

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, 1809 - 2009: A 200th Anniversary Celebration

In this bicentenary year we join Mendelssohn admirers the world over to pay tribute to the beauty and complexity of a truly unique constellation of musical works created by a composer considered to be the very heart of German Romanticism.

*Mendelssohn was at once Christian and Jewish, performer and creator, teacher and role-model, public icon and private artist. (John Michael Cooper, Mendelssohn Received in The Cambridge Companion to Mendelssohn, 2004)

*There is a growing new image of Mendelssohn's life and work along with an increasing presence of Mendelssohn's music in concert halls around the world that transcends a heritage of brutally anti-Semitic scholarship generated in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

*Felix Mendelssohn has been called the Leonard Bernstein of his day. (Jessica Duchon, BBC, Introducing Jessica's Mendelssohn blog, Dec. 18, 2008) Like Bernstein, Mendelssohn was an active conductor, an educator and a composer (not to mention that like Bernstein, he was an extraordinary pianist!).

*Mendelssohn founded the Leipzig Conservatory in 1842, he conducted the Gewandhaus Orchestra for ten years, he revived the music of J.S. Bach and he premiered the music of his contemporaries including Schubert's Ninth Symphony.

*Mendelssohn was born Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn in Hamburg German in 1809, the grandson of Moses Mendelssohn, perhaps the most significant 18th-century Jewish philosopher who influenced the course of Hebraic thinking and an entire generation of philosophers including Immanuel Kant.

*Though Mendelssohn never denied his Jewish roots, as a young man, he converted to Christianity, a decision based on the conventions of the time. The Jewish turned Protestant Felix Mendelssohn was responsible for the musical resurrection of Bach, a devout Lutheran. At age 20, following his Berlin revival of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* performed to a sold-out audience where people wept openly, Mendelssohn is reported to have remarked "...to think that...a Jew should give back to the people the greatest Christian music in the world."

*Mendelssohn embodies the Romantic ideal of an artist seeking to unite humanity; his is the art that seeks to improve the common man's mind, to raise the spirits of his fellows.

Mendelssohn was a true genius who is characterized as a Romantic classicist.

Mendelssohn's Symphony-Cantata as Common Ground
"Hymn of Praise"

The Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus and Orchestra will feature the celebratory Mendelssohn *Symphony No. 2*, known as "*Lobgesang*" (*Hymn of Praise*), a work composed to commemorate Gutenberg's invention of printing, the German hero who had lit a symbolic torch, and the victory of light over darkness through the invention of printing (literacy!)

The grand design of Mendelssohn's **symphony-cantata** draws on traditional symphonic form extending three symphonic movements with a cantata of nine movements. This unique form reveals Mendelssohn's effort to break down the traditional divisions separating church and concert music.

Mendelssohn chose the **celebratory texts** from Martin Luther's translation of the Old Testament, mostly the Psalms. The settings recall the cantatas and passions of Bach and the anthems and oratorios of Handel in a hymn of praise to underscore the triumph of light over darkness, of spiritual awareness over ignorance.

The first chorus repeats the trombone theme on the closing verse of Psalm 150, "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord". This repeated motif is followed by the familiar chorale *Nun danket alle Gott* (Now thank we all our God) symbolizing the turn from darkness into light.

Mendelssohn's consistent use of chorales in both his instrumental and vocal writing exemplifies a certain quality of familiarity and direct expression that **links the performer and listener**, the audience and the artists. Mendelssohn's music often gives listeners and performers a sense of community.

Mendelssohn understood art as a human achievement that revealed the presence of the divine in all humanity. The accessibility of "*Lobgesang*" and other Mendelssohn works invites the kind of **personal engagement** that takes the audience beyond the role of passive spectator to sense the dramatic, spiritual and emotional power of the music.

The *Lobgesang* is often described as Mendelssohn's intent to dissolve the barriers between concert music and church.

First the instruments give praise, then the choir and individual voices combine to create a new symphonic form. Unlike Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* in which the voices sing the "Ode to Joy" in the last movement only, Mendelssohn's *Symphony No. 2* maintains a perfect balance between **the word sung and the music played** punctuated by Martin Luther's hymn, "*Now thank we all our God*".

Mendelssohn's Psalm of Thanksgiving

"As Israel departed from Egypt"

Unlike Beethoven's musical objectivity represented by the virtuosity of the composer's powerful imagination, Mendelssohn's more subjective and intimate self is heard in his choral and orchestral works. This **intimacy of communication** can be heard in both the "*Lobgesang*" and Psalm 114. The listener is invited into the music by directness in expression - a form of expression that also invites amateur participation in performance and creates a sense of community.

Mendelssohn's music invites **personal engagement**.

Reviewed in 1840 following its premiere as "one of the most magnificent compositions he had ever written" this particular Psalm setting was very close to Mendelssohn's heart. Mendelssohn's personal affinity with his Psalm 114 cannot be denied. Rooted in the Jewish tradition, it is a song of thanks of a people to whom Mendelssohn through birth was closely connected.