

Mendelssohn

Among the once celebrated but now almost forgotten art centers of Northern Europe few have made the world under deeper obligation than sober, business-loving Hamburg. When German opera was in its infancy the inhabitants of this old town fostered its infancy with zeal. And as early as 1679 an old opera, Adam and Eva, was first produced. The rich merchants built themselves an opera house and flocked in crowds to hear the opera of the day. Here Händel laid the foundations of his fame. Here musical criticism was invented, and here was born on Friday, the 3d of February, 1809, one of the brightest geniuses of the last century, Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, the subject of our talk.

The question of hereditary transmission of genius is a vexed one but it is quite certain that intellectual capacity is transmissible in unlimited measure and in certain cases unites itself with some definite inspiration of imaginative talent, in order to produce a genius of the highest order.

The special tendency may lie in the direction of painting, sculpture, architecture or music. In either case, its qualities will be increased by mental qualities of exceptional brilliancy, and therefore it is that we constantly find great artists springing up from clever families. The fire of heaven born genius shines with ten-fold brilliancy when united with hereditary clearness of intellect.

The Mendelssohn family was an exceptionally talented one. The branch of it from which the composer sprung traces its origin from a Jewish schoolmaster of Dessau named Mendel, a man of liberal education, deprived by the oppressive laws of the period of every opportunity for knowledge except by stealth. To the wife of this poor but faithful man was born Moses, Mendel's son—an exceptional child who at that age of five was so advanced that the father placed him under the care of Rabbi Fränkel with whom he studied devotedly and diligently. Later when Fränkel was hailed to Berlin, as chief Rabbi, Moses followed on foot and lived on a few pence, gained by copying, in such poverty that his sole food was one loaf a week. Under every disadvantage that a cruel and unjust government could throw in the way of a Jewish student, the frugal youth rose to a position of the most accomplished scholar in Europe.

In 1773 he married Fromet Guggenheim and so brutal were the laws under which his people groaned, that before he could obtain a marriage license, he was compelled to spend a certain amount of money in the Royal Berlin china factory, the manager, having on hand twenty huge china apes (supposed to be unsalable), insisted on his choosing these and they are preserved to this day in the family as priceless heirlooms.

Fromet bore Moses three sons and three daughters—one of these sons was Abraham, the father of

Felix Mendelssohn. The great scholar labored incessantly for the support of his large family and when he died he left behind him deathless fame.

His sons married well and became successful business men. Two of the daughters in after life embraced the Roman Catholic faith.

Abraham, the composer's father, was educated in Paris and later entered the bank of his brother, Joseph, in Hamburg. He married Fräulein Leah Solomon, a very accomplished person of wealth and good family. Their daughter Fanny, born in 1805, was followed by Felix in 1809. Soon after the birth of the third child Rebecca, Hamburg fell into the hands of the French and the Mendelssohns were obliged to escape by night and take refuge in Berlin. The fourth child was born here and until Felix was sixteen the entire family of relatives lived together in a large house on the Neue Promenade.

And now Abraham and Leah took the step taken by the two older sisters, and so true, so loyal, was the bond of affection which cemented the whole family together, that the consent was given, if not the inward approbation, of those members who still maintained the tenets of Judaism. Leah Solomon's brother had long been a Christian and in accordance with the German custom, had assumed the name of Bartholdy. By his advice Abraham and his family became Lutheran Protestants, assuming the name of Mendelssohn-Bartholdy.

Abraham Mendelssohn was a man of firm character and great ability and, though not himself an artist, was gifted with a far keener insight than most dilettanti. He was wise enough to exert upon the education of Felix an influence which proved of infinite value. In this he was nobly seconded by his wife, a woman of highly cultured intellect. Leah Mendelssohn's accomplishments were both varied and comprehensive. She spoke French, English and Italian fluently and was a good Greek scholar. She played and sang with taste and judgment and drew beautifully. She said that Fanny was born with "Bach-Fugue" fingers and she superintended and taught their early musical education. The care of their general education was committed to some of the best known and brainiest men in Berlin.

