

# MENDELSSOHN AND WAGNER: FRIENDLINESS, ENMITY AND OBSESSION

*A paper for the Mendelssohn Bicentenary, organised by the Society of Organists Victoria and delivered on 24 October 2009*  
by RJ Stove

Since about 1750, famous composers have found it very hard to comprehend other famous composers. The only exceptions, off-hand, that I can think of to this rule are three: Haydn's friendship with Mozart, Saint-Saëns's friendship with Fauré, and Brahms's friendship with Dvořák. Otherwise, the history of Western music is to a large extent a history of compositional giants bucketing each other.

Examples: Berlioz dismissed Handel as 'a great barrel of pork and beer.'<sup>1</sup> Mendelssohn described Berlioz's music as 'such a frightful muddle; such an incongruous mess that one feels like washing one's hands.'<sup>2</sup> Tchaikovsky referred to Brahms as 'a talentless s\*\*t.'<sup>3</sup> Brahms called Bruckner 'a poor deranged man'<sup>4</sup> and a 'swindle that will be forgotten a year or two after my death.'<sup>5</sup> Stravinsky accused Richard Strauss of being enslaved by 'bombast and rhodomontade ... useful to me only as an emetic ... Strauss does not know when or how to punctuate. His musculature is without measure.'<sup>6</sup> And so forth. One could go on for hours with similar instances.

However there is one musical relationship between composers that was much more complicated than mere admiration or mere detraction. It was the relationship between Mendelssohn and Wagner. At first the two men got on civilly enough. Later, and by a gradual process, they became estranged. Our knowledge of the estrangement is necessarily one-sided, because while Wagner wrote much about his views on Mendelssohn, Mendelssohn largely kept quiet about his views on Wagner. Thankfully, enough information has survived to enable us to determine, more or less, what took place.

To start with, it must be emphasised how successful, how gifted, and above all how popular Mendelssohn was in the 1830s, the decade of Wagner's emergence. In the 1830s, Mendelssohn was, quite simply, considered Europe's greatest and most versatile living composer. Beethoven, Schubert and Weber were dead. Schumann and Chopin remained largely unknown outside fairly small circles of admirers. Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini were specialists in opera, not all-round men at all. Liszt was already being hailed as a pianist, but there was decided critical hedging about the quality of his own pieces, as indeed, almost two hundred years after his debut, there still is. Meanwhile there seemed nothing in music that Mendelssohn could not do. Leaving aside for the moment Mendelssohn's creative mastery, he was one of Liszt's few rivals at the piano; he was one of the best organists of his time; he was in demand almost everywhere in Germany and in England as an exceptionally effective conductor.

It was Mendelssohn the conductor who primarily piqued Wagner's interest. Wagner – born in 1813 and therefore only four years younger than Mendelssohn – could not play any instrument to an adequate standard. He freely admitted this. In fact, initially, Wagner was not even a particularly efficient score-reader. Still, what he lacked in terms of native flair he made up for in prodigious study and hard work. He soon realised the truth that if he were to make a name for himself,

it would be by combining composition with conducting. Championing his own early effusions was all very well, but Wagner knew that his career path would be greatly smoothed if he could get Mendelssohn the conductor on side.

Already Wagner had composed a *Symphony in C*, which, as he afterwards confessed, contains no elements of his mature manner except boundless confidence. (It has been recorded several times, and it sounds mostly like a conscientious but dull student's imitation of Beethoven. Of authentic Wagnerian grandeur it possesses no trace.) He was only eighteen when he wrote it, but it did get performed. Leipzig, where he was born and grew up, had enough music-lovers sympathetic to his aims to ensure that his music was heard now and then. When Mendelssohn took over Leipzig's concert life – bringing to it a discipline and a perfectionism hitherto unimaginable – Wagner thought it worthwhile to send him a copy of the work. Like everyone else, Wagner had been impressed by Mendelssohn's youthful brilliance, and when he sent Mendelssohn the symphony he appended a covering note, saying that he could not wish the piece a better fate than Mendelssohn's acceptance of it.

Mendelssohn did nothing with it. He seems never even to have acknowledged receipt of it. This was rather unusual for Mendelssohn, the tireless letter-writer, who had in an extreme form the notion of possessing artistic duties towards musicians younger and less fortunate than himself. The obvious inference to be drawn from Mendelssohn's non-response is that he simply disliked the symphony and found even its very mild audacities too outrageous for his taste. Nevertheless, Wagner refused to give up on him, and their paths crossed a number of times subsequently, as Wagner was still conducting at various German cities (mostly in opera) and so was Mendelssohn (mostly in concerts).

