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"Mendelssohn in Performance" by Siegwart Reichwald

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**Reichwald, Siegwart, ed. *Mendelssohn in Performance*.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-253-
35199-9.**

David Montgomery

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Mendelssohn in Performance appeared in time to mark the 2009 bicentennial of Mendelssohn's birth. Among its nine authors are several well-known musicologists, as well as a younger generation of committed Mendelssohn scholars. It comes already endorsed by Leon Botstein and R. Larry Todd, and with a foreword by Christopher Hogwood.¹ The conditions for its success, then, are favorable.

The book's title confirms the General Editor's understanding that informed performance is no longer fully served by widely inclusive period studies ("the performance of baroque music") or even by books on isolated techniques ("rhythmic interpretation in early nineteenth century France"). Medievalists have known for years the necessity of individualized studies – particularly in light of myriad notational variations across Europe, and even between cultural centers not far from each other. Now a growing canon of works on interpretation specific to individual composers of the last several hundred years – Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert – supports the notion that a shrinking world (with increasingly standardized printing practices) has not become, necessarily, a clarified world.

As noted in the foreword and throughout the collection, Felix Mendelssohn has remained an underestimated and partially misunderstood composer – almost certainly since his own times. This perception is particularly at odds with the popularity of many of his compositions with the listening public. The incongruity is heightened, furthermore, by the lack of a completed scholarly edition of his works. Such conditions have contributed to a conceptual haphazardness, to say the least, in traditional performances of his music. Thus, the need for a book about "Mendelssohn in performance" hardly can be disputed.

Actually, this book has something for everyone interested in Felix Mendelssohn: history, culture, reception, orchestras and instruments, editions and texts, Mendelssohn's sense of historicism, his performances of other composers, performances of his music in his time and later, and even modern films that use his music. Difficulty arises, however, when we try to

¹ Three senior musicologists, two of whom are contributors to the book itself, appear particularly to have paved the way for the other authors: Douglass Seaton, R. Larry Todd, and Clive Brown. The last two names appear remarkably often in the text and the footnotes – actually more often than the index reveals.

understand its main purpose and to determine who will find it most useful. As with most essay collections, it offers no strong central message (understandable, with nine authors) and announces no set of specific problems to solve. Although occasionally an essay will turn toward the prescriptive, the overall book is not essentially about how to perform Mendelssohn. Likewise, it is not principally about how Mendelssohn performed. It gives accounts of performances by Mendelssohn and others, but, again, not necessarily for the sake of today's musicians. One must be satisfied, simply, with a collection of essays. In this sense, it is another "Mendelssohn Companion." If Douglass Seaton (the senior scholar at Florida State University, where the editor and several others of the younger authors trained) had not already collected a similar group of essays under that rubric, one might have suggested it for this work.

In any case, the book is provocative, due partially to the very diversity and liveliness of its subject matter. Almost every chapter stimulates the imagination, seeks to inform the reader, and, yes, invites debate. One cannot address all of its details, but one can try to offer a look into its various parts from the perspective of the professional musician who would perform Mendelssohn's music in the intent and spirit of its composer.

The volume opens with an account entitled, "Mendelssohn's Audience" (Seaton), an excellent portrait of the milieu in which Mendelssohn grew up, and the people for whom he concertized, conducted, and composed. It would have been the reviewer's favorite assignment, providing a context for all that is to come.

Readers will find four chapters of specific importance to orchestra conductors and others involved in larger productions: Mendelssohn "...and the Orchestra" (Milson), "...as Composer/Conductor" (Reichwald), "...and the performance of Handel's Vocal Works" (Wehner), and "Performance Traditions of Mendelssohn's Stage Works" (Hennemann). Wehner's essay is informative, revealing Mendelssohn as a conductor-organizer whose compositional instincts were never far from his interpretative mind, even in works by other composers. This picture is corroborated by Reichwald, concerning early performances of *St. Paul*. Wehner offers a valuable picture of nineteenth-century tastes in musical spectacle, including some statistics on performing numbers: 400 performers in the Garrison Church² (Reichwald reports 515 at a preliminary festival performance of *St. Paul*). Wehner's careful attention to figured bass realizations and new instrumentations (particularly in the winds) is invaluable. He also confirms Mendelssohn's use of the apparently tried and true "wedge" formation in placing the orchestra for such large ensembles – an idea still worth considering for certain large modern productions.