In 1818 at the age of nine Felix first performed in public. He entered the Berlin Singacademie, a child among adults. He now began to compose diligently, and some of his childish works show a marvelous aptitude, both for construction and the expression of definite musical ideas. When he was eleven he wrote a piano trio in three movements, two sonatas, four organ pieces, three songs, a violin sonata, and other pieces comprising nearly sixty distinct movements. The next year he wrote two operettas and five symphonies for string instruments, nine fugues, a set of motets for four voices and a multitude of smaller compositions. The manuscripts of these form part of a great collection in 44 volumes now preserved in the Berlin library, a priceless series of records showing the steady progress of his art life from the period of its first awakening in early childhood, to that of its full maturity and premature extinction at the age of 38 years.

When he was a very young lad he met Von Weber who had come to Berlin to superintend the

production of "Der Freischütz." Felix ran up to him on the street and threw himself into the arms of Weber with affectionate greetings.

His teacher Zelter took Felix to Weimar to see Goethe in whose house he spent a happy fortnight. The poet received his youthful guest with undisguised affection; and the letters written by Felix to his parents and sisters contain an interesting description of the great man's domestic life.

That great things should be expected from a child able to win the heart of a man so difficult of access as the author of Faust and Wilhelm Meister is only natural. The leaders of the German intellectual world treated Felix with respect at an age when most children were in the nursery. The Mendelssohn home was the center of intellectual society in Berlin— due to the brilliant conversation of Leah and Abraham's good sense and splendid character. All this time Felix remained the most natural, lovable and modest boy imaginable although his playing was praised, his improvisation admired and his compositions rendered by the best Berlin and visiting musicians. After working hard on his first piano quartet he is said to have cleared high hedges with a leap and climbed trees like a squirrel, his beautiful red brown curls flying.

When he was about twelve he appeared in recital a second time, and now the entire family took a long holiday in Switzerland, the children studying as usual and Felix working hard at compositions.

Thus to give an idea of the power and originality of the child, he at thirteen played his pianoforte concerto in A Minor at a concert and during the year wrote six symphonies for string instruments, five concertos, a second piano quartet, a violin sonata, a Kyrie for two choirs, a psalm, a Magnificat and a Gloria besides an opera in three acts.

He was now fourteen years old; his hair was cut short, he was growing up rapidly. The children began to take an active part in the Sunday evening musicales given in the large dining room with the assistance of friendly artists, artistically interpreting his music, the boy standing on a stool conducting a small orchestra, with his beloved sister Fanny, a superb musician, at the piano.

On Felix' fifteenth birthday his little opera, *Dei Beiden Neffen*, was rehearsed with full orchestra. At the supper which followed his teacher Zelter took him by the hand with the words "From this day, dear boy, thou art no longer an apprentice. I will claim thy independence in the name of Haydn, of Mozart and of old Father Bach."

This year Moschelles, the young French composer and pianist, visited Berlin and so delighted Abraham and Leah by his playing that they begged him to accept Felix as his pupil. He wrote in his diary "Today I gave Felix his first lesson, but not for a moment could I conceal from myself the fact that I was with my master."

In all the compositions of this gifted boy there are no signs of haste or carelessness. Every manuscript and note was done with the greatest neatness. There was never any craving for effect. Everything he did in a spirit of the truest reverence for art.

When he was sixteen Abraham took his boy to Paris where he mingled with the best musicians of the capital who rejoiced to do him homage, even Cherubini, who rarely bestowed a word of praise on anyone. Felix could not admire conditions at Paris. He complained of the want of earnestness, the frivolous taste, the incredible ignorance of the great works of Germany.

After Paris some of the most poetic and masterly works of his whole career were written. Abraham purchased a beautiful, spacious mansion where he and Leah lived to the end of their days, some of the rooms admirably adapted for theatrical performances. The house was surrounded by seven acres of beautiful park with magnificent old trees. In this beautiful mansion the old life ripened into fuller beauty—it became their kingdom inseparable from their tastes, feelings and convictions in which their dreams of art and philosophy were to be worked out in the utmost happiness.

At about this time Schlegel's translation of Shakespeare came out and Felix and his beloved sister Fanny were enchanted with the beauties of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and thus Felix conceived the delicious commentary upon Shakespeare's fairy vision which would alone have sufficed to make his name famous. As Leonardo da Vinci and Rafael—even Titian—first traced their designs on paper and afterwards glorified them with color, so did Mendelssohn first rest the expression of his idea upon the faultless propositions of its symmetrical form. When that was fully developed and not till then he proceeded to ornament the construction with the wonderful imagery which delights us today as much as it did those who first heard it one hundred years ago. And the principle involved in this process—the ornamentation of the construction as opposed to the construction of the ornament, he never ceased to preach or to practice to the end of his days.