In 1843 Wagner received the privilege of being allowed to conduct, in Dresden, a patriotic cantata about Saxony that Mendelssohn had composed to mark the unveiling of a statue of a former Saxon king. A few months earlier, Wagner attended one of Mendelssohn's own concerts in which he conducted his oratorio *St Paul*. Wagner loved it, or said he did. Later that year he told Mendelssohn in a letter that he was proud to belong to the German nation which had produced both Mendelssohn and the oratorio in question. At the same time, he was censuring Mendelssohn behind the latter's back. When Mendelssohn defended his choice of fast speeds in the conducting of Beethoven's Eighth Symphony, Wagner – who regarded Beethoven's symphonies as Holy Writ – was enraged. Mendelssohn favoured fast speeds in everything, but Wagner convinced himself that Mendelssohn only did so because he was too inept as a conductor to adopt slow speeds. Nobody else who heard Mendelssohn on the podium supposed him to be in any way inept. Quite the reverse. As music historian Harold C. Schonberg put it: 'Wagner's is the only major dissenting viewpoint about Mendelssohn's ability as a conductor, and that alone makes it suspect.'<sup>7</sup>

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By this stage Wagner had finished not only *The Flying Dutchman*, but also *Tannhäuser*. Although Mendelssohn had a soft spot for the former opera, he found the latter opera almost entirely unappealing, and said so to Wagner's face. Notwithstanding that, he agreed to conduct *Tannhäuser's* overture at a concert in 1846. It went disastrously. We still do not know exactly what occurred. Maybe the orchestral players wanted to take Wagner down a peg, and were determined to sabotage the overture. Maybe it simply exceeded their talents. Maybe Mendelssohn was so uncomfortable with it as to let his normal standards of precision lapse. Maybe he was just too sick to try hard. Whatever happened, the result was the same.

Hell hath no fury like a composer who thinks his music has been deliberately mangled by its performers. From then on, Wagner was determined to give it to Mendelssohn with both barrels. The fact that Mendelssohn's conducting appearances in England met great popular and critical acclaim, whereas Wagner's certainly did not, confirmed Wagner in his conviction that between him and Mendelssohn there could no longer be any common ground. This belief derived extra force from the way in which Wagner had already started groping, in his own output, towards what he called *Zukunftsmusik*, the German word for 'music of the future.'

A year after the *Tannhäuser* overture fiasco, Mendelssohn died, aged only thirty-eight, having run himself ragged with international touring, teaching and administration, as well as an extremely large compositional output. With Mendelssohn's death went the last incentive for Wagner to play nice. Not long afterwards, Wagner had a further excuse for bitterness: that is, the failure of Saxony's 1848-49 revolutionary uprising, in which Wagner took a fervent part, and following which he became a refugee in Switzerland. Political defeat combined with musical frustration to convince Wagner that every man's hand was against him, and that his hand had better be against every man, though not against every woman. In 1850, Wagner contrived a terrible revenge against Mendelssohn: a pamphlet, which he at first issued under a pen-name, called *Judaism in Music*.

Mendelssohn had never practised the Jewish faith, and from his childhood regarded himself as a wholehearted Lutheran. But details like these were insufficient to deter Wagner from gratuitously kicking Mendelssohn's corpse. Even he could not dispute Mendelssohn's genius entirely. Nonetheless, he believed he had to belittle it, and thus blamed Mendelssohn's failings – real or imaginary – on Jewish blood. Here is an excerpt from Wagner's attack:

'He [Mendelssohn] has shown us that a Jew may have the amplest store of specific talents, may own the finest and most varied culture, the highest and the tenderest sense of honour – yet without all these pre-eminences helping him, were it but one single time, to call forth in us that deep, that heart-searching effect which we await from Art.'<sup>8</sup>

While Wagner was at it, he denounced in the same pamphlet another musician of Jewish stock: Giacomo Meyerbeer, the German-born but French-based composer of *Les Huguenots*, *Robert le Diable*, and other operatic smash-hits. Unlike Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer never converted to Christianity.

Also unlike Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer was still living at the time of Wagner's diatribe.

It is quite evident from Wagner's complaints about Mendelssohn – complaints which I have only touched on – that Wagner's reaction to Mendelssohn was fundamentally an emotional one and, as so often with Wagner, he was trying to disguise his gut feelings as a reasoned intellectual discourse. (Confirming the lack of logic in Wagner's attitude was the reverence that he felt towards various other Jewish musicians such as opera composer Fromental Halévy, pianist Carl Tausig and conductor Hermann Levi.) The pamphlet caused a wave of outrage, especially among Mendelssohn's numerous and still influential friends. Wagner soon stopped denying that he was the author of it. Almost twenty years later he reissued it, this time under his own name and offending even more readers than he had managed to do with the first edition.