David Milsom reminds us that orchestral conducting duties before Mendelssohn's time were divided between the leader (usually a violinist) and a supporting pianist – not a satisfactory arrangement, according to Spohr. Mendelssohn apparently conducted all rehearsals and concerts of his orchestras, and developed enough control over the ensemble that (according to Wilhelm von Wasielewski) he was able to achieve tempo fluctuation with a precision that suggested the prior working-out of such effects in rehearsal. One is grateful for the inclusion of this story in

²

At the time, apparently, this church could hold 2,700 worshipers. It was destroyed in the Second World War.

Milson's account, for whether or not Wasielewski remembered with accuracy a performance he had heard half a century before (his memoirs came out in 1897), his remark remains interesting in several aspects. It strengthens the idea that conducting as we know it today with all of its baton skills was an infant art in Mendelssohn's day – and thus that many of the tempo fluctuations and related gestures that we so enjoy and praise in orchestral performances of music from that time may need rethinking.

Milson makes the less credible statement that it was Spohr whose “activities as Kapellmeister in Frankfurt in 1817-20 acted as a model for Mendelssohn's aspirations” as a conductor [88] – an idea that Milson seems to have gotten from Clive Brown. This statement cannot be supported, of course, because Mendelssohn was between eight and eleven years old and lived in Berlin at the time. It seems more reasonable to assume that the adult Mendelssohn's personality, ingenuity, and – particularly – his own musical standards led him naturally to deal with orchestras in whatever manner they may have needed.

The opening paragraph of Clive Brown's essay reveals a technique of argumentation whereby one “suggests” a thing early on (without proof), and then relies on its tacit acceptance to establish what later will be taken as real:

“...In 1816, when the family visited Paris, it seems possible that the eight-year-old boy had a few lessons with the great French violinist and pedagogue Pierre Baillot...”

Above, we pointed out a similar attempt by Milson (derived from Brown) to establish a connection between Mendelssohn and Spohr in their conducting styles. Here, Brown will go on to make a number of references to Baillot in connection with practices in violin playing that we should accept for Mendelssohn, among them the notion of “vibrato as an ornament.” Brown is given, apparently, to such persuasion, as we note in his readiness to add his own slanting lines to musical examples by nineteenth century composers “in places where portamento would be likely to have been heard” [73-79]. The reviewer opposes this manner of reporting, and he particularly opposes Brown's theory of vibrato-as-ornament. In this book, we see the theory repeated by Milson [98, unreferenced] and Cooper [184], both of whom are willing, apparently, to take it at face value.¹³ Until adherents of the authentic performance movement are ready to separate the concept of vibrato from that of the tremolo-as-ornament in the historical sources (and from a

³ Milson [96] also has brought into the notion that old recordings are witness to an age of reduced or no vibrato. The footnote to his remarks about Arnold Rosé refer only to a Bruno Walter recording made in 1938. This discussion, however, has been active for a number of years since the publication of Robert Philip's *Early Recordings and Musical Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) and a later publication, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003). These publications seem to have attracted Roger Norrington and others to the mistaken position that music written before the twentieth century is best played without vibrato – a sweeping generalization that clearly would include Mendelssohn. Much debate has ensued, some of it scholarly, some of it sadly journalistic (see Morten Fuglestad, *Gramophone Magazine*, April 2007, on vibrato in the Vienna Philharmonic as introduced by a “Nazi premier violinist”). For the counter position, see David Hurwitz in *Classics Today*, 2009 features: Vibrato, parts 1-3.

linguistic point of view, this task is not always easy), the arguments concerning the application of either technique will remain blunted.

Monika Hennemann's essay, "From Drawing Room to Theater," offers fascinating reading. Combining scholarly research with a clear literary style, she takes the reader through Mendelssohn's early home-theater productions to his mature productions for the public, including a case study of the Incidental Music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For those of us who would be inspired immediately to recreate one of those early private events in Berlin, she regrets to report that the great house in the Leipzig Street and the family's two other residences are now gone.⁴

Peter Ward Jones's chapter is entitled "Mendelssohn and the Organ." The author gives us a picture of Mendelssohn and his earliest connection and acquaintance with the instrument[s] (one cannot speak of a generic "organ" in Mendelssohn's day as easily as one might speak of "the pianoforte," because even more than the pianoforte, organs existed in widely varying states of development). Jones's seven-page section on registration is informative and well-considered. He adds a short section on tempi (perhaps less useful than that for which the reader might hope) and a final alert to the pitfalls of Mendelssohn's slurs.