Felix' path was not without obstacles. He suffered keenly when his maiden opera met with rebuffs by the director of the opera, Spontini. It was presented only once and was apparently the victim of intrigue and merciless criticism. So sensitive was Felix that it was some time before he could throw himself into his work again. He was now nineteen years old and he threw himself with passion into the determination to make the works of Johann Sebastian Bach known and appreciated. He succeeded in causing a revival of these works which has continued to this day in Germany and England. In this year his idolized sister Fanny became engaged to the well-known German painter Wilhelm Hensel of whom Felix was a long time violently jealous. This delightful young man finally won the affection of the entire, Mendelssohn family and lived with them in the garden house on the family estate and painted over a thousand portraits of the celebrities of the day, of the family and their intimate associates. They knew everyone worthwhile in Europe.

1829 was a great year for Felix who went with his father for the first time to London. Felix wrote of London "The grandest and most complicated monster on the face of the earth." Abraham Mendelssohn had long hesitated as to the choice of a career for his eldest son, and it was not until he had well considered the matter and asked the advice of many a friend in whose judgment he placed implicit confidence that he decided upon permitting him to devote himself to music as a profession. Having once made up his mind, there was to be no drawing back. Felix must make up his mind to live by his profession; and in order that he might have every opportunity for settling himself advantageously it was decided that he should visit by turns some of the greatest and most

promising capitals in Europe and decide for himself the scene of his future labors. He began with London and made his first appearance before a London audience in 1829 at a concert of a philharmonic society. He wrote home, "The success was beyond anything that I could ever have dreamed. I was received with immense applause." The next important event followed quickly with a presentation of the overture to "A Midsummer Night's Dream," Mendelssohn conducting. He also played Beethoven's "Concerto in E Flat" which had never before been heard in England.

Felix was received into society with all possible honor. We hear of him at balls given by the Duke of Devonshire and the Marquis of Lansdowne; at a state dinner of the Prussian Embassy; at the opera, the House of Commons; at private parties and all manner of places of amusement. His manners and animation delighted everyone and he laid the foundation of many life-long friendships which proved of infinite value to him.

At the close of the season he started with his friend, the poet Klingemann, many of whose charming lyrics he had set to music, on a tour of Scotland. His impressions of this country he interpreted into much of his most significant music. On returning to London he was compelled to nurse a hurt leg received in a carriage accident and he was disappointed because he was obliged to miss Fanny's wedding.

The second division of his long journeying began with a visit to Goethe at Weimar. His letters numbering hundreds record the story of his adventures and impressions. He visited the large German cities and thence to Venice and Florence. He saw and studied everything most worthy of attention in the Eternal City—Rome—galleries, works of art, the Vatican, St. Peter's and visited the great musicians and painters. He saw Naples and many resorts and he composed and concertized before going home and back again to London. It must be mentioned that Mendelssohn used much of Goethe's inspiration.

Paris pleased him no better than before and he wrote home that he had decided to settle in Germany. Everywhere he found the most delightful friendships, especially in England.

At this time a great deal of his work was being published. He was conducting with immense success and he accepted the post of director of all the private and public musical establishments of Düsseldorf, to which city he returned at the end of his Wanderyahre. Here he had his troubles with church and theatre and the resentment of the population over new ideas. Later he accepted the opportunity to become conductor of the famous Gewandhaus concerts at Leipzig. He wrote "When I first came to Leipzig I thought I was in paradise." Chopin came to call bringing the young lady who afterward married Schumann. His friend David, the violinist, was appointed concertmeister and his friend Moschelles also was in Leipzig for a time.

Felix enjoyed a happy visit home despite the fact that his father was now quite blind, but apparently in good health, only to learn very soon after his return to Leipzig, of Abraham's sudden death.

Felix flew to his mother's side. After the first terrible shock had passed away he fell into a

despondent mood and solitary habits which gave Fanny great uneasiness.

But he fell to work with great energy to complete the work which his father had urged upon him. His responsibility for the excellence of the Gewandhaus concerts caused him much anxiety as well. The friendship between the town of Düsseldorf and the artist was a source of gratification to both and tended greatly to the interest of German art.

