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Mendelssohn perspectives

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Notes

1. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 38.
2. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel, "Introduction: The Dialectic of Jewish Enlightenment," in *Outsider/Insider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 7.
3. See the collection of articles *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, eds. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

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Mendelssohn perspectives, edited by Nicole Grimes and Angela R. Mace, Farnham and Burlington, Ashgate, 2012, xxii + 368 pp., £75.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781409428251

When editors characterise the fruit of their labour as 'kaleidoscopic', the reader knows he should prepare himself for methodological disparity and lack of thematic focus. To some extent the volume *Mendelssohn Perspectives*, edited by musicologists Nicole Grimes and Angela R. Mace, seems to fit the picture. Its 16 chapters alternately deal with Mendelssohn as a composer, performer, businessman, friend and, last but not least, as the Jew that he was *and* wasn't, according to nineteenth-century standards. As the editors point out in their short but helpful introduction, Mendelssohn's 'multi-faceted career' certainly validates this wide range of approaches. Yet whereas in life the composer's varying capacities productively interacted, in the present volume they somehow fail to come together. And that is where the simile ends: where the kaleidoscope yields shifting patterns by constantly rearranging the same ingredients within the confines of one narrow lens, the successive chapters of Grimes and Mace's volume keep opening up additional vistas, offering the reader new perspectives by viewing different topics through different lenses.

Given the current state of Mendelssohn research, this methodological and thematic variety may well be inevitable. Increasingly disregarded as the nineteenth century proceeded, Mendelssohn's oeuvre was only rediscovered in the early 1960s (the extent to which his Jewish background may have contributed to both his artistic demise and his rehabilitation will be briefly touched upon below). Before this reappraisal, Mendelssohn seems to have enjoyed a rather modest reputation as a man of talent, not genius, an artist whose work betrayed skill rather than inspiration, mannerism rather than authenticity, sentimentality rather than depth. In 1963, however, Eric Werner's monograph *Mendelssohn. A New Image of the Composer and his Age* triggered an energetic revision of this uncharitable paradigm. In the fifty years that followed, many scholars have joined the attempt to disengage Mendelssohn's oeuvre from a century of bias and appreciate it in its own terms. In the editors' words, the present volume should be seen as the 'latest instalment in this tradition of collected essays volumes' (3), meant to offer an objective analysis and redirect our gaze at the intrinsic merits of Mendelssohn's many achievements.

In accordance with this ambition, parts II and IV of the volume try to reposition Mendelssohn vis-à-vis the musical standards and influences of his time, which range from Bach's lingering Baroque presence (Anselm Hartinger) to the innovative Romanticism of Mendelssohn's contemporary and acquaintance Hector Berlioz (John Michael Cooper). Several authors offer new, 'empirical' close readings of Mendelssohn's *Formensprache*, especially in the sonatas (dissected by Paul Wingfield and Julian Horton) and the early string quartet in E-flat, which Benedict Taylor speculatively interprets as cyclically built around a 'traumatic' F-minor theme. Mendelssohn specialist R. Larry Todd no less tentatively explores the intriguing relationship between composition and improvisation, and between music and (hidden) text in perhaps the most Mendelssohnian of all genres, the *Lieder ohne Worte*. Likewise highlighting the role of improvisation, co-editor Angela R. Mace interprets the piano cadenzas developed by Felix and his sister Fanny as ways of absorbing the classical concertos by Mozart and Beethoven into the Romantic canon of the Biedermeier era.

Parts III and V, by contrast, do not concentrate on Mendelssohn's music, but explore various aspects of the composer's outward persona and his – contemporary as well as later – reception. Jason Geary reconstructs Mendelssohn's share in the success of the staging, in 1841 and 1845, of two Greek tragedies at the Prussian court, once again stressing his role as a musical *trait d'union*, now between ancient pagan culture and modern Christian ethos. Trading actual for virtual drama, Monika Hennemann traces and evaluates the nineteenth-century rumours of Mendelssohn's 'phantom opera' as ever-so-many cases of – historically quite significant – musical pseudepigraphy. Firmer ground is covered by Pietro Zappalà and Cécile Reynaud, who take Mendelssohn beyond the borders of his familiar Germany and England and sketch the logistics that facilitated his reception in Italy and France. Drawing upon recently published documentary evidence, Regina Back offers a glimpse of Mendelssohn's deepest thoughts as shared with his lifelong friend, diplomat Carl Klingemann, while Lorraine Byrne Bodley adds to our knowledge of the creative influences on the young composer, as exemplified by the correspondence between his teacher Carl Friedrich Zelter and Johan Wolfgang von Goethe.