Kenneth Hamilton's essay, "Mendelssohn and the Piano," is culled largely from other accounts. It is a lively mixture of anecdote (at least one, apparently, by Hamilton himself), reception history, and commentary on style, but with no musical examples or analyses. Hamilton repeats some old assumptions about Mendelssohn, one of which is that Mendelssohn "despised [the metronome] as unworthy" [33] – a broad statement based inductively on a single piece of evidence – the now-famous, but unreliable Berlioz memoir published four decades after their meeting in Paris in 1831. The memoir is included elsewhere in the book [Reichwald, 195], but with a more considered conclusion.

For singers and choral directors, the final chapter is "On Performing Mendelssohn's Music in Translation" (Cooper), to which are attached several appendices. The chapter is well planned and inclusive, dealing with topics ranging from solo song to large productions, the details of translation and their difficulties for musical settings, and an interesting section on works that Mendelssohn composed in languages other than his native German. In this regard, it would have been interesting to read an account of his linguistic training and competency, but perhaps this topic lay outside the reasonable scope of research for the project at hand. Choir directors might, as well, have hoped for some practical notes on performing Mendelssohn's works in translation – a project, perhaps, for future expansions on this topic.⁵

⁴ Happily, one of the extant homes (not too far away) in which Mendelssohn performed as a youth, and which must have had a similar drawing room, was (is) at Brüderstrasse 13 – the Nicolai/Parthey home. Lili Parthey was a witness to many of Mendelssohn's early successes. See David Montgomery, "The Parthey Diaries" in *Musical Quarterly* 74/2 (1990), 202 (picture).

⁵ Every singer and choir director knows the intricacies of effective consonant placement. German word division differs primarily from English division in that, in German, the new syllable begins preferably with a consonant, even at the risk of obscuring the stem. An example would be the word "Sün-der" in the aria, "Sei willekomm, du edler

Two technical chapters complete this collection, “From Notation to Edition to Performance” (Cooper) and “Mendelssohn’s Tempo Indications” (Reichwald). Cooper’s notation chapter might best have been placed second, directly after Seaton’s contextual introduction, for its topic is important for all readers and Mendelssohn performers. Cooper uses three notational problems to illustrate the breadth of thinking that must be done in order to bring a score most successfully to printed form: (1) the beaming of repeated notes, (2) the beaming of undulating notes (fingered tremolos in string playing and the use of notational shorthand in their presentation), and (3) the interpretation of diamond-shaped hairpin signs. His goal is to discover the way to maximize a composer’s intent through the “retention or suppression” of a given notation’s “connotative power”. He considers solutions in all three cases, but leaves room for the reader to participate. In the first case, we are not shown enough of the music from the beginning to draw a conclusion; in the second case, the problem seems far less important to the reviewer than to the author. In the third case – i.e. the double hairpins in Example 9.5 – there is hardly time for vibrato (Cooper’s solution) on the beginning of each group of eight notes, unless the violinist is playing at a much slower tempo than expected. The double hairpins may be related to tenuto signs in Viennese notation (before the widespread use of strokes), consisting of an open-to-closed hairpin called a “*kleine Anschwellungszeichen*” (“small swell sign”) in August Swoboda’s *Allgemeine Theorie der Tonkunst* (Vienna: Strauss, 1826).

The image displays two systems of musical notation for violin. The top system consists of two staves: the upper staff is labeled 'Vn (David)' and contains a complex rhythmic passage with many beamed notes and diamond-shaped hairpins; the lower staff is labeled 'Vn (Bach)' and contains a simpler accompaniment. The bottom system also consists of two staves: the upper staff is labeled 'Vn (David)' and features a triplet of notes followed by a 'dimin.' marking and further complex rhythmic patterns with beaming and hairpins; the lower staff is labeled 'Vn (Bach)' and contains a simple accompaniment. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 3/4.

Reichwald’s essay on tempo indications would have found a natural placement as the book’s third essay, before proceeding with the chapters on specific instruments and genres. Still in all, one does not read such a book necessarily in the order presented, and no harm is done. The author discusses tempo and tempo markings (both numerical and Italian), ordering the markings in *St. Paul* and *Elijah* – contrasting them with the markings in sonata-plan instrumental pieces, with the remark that the polarization between markings in the latter is driven by the need

Gast,” m. 17. The ramifications for performance (and differences in performance according to language) are interesting. Likewise, a discussion of the effects of differing syntax and punctuation between German or English texts, applied to the same musical lines, might have been worthwhile for vocalists.

for contrast between movements. It is unclear, however, why contrast between sections in a dramatic work would be of less value than in an instrumental work.

