continue long in this vein. His thoughts reverted to the dead mother, and all the craving for sympathy came out in words: "We have recently had a bitter, heavy loss to bewail—that of my dear mother. I intended to have written in a gay mood all through this letter, and not by a single word to allude to anything that, through its melancholy nature, might disturb your happiness, but I feel that I must write this to you, otherwise all that I have said would appear to me like mere hypocrisy. You must therefore, take part in my sorrow, for I could not conceal from you the event that, during the last few weeks, has so bowed us down by grief, from which it will be long before we recover. Yet such a letter as yours is welcome at all times and in all sorrow, and just as I know how you will feel towards me on hearing this so you know how cordially I sympathise with your joy. This may well be called a close union."

Through all trouble Mendelssohn found relief and consolation in the practice of his art. Take as proof the following extract from a beautiful letter to Carl Klingemann: "I cannot as yet at all reconcile myself to distraction of thought and every-day life, as it is called, or to life with men who, in fact, care very little about you, and to whom what we can never forget or recover from is only a mere *piece of news*. I now feel, however, more vividly than before what a heavenly calling Art is; and for this also I have to thank my parents. Just when all else which ought to interest the mind appears so repugnant and empty and insipid, the smallest real service to Art lays hold of your inmost thoughts, leading you so far away from town and country, and from earth itself, that it is indeed a blessing sent by God. A few days previous to the 11th I had undertaken to transcribe my 'Walpurgis-Night.' . . . Then I was summoned to Berlin, and after an interval of some weeks I have

now begun to write the instrumental parts in my little study, which has a pretty view of fields and meadows and a village. I sometimes could not leave the table for hours, I was so fascinated by pleasant intercourse with the old familiar oboes and violas and other instruments, which live so much longer than we do and are such faithful friends. I was too sorrowful and the wound too recent to attempt new compositions, but this mere mechanical work and employment in Art was my consolation the whole time I was alone, when I had not my wife and children with their beloved faces, who make me forget even music, and cause me daily to think how grateful I ought to be to God for all the benefits He bestows on me." Something like the spirit of the old biblical saint shines through the foregoing words—"Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

In 1844 Mendelssohn made what he called a "glorious" visit to England, chiefly for the purpose of conducting at the concerts of the Philharmonic Society. "I never was anywhere received with such universal kindness as on this occasion, and I had more music in two months than elsewhere in two years." But he was as pleased as a child to get back to Germany and rejoin his family, who were rusticated at Soden, near Frankfurt-on-the-Main. How he enjoyed repose there amidst his beloved ones he tells us himself with the freshness and naïveté of a youth: "I am sitting here at the open window, looking into the garden at the children, who are playing with their 'dear Johann' (Mendelssohn's servant). The omnibus to Königstein passes this twice every day. We have early strawberries for breakfast; at two we dine, have supper at half-past eight, and by ten we are all asleep. . . . The country is covered with pear-trees and apple-trees, so heavy with fruit that they are all propped up; then the blue hills and the windings of the Main and the Rhine; the confectioner, from whom you can also buy bread and shirt-buttons; the well-spring No. 18, which is called the Champagne Spring; the Herr Medicinalrath Thilenius; the list of visitors, which comes out every Saturday, as *Punch* does with you; the walking postman, who before going to Frankfurt calls as he passes, to ask what we want, and next day brings me my linen back; the women who sell cherries, with whom my little four-year-old Paul makes a bargain or sends them away, just as he pleases; above all, the pure Rhenish air—this is familiar to all, and I call it Germany." In the same happy vein he addresses his sister Fanny: "My family improve every day in health, while I lie under apple-trees and huge oaks. In the latter case, I request the swineherd to drive his animals under some other tree, not to disturb me; further, I eat strawberries with my coffee at dinner and supper; I drink Assmannshauser, rise at six o'clock, and yet sleep nine hours and a half (pray, Fanny, at what hour do I go to bed?). . . . Then towards evening . . . we stroll through the fields near home for a quarter of an hour, and find fault with the system of the world, utter prophecies about the weather, and are unable to say what is to become of England in the future. . . . Jestings apart, the contrast of these days with my stay in England is so remarkable that I can never forget it. There during three weeks not a single hour unoccupied; here the whole of the bright days free, without employment of any kind except what I choose for myself, and what is not done to-day is done to-morrow, and there is leisure for everything. In England, this time, it was indeed wonderful; but I must describe to you when we meet each concert there, and each bramble bush here." All this exuberance of delight has its pathetic side. It shows how tremendous was the strain Mendelssohn had

imposed upon himself, and we may see in the so grateful rest at Soden the forethrown shadow of the eternal rest upon which, three years later, the master entered.

