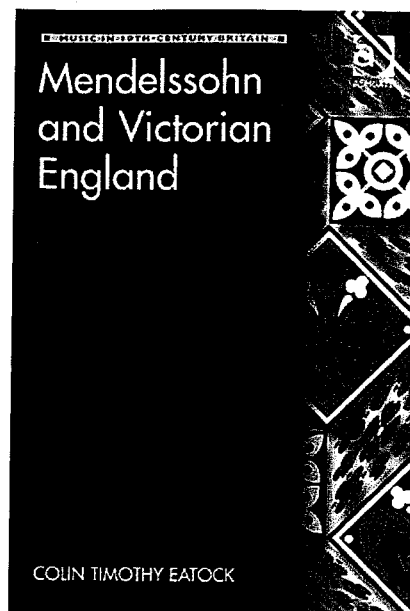


Book Review

Mendelssohn and Victorian England
by Colin Timothy Eatock

By RJ Stove



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It seems incredible, and yet it is true: we have had to wait till the present release for a thorough analysis (complete with scholarly appurtenances) of this topic, which seems such an obvious theme. Accordingly, even a bad book would appear a long-overdue guide, but Colin Timothy Eatock, from the University of Toronto, proves an admirably graceful writer as well as a sedulous researcher, one who has numerous useful and fresh observations even considering that Mendelssohn has now become a positively fashionable field of study.

To examine Dr Eatock's monograph – arguably mistitled: 'Victorian Britain' would surely have been a more appropriate name, given Mendelssohn's personal experience of Scotland and Wales as well as England – is to be newly impressed both by the composer's force of character and by his skill at what would now be called 'networking.' That British fame which Handel could acquire solely by decades of residence, Mendelssohn achieved as a transient. (While he visited Britain ten times in all, he never seriously contemplated living there and remained a loyal German to his last breath.)

One would like to think that genius at Mendelssohn's level could

have been rewarded by British music-lovers anyhow, whatever personal idiosyncrasies might have stood in his way. All the same, one need only contemplate the far less successful British visits of Wagner – and the downright fatal harm which London had already done to Weber – for realising how great a debt Mendelssohn owed to his combining abundant social graces with a stubborn refusal to be pushed around. Even if such terms as 'gentleman' routinely turn up in contemporary accounts of Mendelssohn's demeanour, Dr Eatock quotes from enough astringent letters by Mendelssohn to publishers and concert promoters in order to confirm that gentlemanliness never meant weakness of will; and woe betide any

unctuous plutocrat who assumed that it did. Dr Eatock's descriptions do not always make it clear whether a particular letter had originally been written in German or English, but Mendelssohn's command of the latter tongue existed on so high a plane (some unidiomatic phrases in an English-language note of his from 1845, which is cited on page 96, stand out for their rarity) that the distinction hardly counts.

In retrospect, one startling feature of Mendelssohn's British labours is that he managed to attain even the modest age of thirty-eight: so ferocious was his work ethic, so poor was his health, so irksome were the conditions under which he travelled – in what until the 1840s largely remained a pre-railway civilisation – and so reluctant was he to short-change his audiences by giving them less than his very best. Appendix B (pp. 161-171) of Dr Eatock's account, which lists every public and semi-public appearance Mendelssohn is known to have made while in England, constitute a truly awesome schedule of concert-giving, although a similarly detailed breakdown of his performances and administrative chores in Berlin, Düsseldorf and Leipzig would have much the same harrowing effect.

This reviewer would have welcomed extra details of Mendelssohn as organist, with the revolutionary impact he left upon British organ-playing, partly through his six sonatas (Mendelssohn had insufficient knowledge of Anglican rites to accept his publisher's proffered title 'voluntaries', and preferred the more conventional one), but above all through his own command of pedalling. Such expertise created general astonishment at a time when not only did British instruments mostly lack full Teutonic-type pedal-boards, but it was considered thoroughly infra dig to use what limited boards these organs did have. The response of Mendelssohn's colleague Sir

George Smart to a suggestion that he start employing pedals – 'My dear sir, I never in my life played on a gridiron' – typified the old-style Anglo-Saxon attitude. Curiously, Dr Eatock does not mention this particular inanity of Smart's, although Smart does frequently appear in the narrative. Nor will readers seeking either confirmation or disproof of Mendelssohn's alleged late-life affair with Jenny Lind obtain any details on the subject from Dr Eatock, although the impossibility of proving such a relationship's occurrence has not stopped certain tabloid ink-slingers from imagining (cf. The [London] Independent's 12 January 2009 issue) that the great composer and the great singer absolutely, positively must have been soul-mates.

Perhaps the finest single chapter in Dr Eatock's chronicle is his seventh and last, which goes into exceptional detail regarding Mendelssohn's posthumous reputation. Naturally Wagner gets mentioned, with the snide anti-Mendelssohn references which he worked into his 1850 pamphlet *Das Judentum in der Musik* (not 'der Music', as Ashgate's usually typo-free text would have it); but then Mendelssohn's background could have been Uzbek or Rastafarian instead of Jewish and Wagner would have felt equally peeved by him. A less conventional citation is the unpleasantly abusive *The Races of Men: A Fragment* (also 1850), by anatomist Robert Knox: most notorious, though Dr Eatock does not mention this, for his function as unconscious stooge of Burke and Hare, the body-snatching and murdering duo who flourished in 1820s Scotland. (Knox needed, and willingly purchased, corpses for his scientific work. Upon the killers' arrest, Edinburgh's ballad-sellers gloated: 'Burke's the butcher, Hare's the thief, / Knox the boy who buys the beef!') Knox, in the extract from his output which Dr Eatock quotes, nowhere singles out Mendelssohn for specific condemnation but it is fair to

say that he had Jews on the brain in a racial sense and that Mendelssohn's baptism can have made no difference whatever to Knox's thinking.

Dr Eatock mentions the allusions to Mendelssohn's Jewish heritage made in the late nineteenth century by Sir George Grove (who thoroughly approved of it) and Sir Charles Villiers Stanford (who equally thoroughly disapproved of it, and who in his 1917 *History of Music* – written in collaboration with the now-forgotten musicologist Cecil Forsyth – deprecated Mendelssohn's ostensibly 'perpetual and unvaried repetition of phrases and even bars: a habit which probably had its source in his Hebrew blood'). Much more celebrated than Stanford's unconvincing sneer was the earlier wrath of Stanford's arch-foe Bernard Shaw, who lambasted (with a self-aware longing to offend) what he called Mendelssohn's 'kid-glove gentility, his conventional sentimentality, and his despicable oratorio-mongering'.

Not till the whole Shavian and Lytton Stracheyish world-view – with its unquestioned, basically schoolboyish assumption that Victorian culture must ipso facto be risible – had passed into gratifying desuetude could a fairer, more conscientious, scrutiny of Mendelssohn's oeuvre take place. That it has now taken place, the recent biographies by America's R Larry Todd and Britain's Mary Allerton-North provide liberal evidence. Nevertheless, Dr Eatock's investigation (enticingly presented in a clear Times Roman font and with easily consulted footnotes) is by no means rendered redundant by those scholars. For anyone with the slightest interest in Mendelssohn's music it will be, quite simply, a must-read. One small error of nomenclature obtrudes: the engineer responsible for devising the Rocket locomotive was George Stephenson, not Robert Stephenson, as Dr Eatock (p. 2) would have us suppose. Otherwise, pure enjoyment and enrichment prevail.