The usual questions, concerning such matters as the relative speed of an *andantino*, or the note value of the main beat of a movement, could not be solved here – not merely for lack of enough comparative evidence, but also on conceptual grounds. The well-worn idea that a preliminary look at the “fastest” notes plays a major role in establishing the tempo of a work harks back to standard conservatory thinking and needs revision. The main theme of a work or movement determines its character, and thus it should be the major factor in establishing a tempo. Few composers write the fastest notes first and then devise a theme. Nevertheless, Reichwald is on the right track in celebrating Mendelssohn as a composer to treat seriously, as are his colleagues, and inch by inch we all shall move forward.

One should speak, finally, to the prospective buyer/reader. As of the submission of this review, Amazon advertises the book’s list price at \$39.95, but sells it for \$32.26. Library.com offers it for \$23.80 – hardly enough to reward the editor and authors, but advantageous for retail buyers. Considering this product generically as a book, first sight reveals an attractive offer: the layout is clear, the paper is strong, and the illustrations are sharp. It includes a table of contents, chapter endnotes, an index of names (but not subjects), and biographical sketches of the authors. In recent times, however, one often has been disappointed to learn that just this much is the apparent extent of a publisher’s responsibility towards the total work, and that beyond such basics it is often “author and/or reader beware.” In terms of “reader beware,” for example, why can we not have simple footnotes on each page for immediate reference, instead of the tedious-to-use chapter endnotes? Editors and publishers know this problem well, but the practice continues and readers fumble.

A more important hindrance is the lack of a separate list of compositions mentioned in the book – which might have been arranged, perhaps, by genre. Arrangement by name might cause confusion, considering how unsure the reader might be of the official title of a work, or in which language it is best known. Lacking such a list, one must go to the Index, where one finds an unnecessarily compressed and hard-to-read compilation under “Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Felix.” Works are arranged by name, partially in English, partially in German, partially in Latin.

Useful, as well, would have been a bibliography, because of the sheer number of sources cited. The Mendelssohn materials are widely scattered, and the reader unfamiliar with them would get a better picture of the whole scholarly undertaking with a bibliography at hand. For that matter, even a one-page statement concerning the major sources – primary and secondary – at the outset of the book might have been a good idea.

Most authors now understand, sadly, that in addition to such nonchalance towards the ease of use, modern publishers of scholarly texts often limit their concern with beauty to the dust jackets of their products (and, yes, this one is lovely). The rest is left to a computer and/or to the editor, if he or she chooses to intervene. Printers’ “orphans” and “widows” abound, as well as an

unusually large number of typos and oversights.⁶ Some of them would be ignored by a computer's English spell-check, such as "Robert Schumann, Erinnerungen and Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy; nachgelassene Aufzeichnungen von Robert Schumann..." [readers assume this would indicate two different works]⁷ or "...for the other forms to great a contrast..." [110], and for that reason alone one needs an alert proofreader.

The old rule about not dividing proper names appears to be gone, as well. Consider, for example, "Shake-speare [135], "Vi-enna" [184], or, even less acceptable, "En-gland" [42]. Perhaps the former differences between the European and American word division are being reconsidered today, but English-language readers still may not be used to seeing the stems obscured, as in "ma-nipulate" [48] or "mu-sicians" [62]. Phrases involving contractions divide particularly badly, as in "del-l'oro" [175]. The budget for the proofing personnel that it takes to avoid such things, however, may be a luxury of the past.

The language and tone of this book is generally straightforward, with the exception of a few sentences that appear calculated to obfuscate – both as language and as theory:

"Moreover, this passage's evident creation of a new sub-context that subverts the performance implications of the notation suggests that interpreters' decisions as to the relative autonomy given to individual notes and the implications of any notated note-groupings may be contextually 'nested' (i.e., may depend on the relationship of the immediate context to broader contexts in the work at hand [177])."

Some individual words also jump out at the reader, either as unfortunate fabrications or simply as scholarly-precious:

"...The device...of crescendoing with full swell..." [50]

"...His coadjutor, at the pianoforte..." [88]

"...between editorial and authorial information..." [174]

"...treated the two symbols as different scribal challenges." [184]

These choices are a matter of individual style; they do no more than slow the reader's progress. The use of one particular term, however, may have imparted more meaning than its author [Cooper] intended:

"In addition to the exemplars in the Bodleian Library..." [248].