The odd thing is when Wagner finally achieved lasting success in his own right in the 1870s – once the eccentric King Ludwig II of Bavaria had solved his financial problems for him, once he had his own opera house at Bayreuth to micromanage, and once he had become undeniably the most controversial musician of his era – he simply could not let Mendelssohn's memory alone. When he composed the opening music of *Das Rheingold* (the first and shortest opera in his mighty *Ring* cycle), he produced a passage that sounds remarkably similar to one of Mendelssohn's concert overtures, *The Fair Melusine*.

That could well have been an instance of unconscious plagiarism or near-plagiarism. Anyone who has ever composed will know how frighteningly easy it is to be attracted to a particular phrase in someone else's work, to store it in one's own memory, and then to reproduce it under the impression that one invented it oneself. But no such unconscious process can explain what Wagner did, near the end of his life, when writing *Parsifal*. In *Parsifal* there repeatedly occurs a cadence – the so-called *Dresden Amen* – that Wagner knew from Mendelssohn's *Reformation Symphony*. As it happens, the cadence did not originate with Mendelssohn. He borrowed it from an obscure eighteenth-century composer called Johann Naumann. Clearly it haunted Mendelssohn's imagination, as it did Wagner's. Lo and behold, Wagner appropriated the passage for several of *Parsifal's* most solemn moments.

It has been argued, notably by the recent Wagner biographer Joachim Köhler, that Wagner wanted to 'rescue' the passage from 'hands not qualified to use it.'<sup>9</sup> But it could equally well be argued that Wagner, ill with heart disease and conscious of death's shadow, was belatedly and clumsily trying to effect a rapprochement of sorts with the man whose legacy he had calumniated. Such a rapprochement, if it was envisaged, would have been tied up with Wagner's increasing tolerance (much to Nietzsche's horror) of established religion. This theory gains strength from the diaries (not released to the public until 1974 and not translated into English till 1978) of Wagner's widow, Cosima, the daughter of Liszt.

Cosima, who survived her husband by almost half a century, notes several times that Wagner paid tribute, in conversation, to various Mendelssohn pieces, and even

encouraged his children to enjoy them. She also notes, still more surprisingly, that Wagner in his last years even had a dream about Mendelssohn. In this dream, Mendelssohn actually addressed Wagner with the intimate second-person German usage *Du*.<sup>10</sup> (When still alive, he would have called Wagner by the formal second-person German usage, *Sie*.)

In conclusion, what is one to make of all this? The jury is still out on that question. What we can readily discern from the whole affair is that Wagner and Mendelssohn rubbed each other up the wrong way to start with; that for a while they could maintain (and had to maintain) a façade of mutual courtesy; that their shared loathing of French musical life (because Mendelssohn had no more time for Meyerbeer than Wagner had) was not enough to forestall their eventual antagonism; and that nevertheless, Wagner retained a greater respect for Mendelssohn's masterpieces than his aesthetic theories – his ideology, if you like – would allow him to concede in the open.

Today, Wagner has been dead so long that, if we have any purely musical enthusiasm whatever, we can contemplate his horrid personal behaviour with a degree of detachment. After all, nobody thinks the less of Carlo Gesualdo's music on the grounds that Gesualdo murdered his wife and her lover.

Meanwhile, Mendelssohn, in 2009, the bicentenary of his birth, appears to be growing almost as popular again as he was 150 years ago, when every American town with German inhabitants had its own Mendelssohn Club and almost every piano student in Europe was expected to manage at least a few of the composer's *Songs Without Words*. In 2008,

two new books about Mendelssohn<sup>11</sup> were published to good reviews. Altogether, the relations between Wagner and Mendelssohn constitute one of the oddest tales in the history of nineteenth-century music. And yet, it is a tale which now, despite Wagner's best efforts, seems to have a more or less happy ending.

#### NOTES

1. Hector Berlioz, *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, ed. and trans. David Cairns (London, 1969), p. 546.
2. Mary Allerton-North, *Mendelssohn: The Caged Spirit* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent, 2008), p. 422.
3. Wladimir Lakond (ed.), *The Diaries of Tchaikovsky* (New York City, 1945), p. 126.
4. Peter Clive, *Brahms and His World* (Lanham, Maryland, 2006), p. 71.
5. Jan Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography* (New York City, 1998), p. 501.
6. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions and Developments* (London, 1981), p. 58.
7. Harold C. Schonberg, *The Great Conductors* (London, 1968), p. 146.
8. Milton E. Brener, *Richard Wagner and the Jews* (Jefferson, North Carolina, 2005), pp. 311-312.
9. Joachim Köhler, *Richard Wagner: The Last of the Titans*, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven, Connecticut, 2004), p. 593.
10. Alex Ross, 'The Youngest Master', *New Yorker*, 23 February 2009.
11. Allerton-North, *op. cit.*, Neil Wenborn, *Mendelssohn: His Life and Music* (London, 2008).



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