Mendelssohn was also very active in musical festival activities and through his efforts a monument to Bach was erected.

He became happily engaged at the age of twenty-seven to a most charming and attractive young French woman Mlle. Cecile Jeanrenaud.

After the winter's excellent work and the bestowal upon him of an honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy by the University of Leipzig, Cecile and Felix were married.

The idea of the oratorio "Elijah" which had been for years in his mind, became by 1846 a realized fact. He wrote to a friend "I am jumping about the room for joy. If it only turns out half as good as I fancy it is, how pleased I shall be!"

In the fall he went to London for the first presentation of Elijah before a huge, rapturous audience. It was a magnificent performance. After the tremendous struggle of preparing Elijah followed by the excitement and constant strain of London, Mendelssohn was becoming more and more fatigued to the point of exhaustion. Yet he went on with his unrelenting labors though suffering much with pain in the head, and under the doctor's care. He did his duty minutely. It was on this visit to London that Mendelssohn met Charles Dickens. The enthusiasm for Mendelssohn was greater in England than ever. He wrote Fanny "A mad, most extraordinarily mad time. I never had so severe a time before. Never in bed till half past one. For three weeks together not a single hour to myself in any day. My visit was glorious. I was never received anywhere with such universal kindness and have made more music in two months than I do elsewhere in two years."

Yet even in the midst of his London season he labored at his "Israel in Egypt" and "Athalia." All this over-doing was very imprudent yet very difficult to avoid. And his power of recovery from fatigue was as great as his power of enjoyment. Three things were in his favor—his splendid constitution, an extraordinary power of sleep which he possessed in common with many other great men and of being lazy when there was nothing to do. The only stimulants he ever indulged in were music, society and boundless good fun.

Now he returns to Cecile and the four children to be happy and idle for a time at Frankfurt, he wrote to a friend, "eating and sleeping without dress coat, without piano, without visiting cards, without carriages and horses; but with donkey and with wild flowers, with music-paper and sketch book, with Cecile and the children and, to sum up, the best part of every pleasure is gone if Cecile is not there."

The constraint and petty annoyances of Berlin, the difficulty of steering a course in troubled official waters, constant commissions with the Singakademie, with the managers of the theatre, the clergy, the king and the ministers, the want of independence, the coldness of the press, misunderstandings and over-work, he came to dislike Berlin—and petitioned the king to relieve him of his duties there, which request was granted with a salary of one thousand thalers a year and permission to live where he pleased, which was the charming city of Frankfurt.

He had suffered the severe agony of the deaths of his mother and father and now the death of his dear Fanny was broken to him too suddenly and in his enfeebled condition completely overcame him. With a shriek he fell to the ground insensible. In his own words “A great chapter was ended.” When he at last could write again he composed the intensely mournful and agitated “String Quartette in F. Minor,” and he arrived at a happier mental condition though with occasional paroxysms of intense grief. From time to time his talk of music was still “all life and fire” as of old, but such moments of vivacity were followed by great depression, in which he could not bear to speak or be spoken to, even by old friends. He was aged, pale and weary, “oppressed with the air of the town.” He dreaded all public music and was only happy with his dear Cecile and the little boy Paul who had recovered from a serious illness. After a time of rest in Switzerland he visited Berlin and saw Fanny’s rooms, a strain which he could not endure. He gave up a cherished plan to visit Vienna to hear his great friend, Jenny Lind, sing songs which he had written for her.

During his last illness public feeling was intense. He died at Leipzig on Nov. 4, 1847, at the age of 38 years. His wife and brother, his friends David and Moschelles were with him.

It was as if everybody in the town had received a severe blow and personal loss. A young English student wrote to the York Courant, “It is lovely weather here but an awful stillness prevails; we feel as if the king were dead.”

The entire town came to mourn over his body. Great honor and reverence were displayed at the funeral service accompanied by the most beautiful instrumental and chorale music. The body was then taken to Berlin and after more funeral services, laid to rest with those of his father, mother and Fanny.

In London sorrow was both wide-spread and deep. His visits had been so frequent, his was such a vivid personality, such force and fire. The tone of the press was regret as for a dear relation intimately known and loved.