⁶ The last line on p.110 is a prime example. Not only is the last word badly divided ("exemplifies"), but it is orphaned as well. The sentence in which it appears is the last statement by the author (not counting the small text) before his conclusion, and it need not have been indented (thus displacing the final word). Orphan and unfortunate division both could have been avoided with the services of a proof reader.

⁷ This citation is taken from a tertiary source: Reichwald citing Nichols' translation of Eismann reproducing Schumann, a practice that invites mistakes.

In this context, “exemplars” is supercharged, whereas “examples” or even “exempla,” may better have matched the author’s meaning.⁸

Specialists may want to be particularly careful in the use of unexplained or untranslated words from other languages in a “companion” volume such as this one for non-specialists. Most readers know enough German to figure out “Sonntagsmusiken” [Seaton, 11, “Sunday house concerts”] or “Gartensaal” [Reichwald, 105, “garden room”], but other terms are less familiar. Examples of the latter are “Revisionskrankheit” [Hogwood, viii, “obsession with revising”], “Vormärz” [Seaton, 2, referring to the period of the police states leading up to the 1848 revolts in Austria and Germany] and “Notenbild” [Cooper, 177]. This last term is not so easy to translate: the Viennese musicologist Michael Lorenz describes it as “the overall visual impression of the pages in a score,” remarking that it is a rather abstract concept at best.⁹ Surely the inclusion of short explanations of such lesser-known foreign terms would have been both a courtesy and an aid to the general reader.

Under ideal circumstances, one would have wished for modern translations of some of the non-English sources quoted in this book. Lady Wallace’s linguistic skills, for example, were surely up-to-date for her times, but do they really serve current purposes? Some phrases can be overlooked as quaint, but others simply tickle the funny bone:

“...I look forward to your oratorio, which will, I trust, solve the problem of combining ancient conceptions with modern appliances ...” [102]

The syntax of certain passages is troubling. It causes one to wonder if some of Wallace’s work might have been in collaboration with (or altered by?) a non-native English speaker – possibly one of the editors, Paul or Carl Mendelssohn Bartholdy, who must have provided the texts.

“...Before decidedly accepting the proposal, I have stipulated to wait till after the performance at Frankfort, that I may judge whether it be suitable for the festival...” [103]¹⁰

⁸ The term “exemplar” became popular in American writing after Thomas Kuhn gave it particular meaning in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970). In English usage it now seems to imply special or even extraordinary attributes and/or achievement, whereas in typical German usage it simply means “specimen.”

⁹ Private correspondence, December 2009. Actually, Cooper seems to have had in mind only a faithful reproduction of the source.

¹⁰ This passage is not to be found as cited on p. 84 of the Wallace translations (which is an October letter to his family), but on page 78 – at least in the “new edition” (not 1863, but 1864) available for viewing in Google Scholar. Perhaps this discrepancy is due to the fact that the Google version is a “new edition.” The letter quoted on p. 102, from March, 1835 (containing the reference to “appliances”), is indeed on p. 72 of the Google Scholar Wallace edition, as cited. Was there really a “new,” differently paginated edition, published only a year after the original edition, or does this problem represent an oversight in the footnotes? An annotated bibliography would have been helpful to us here.

A native of Edinburgh and well educated, Lady Grace Jane Wallace was an experienced writer and translator with 10 major translations to her credit before she undertook the letters excerpted above. Her translator's preface to Nohl's *Life of Mozart*, for example, shows an altogether different level of English fluency – as do her translations of Beethoven's letters (ed. Nohl, 1866), or, for that matter, of other Mendelssohn letters in the present collection. These sources may be examined on Google Scholar, as may, indeed, a surprisingly large number of the remaining sources cited in this book.

One cannot call *Mendelssohn in Performance* a work of original research, for it relies heavily on scholarship already undertaken – partially by the authors themselves, but by other authors as well. This fact is evident in the proportion of secondary and tertiary sources cited by most (not all) of the contributing authors. This observation does not constitute a judgment, however. There is an honorable place and purpose in reordering prior research for new purposes. The goal is to demonstrate, through continuing focus upon Felix Mendelssohn's legacy, that his was a life's endeavor worthy of the critical attention we should devote to all such gifted artists.