There are a few more such letters as those in which we have just seen how Mendelssohn's pure soul revelled in association with his family, with nature, and with the God whom he saw in every good thing. But, as the end draws near, more and more of gravity, of anxiety for peace and goodwill, and of earnestness in the pursuit of high and noble aims, becomes apparent. At this time Germany was much distracted by religious questions that gave Mendelssohn no little anxiety. Though not insensible to them, he refused to join in the strife, above all as a mere *dilettante*—a character for which, as usually found, he had nothing but contempt. His thoughts on the whole question are fairly expressed in a letter to Pastor Bauer acknowledging the receipt of a religious book: "The only point of view from which I can consider such questions is that of a learner, and I confess to you that, the older I become, the more I perceive the importance of first learning and then forming an opinion, not the latter previously to the former nor both simultaneously. In this I certainly differ much from very many leading men of the present day, both in music and theology. They declare that he alone can form a right judgment who has learned nothing, and indeed requires to learn nothing; and my rejoinder is that there is no man living who does not require to learn. I think, therefore, that it is more than ever the duty of every one to be very industrious in his sphere, and to concentrate all his powers to accomplish the very best of which he is capable; wherefore, the recent Church movements are more unknown to me than you probably believe (perhaps more than you would approve), but I rejoice that the very reverse is the case with you. I cannot, in fact, understand a theologian who at this moment does not come forward, or who feels no sympathy in these matters, but just as little do I comprehend many of those non-theologians whom I often see, and who talk of reformation and improvement, but are equally incompetent to know or understand either the present or the past, and who, in short, wish to introduce *dilettanteism* into the highest questions." These remarks suggest an idea that the *Ne sutor ultra crepidam* maxim may be carried too far in regard to such a personal and personally important matter as religion, but they serve to show the intense earnestness of Mendelssohn's spirit and the horror he had of dogmatising on questions imperfectly understood. *A propos*, take an extract from a letter to his brother: "It is shameful in me not to have thanked you yet for the beautiful copy of Dahlmann, but it is still more shameful that such ordinary—not extraordinary—but honest, able, true words are so seldom met with in our Fatherland, the cause of which is that mediocrity, or worse, vapid superficiality, is so prevalent in Germany, parading itself till we would fain drive it out of sight. And this is also why I have been hitherto prevented from even thanking you. I never yet encountered such a mob of strangers and of inquiries and proposals all entirely worthless; many so modest, many so immodest. Singers, players, a fine heap of compositions, and scarcely one that can be called even moderately good; but at the same time overflowing with the longest words, full of national pride, full of—anything but striving after high aims, though pretending to the highest of all." In such words did this lofty nature, fast ripening for the greatest of all realities, deal with the shams and quacks of his day.

General Grant's famous aspiration, "Let us have peace," was always in its spirit characteristic of

Mendelssohn, and never more so than during the last years of his life. He shunned all quarrels, and was more than ready to pass over an affront when that could be done without loss of self-respect. We see this combined gentleness and magnanimity illustrated by an event which took place in the year 1846. It is notorious that the orchestra of the Philharmonic Society was at that time most undisciplined. The iron rule of a Costa had not then taught orchestral players what subordination meant, and some of those engaged at the Philharmonic in 1844 went so far as to make insolent remarks upon the tardiness with which one day Mendelssohn put in an appearance. The result was that, in engaging the orchestra for the Birmingham Festival of 1846, these boors were passed over, as they deserved. In due course the fact reached Mendelssohn's ears, and greatly troubled him. Entirely free from vindictiveness, he could not approve any action based upon an assumption of the contrary. Hence he wrote to Moscheles in very earnest language: "Nothing is more hateful to me than the revival of old worn-out squabbles. It is quite bad enough that they should ever be in the world at all. Those of the Philharmonic I had quite forgotten, and they must *on no account* have any influence on the engagements for the Birmingham Festival. If people are left out because they are incapable, that is no affair of mine, and I have nothing to say against it; but if any one is to be left out because he made himself unpleasant to me, I should consider it a piece of injustice, and beg that this may not be the case. There is certainly no cause to fear that these gentlemen will again be troublesome; at least, I feel none, and do not believe that any one can do so. So I beg of you to let the affair proceed exactly as it would if I had no thoughts of coming to England. If it be really desired to show me consideration, the greatest favour that can be conferred on me would be *not* to take notice of any such personal considerations. I know you will be so good as to bring this subject under the notice of Mr. Moore, and I hope I shall hear nothing further of these obsolete stories, by my wishes being complied with and no sort of vindictiveness exercised. Otherwise I shall protest against it ten times at least by letter." Surely, if a certificate of character were needed for Mendelssohn, these brave and beautiful words would suffice.