Together parts II–V yield a rich, if somewhat diffuse tableau of musical life and standards, business and practice, dissemination and appreciation in nineteenth-century Europe. Throughout the volume, it is up to the reader to keep track of all the fields covered, to reconstruct how each chapter supplements which ongoing discussion, and to hold on to Mendelssohn as the prime subject of each account. Unfortunately the first four chapters, which deal with what the editors aptly call 'Mendelssohn's Jewishness', fail to provide the necessary unifying prism. As the nineteenth century progressed and European nationalism gained ground, Mendelssohn appears to have become more and more Jewish in the eyes and ears of his beholders. It is generally assumed that this involuntary 'rejudaization' affected both Mendelssohn's reputation as an artist and the valuation of his work. Indirectly, it also raises the issue of Mendelssohn's own affinity with Judaism and its supposed impact on his compositions. Yet if the latter question has long been part of Mendelssohn studies, it is wholly absent from the analyses in Chapters 5–16. Somehow one cannot help feeling that this absence puts the matter of the perception of the composer as a Jew, and of his alleged Jewish self-perception, in its proper place: that of the *meta*-history of Mendelssohn critique. And belonging to this meta-realm, it is perhaps slightly inconsistent with the volume's overall ambition to present the composer 'in his own terms'.

Writing in the early 1960s, when the world was just beginning to come to terms with the implications of the Shoah, Eric Werner portrayed Felix Mendelssohn as a nineteenth-century European who had treasured his Jewish lineage. This obviously restorative paradigm stood unchallenged until the late 1990s, when Jeffrey Sposato postulated a somewhat more complex dynamic between Mendelssohn's Lutheran faith and his Jewish roots. After a strictly Christian childhood, dominated by his overpowering father Abraham, Felix had gradually begun to reconsider, perhaps even reappropriate his Jewish legacy, Sposato claimed. In what was to become a lively polemic, the musicological establishment responded to Sposato's contention by reaffirming Mendelssohn's lasting affinity with Judaism, often relying on the same evidence (the combination of libretti and biographical material) and using the same cyclical hermeneutics as their opponent. With the discussion having reached this manifest deadlock, the four chapters on Mendelssohn's Jewishness could do little more than provide some basic fine-tuning, or fill in some – more and less urgent – gaps in the overall picture.

Like the other contributors, the authors of Chapters 1–4 approach their theme from a broad, slightly incongruous series of angles. Marion Wilson Kimber compiles a well-informed but unfortunately little-contextualized survey of the changes in Mendelssohn's visual representation through the nineteenth century. Developments in physiognomy and phrenology are somewhat superficially linked to racial thinking, rising anti-Semitism, transformations in Mendelssohn portraiture (from 'mental' and aristocratic to 'vital', puffy and effeminate) and technical evaluations of his compositions. Colin Eatock, on the other hand, construes a conceptually rather precise outline of perceptions of Mendelssohn's Jewishness in Victorian England. There as elsewhere, the change from religious anti-Judaism to racial anti-Semitism caused an increasing emphasis on the Jewish origins of the composer and his work. Eatock convincingly shows that Darwinian evolutionism and, ironically, English philo-semitism contributed at least as much to this trend as Richard Wagner's somewhat belated popularity in the UK. In the decades after 1880, the mass immigration of Jewish refugees from the Continent seems to have sealed the decline of Mendelssohn's reputation.

Sinéad Dempsey-Garratt likewise modifies Wagner's role in what she calls, between deliberate quotes, Mendelssohn's artistic 'Untergang'. In a richly documented and well-argued chapter, she challenges the commonly held opinion that the composer's 'downfall' owed much, if not all to Wagner's anti-Semitic critique as voiced in the pseudonymous 'Das Judentum in der Musik' (1850). She traces and analyses immediate precursors, obvious acclamations and subtle objections to Wagner's text, showing that, despite the occasional anti-Jewish stereotype and argumentation, it was aesthetic rather than ethnic or social concerns that caused the speedy decline in Mendelssohn's status. Assuming a more direct correlation between anti-Semitism and negative reception, co-editor Nicole Grimes takes the shift in Mendelssohn's reputation as point of departure for reconstructing how a critic like Eduard Hanslick (1825–1904) would negotiate his own distant Jewishness in the changing political climate of late nineteenth-century Vienna. The result is an associative, at times rather intuitive, reconstruction of the tastes and emotions triggered by Mendelssohn's 'Jewish' work in an era of increasing anti-Jewish censorship.

Modern times have witnessed the fragmentation of European Jewry from an autonomous polity into a religion, a culture, a nationality and, ultimately, a race. If this metamorphosis has had an undisputed bearing on the *reception* of Mendelssohn and his

oeuvre during the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it never really touched Mendelssohn himself. We know that the Lutheranism in which he was raised as a child was an enlightened faith that advocated universal *égalité* by endorsing civilisation and proper ethical conduct. Taking Mendelssohn out of that established Christian framework, whether through nineteenth-century political discourse or via late twentieth-century academic research, only serves to articulate underlying attitudes in society. Every history is contemporary history – I admit there is hardly a greater truism to be found in historiography. Yet by virtue of that same cliché the obvious anachronism of Mendelssohn's Jewishness, however well explored, might have been left out from this volume, which otherwise succeeds in providing the reader with some new, unbiased perspectives on this widely mis-appropriated composer.

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