His friend Mrs. Austin wrote a most beautiful tribute to his memory. She says, “His is one of the rare characters which cannot be known too intimately. Of him there is nothing to tell that is not honorable to his memory, consoling to his friends, profitable to all men. If I admired him as an artist I was no less struck by his childlike simplicity and sportiveness, his deference to age, his readiness to bent his genius to give pleasure to the humble and ignorant, the vivacity and fervor of his admiration for everything good and great, his cultivated intellect, refined tastes and noble sentiments.” More than the fruits of his great genius his singular purity of life, devotion to wife and

family and his general high and unselfish character endeared him to both the public and his intimate friends.

In person Mendelssohn was short and slight of build. His look was dark and very Jewish, the face unusually mobile and full of animation with an unmistakable look of genius.

Thackeray said of him, "His face is the most beautiful I ever saw, like what I imagine our Saviour to have been." His large dark brown eyes are described "as expressive a pair of eyes as were ever set in a human head." They could also 'sparkle with rage like a tiger's.' When he was improvising or otherwise much excited they would dilate enormously and become a vivid black. His laughter was hearty and frequent and he would quite double up, shaking his hand from the wrist; he would nod his head violently when agreeing so that his hair came down over his face. His body was almost as expressive as his face. His hands were small, and on the keys behaved almost "like living and intelligent creatures, full of life and sympathy." He was so modest of his personal appearance that he disliked having his picture taken and often refused. His manner is described as particularly winning, soft, gentle and affectionate, and his speech with all people extremely fascinating—but with his unusually affectionate family, full of pet words and endearments. Yet he was not effeminate but there was a great deal of manliness packed into his little body.

His friendships with many of the greatest men of his day were rarely warm, true and tolerant. He had the gift not to take himself too seriously and was never more charming and amusing than when poking fun at his own foibles. He was a great mimic also.

No musician, unless perhaps it were Leonardo da Vinci, and he was certainly not a great musician and only a limited composer—certainly no great composer ever had so many pursuits as Mendelssohn. Mozart drew and wrote splendid letters. Berlioz and Weber also wrote fine letters. Beethoven was a great walker and an intense lover of nature. Cherubini was a great botanist, but none of them equal Mendelssohn in the number and variety of his occupations.

He excelled in almost all sports and games; skating and cards he did not care for. His drawing, water colors and letters are of a very high quality; in fact, distinguished. He had a passion for neatness and order. Everything he did with intense carefulness.

As to his playing, Madame Clara Schumann says, "My recollection of Mendelssohn's playing is one of the most delightful things in my artistic life. It was to me a shining ideal full of genius and life united with technical perfection."

He played everything even the most lengthy concertos, his own and others, almost always without notes. His memory was prodigious.

Hiller says, "Mendelssohn's playing was to him what flying is to a bird. No-one wonders why a lark flies. It is inconceivable without that power. In the same way Mendelssohn played, because it was his nature."

It is natural that in the Psalms and Elijah his music was peculiarly living. With the 114th Psalm "When Israel out of Egypt Came" the Jewish blood of Mendelssohn must have beat fiercely over the great triumph of his forefathers. His music is a perfect match for the splendid words of the psalmist.

Perhaps no man could be found in whose life there was so little to conceal or regret, brought up so carefully, endowed with every circumstance to make him happy and so thoroughly fulfilling his mission.

Is there a draw-back to this? Does his music suffer at all from his habitual cheerfulness? No-one can deny his genius, but it had never been submitted to those fiery trials which seem necessary to insure its abiding possession of the depths of the human heart. "My music" says Schubert "is the product of my genius and my misery and that which I have written in my greatest distress is that which the world seems to like the best."

Mendelssohn was never tried by poverty, disappointment, neglect, the perfidy of friends, ill health, or so many of the great ills which crowded so thickly around Beethoven, Schubert or Schumann. Who can wish that he had been? That that bright, pure, aspiring spirit should have been dulled by distress or torn with agony? It might have lent a deeper undertone to his songs but let us be happy with the man as we find him. Surely there is enough of conflict and violence in art and life. When we want to be made unhappy we can turn to others. It is well in these agitated modern days to be able to point out one perfectly balanced nature in whose life, whose letters and whose music alike, all is at once manly and refined, clever and pure, bright and substantial. For the enjoyment of such shining heights of goodness we may well forego, for once, the depths of misery and sorrow.