The shadows darken as the end draws near, and the closing letters become more and more tinged with gravity or clouded by grief. At one time we find Mendelssohn consoling a father for the loss of a gifted musical son: "Far more could I appreciate the extent of this loss when I had become acquainted with the compositions which you so kindly sent me, in the name of your deceased son. Every one who is in earnest with regard to Art must indeed mourn with you, for in him a true genius has passed away—a genius that only required life and health to be developed in order to be a source of joy and pride to his family and a benefit to Art. . . . And all this was not to be! and thus everything in Art and in life remains inscrutable. . . . But I must thank you for having made me acquainted with those works, and for having written me those few lines, and I will waft my thanks after your son also for having destined these works for me. May Heaven grant you consolation, alleviate your grief, and one day permit you to rejoin your son, where it is to be hoped there is still music, but no more sorrow or partings." Not long after these touching words were written, the master's faithful servant died and was sincerely mourned. Writing to Carl Klingemann, Mendelssohn said: "You know that I valued him very highly, and can well understand that when I saw him suffer so much, and become worse and worse to the point of

inevitable death, it put me in a grave mood that will last for a long time to come. His mother and sister did not arrive here till the day after the funeral. It distressed us very much to see them, and not to be able to say one consolatory word. Among his things, which were all in the most exemplary order, we found a letter to me containing his last will. I must show you this the next time we meet; no man, no poet, indeed, could have written anything more heartfelt, earnest, and touching. Then there was a great deal to do and arrange. . . . I write all this to you in detail because you are my *one* friend, and because you sympathise in all that really affects and concerns me."

The spring of 1847 came, and then Mendelssohn suffered the cruellest blow of all. His darling sister, the gifted Fanny Hensel, died, and he who was so soon to follow her never recovered from the stroke. We see a breaking heart in every sentence of the following extract from a letter to General von Webern: "Your letter did me good. . . . I thank you for it all, my dear, kind, faithful friend. It is indeed true that no one who ever knew my sister can ever forget her through life: but what have not we, her brothers and sister, lost? and I more especially, to whom she was every moment present in her goodness and love; her sympathy being my first thought in every joy; whom she ever so spoiled, and made so proud by all the riches of her sisterly affection, which made me feel all was sure to go well, for she was ever ready to take a full and loving share in anything that concerned me. All this, I believe, we cannot yet estimate, just as I instinctively believe that the mournful intelligence will be suddenly recalled, and then again I feel that it is true, but never, never can I inure myself to it. It is consolatory to think of such a beautiful harmonious nature, and that she has been spared all the infirmities of advancing age and declining life. But it is hard for us to bear such a blow with proper submission and fortitude. . . . My family are all well. The happy, unconcerned, cheerful faces of my children alone have done me good in these days of sorrow. I have not as yet been able to think of music; when I try to do so all seems empty and desolate within me. But when the children come in I feel less sad, and I can look at them and listen to them for hours." It was natural that in his affliction the master should turn with special love to his dead sister's son, and on the occasion of the young man's birthday he addressed to him a letter which, though Mendelssohn did not suspect it, was to be his last brave testimony in favour of a pure life and an exalted purpose. Thus it runs: "I must send you my good wishes on your birthday, the most mournful one you have yet known. The retrospect of its celebration last year will deeply grieve you, for then your mother was still by your side; may, however, the anticipation of the birthdays which you may yet be spared to see comfort and strengthen you! for your mother will stand by your side in these also, as well as in everything that you do or fulfil. May all your actions be estimable and upright, and may your daily steps be directed towards that path to which your mother's eyes were turned for you, and in which her example and her soul went with you, and always will go with you while you remain true to her—in other words, I trust, all your life long. Whatever branch of life, or knowledge, or work, you may devote yourself to, it is indispensable to *will* (not to *wish*, but to *will*) something good and solid; but this is sufficient. In all employments and in all spheres there is now, and ever will be, a want of able and honest workmen, and therefore it is not true when people declare it now more difficult than formerly to achieve anything. On the contrary, in a

certain sense it is and always will be *easy* or altogether *impossible*. A genuine, faithful heart, true love, and a brave, determined will are alone required for this, and you will not assuredly fail in these with such a bright and beloved example steadily shining before you. But even if you do all in your power, still nothing is done, nothing is attained, without the fulfilment of one fervent wish that I send you this day—may God be with you.”

In June, the Mendelssohn brothers, with their families, sought relief from sorrow in Switzerland, and there were, as Felix testified, “sometimes even cheerful.” But only sometimes. The cloud that hung over our dear master was lightened but not dispersed, and who can tell what mysterious premonitions were his in the Valley of the Shadow of Death whither Providence had led him? or under what influence he wrote: “A great chapter is now ended, and neither the title nor even the first word of the next is written. But God will make it all right one day; this suits the beginning and the end of all chapters.” But it was Mendelssohn’s duty to “act in the living present,” and he forthwith began to form plans for the chapter of the future. “In September, God willing,” he wrote to his sister Rebecca, “I intend to come to Berlin, and Paul has probably told you how seriously I am occupied with the thought of spending my life with you, my dear sister and brother, and residing with you, renouncing all other considerations. . . . There is no lack of visitors here . . . but they all seem to me so empty and indifferent that I, no doubt, must appear in the same light to them, so I heartily wish that we may soon part and remain apart. In the midst of all the phrases, and inquiries, and speechifyings, one thought is always present with me—the shortness of life. I hope we shall be soon together and long remain together.” This is the language of a man ripe for death, to whom the world and all its ambitions have become vanity, and who only desires to rest in the arms of a supporting love both here and on the other side of the dark river. How, shortly after Mendelssohn returned from Switzerland, he was stricken by illness, and how he rallied for a time, every reader knows. On October 25 he was so much better as to write to Paul about plans for the immediate future, but this turned out to be no more than the “lightening before death.” Five days later he was again smitten down, and on November 4, his pure, brave soul went to its appointed place—the place reserved—who can doubt it?—for “the spirits of the just made perfect.”

THE IMPROVEMENT OF SOUND.

By DR. W. H. STONE.

UNDER the above rather questionable title, Mr. A. C. Engert exhibited to an appreciative audience at the Neumeyer Hall, on Saturday, March 6, his suggestions for improving the acoustic qualities of rooms and instruments.

The former of these subjects is one much neglected at the present time. It appears impossible to build a concert-room of which it can be said beforehand that it will prove favourable or the reverse to musical vibration. The case appears to be somewhat different according as the speaking voice or instrumental and vocal performances are contemplated, many rooms being good for the former which are absolutely unfit for the latter. A fair instance of this peculiarity is the St. George’s Hall, Langham Place, which, though not exceptionally difficult to speak in, has the faculty of taking all tone and quality out of an orchestra or a chorus.

Indeed, such discrepancies are not to be wondered at when the number of factors included is considered. Rooms, and closed spaces generally, always have one predominant key-note, which may be either over-powerful or the reverse. Reflected echoes may predominate; or reflections from a long series of similar parts, returning with rhythmical repercussion, may produce the greatest of all impediments to articulate sound, namely, a musical echo. This is well illustrated by the Crystal Palace at Sydenham. Other large rooms have foci, and concentrate instead of dispersing the sound. This occurs to a notable extent in the Albert Hall, a space elliptical in plan, cylindrical in elevation, which has a marked focus at the diagonal of the longest axis of the ellipse.

Other buildings, like St. Paul’s Cathedral, fail simply from excessive sonority. Perhaps the worst of all have the defect of starting a selective resonance, which reinforces some sounds and damps others; for instance, the large school-room at the east-end of St. Paul’s.

It is impossible, within a limited compass, even to name all the devices which have been at different times suggested for the cure or alleviation of so radical a difficulty. Screens, wires, curtains, hollow resonators, wainscoted walls, paper stretched on canvas, have all been tried, sometimes with good effect.

Mr. Engert relies on thin plates of steel freely suspended in the neighbourhood of the speaker or singer. He also utilises the well-known principle of suspended curtains.

Singularly enough he appeared at the demonstration named above to suppose that the simple drawing of a curtain across his resonating plates would prevent their action. Any one even moderately acquainted with the laws of aerial vibration will see through this fallacy, which divested the experiments of much cogency. A short statement of his views was circulated in the room, some of the items in which would hardly meet with unanimous approval from students of acoustics. The general effect produced upon the ear in various parts of the room was as follows, it being premised that the newly built Neumeyer Hall is far from bad for the speaking voice, though, in consequence probably of the coved and dormered roof, rather too resonant for singing or playing:—

1. The curtains assisted both speech and singing.
2. The steel plates, in speaking, had a slight but appreciable effect of the same kind. On the other hand, in loud singing or playing they clearly reinforced certain sounds to the exclusion of others, and continued it for two or three seconds independently. All staccato effects or sudden pauses were thus impracticable. The effect was that of a piano with the dampers lifted.
3. The plates when applied to the framework of a piano materially altered its tone for the worse, by producing the “tin-kettle quality” which is often heard on old instruments with hardened hammers, and which Helmholtz has shown to depend on remote and irrelevant upper partial tones. Moreover, they were apt to act as chorus to any accidental noise in the room or on the platform.

Their function seems to be limited to reducing excessive resonance by the principle of interference. Here they may prove useful, though great care must be exercised to keep them out of the reach of shaking movements or of malicious and busy fingers. On the slightest touch they are liable to produce a fine rolling peal of stage thunder.

THE late King of the French, Louis-Philippe, when on a visit to the racing-stud of his son, the