

Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Rebecca Wallace



Mendelssohn @ Menlo

by Janet Silver Ghent

He played piano before most kids his age learn to read, expanding his repertoire to include organ, violin, conducting, composing, languages and drawing. At Sunday salons, he and his sister enchanted audiences with the classics as well as their own compositions and the intellectual crème de la crème flocked to see them. He later went on to wow the crown heads of Europe.

But unlike Mozart, whose life presents curious parallels, it was once fashionable to damn Felix Mendelssohn with faint praise. Although his genius as a composer, musician and impresario is beyond dispute, his work was dismissed as saccharine, sentimental and superficial. Because his most widely known works, such as “The Wedding March” from “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” and “Spring Song,” fail to reveal the breadth of his talent, Mendelssohn has often been placed a notch or two below Bach, Beethoven and Mozart in the musical pantheon.

He “never quite succeeded in joining the elect,” write Milton Cross and David Ewen in their “Encyclopedia of the Great Composers and Their Music.”

Needless to say, Music@Menlo organizers disagree. Determined to dispel such second-rung stereotypes, the festival is celebrating the 200th anniversary of Mendelssohn’s birth with a 14-concert program that features the composer’s greatest chamber works, including the complete string quartet cycle played by the Grammy Award-winning Pacifica Quartet.



Other concerts feature piano, cello and violin compositions by Mendelssohn and his contemporaries. In addition, four musical symposia examine Mendelssohn’s talent not only as a composer and musician but as an artist and scholar.

Founded by cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han, Music@Menlo is marking its seventh year. The concert and lecture series runs from July 17 to Aug. 8, with events in Palo Alto and Menlo Park as well as at the festival home at the Menlo School campus in Atherton.

“Musically, people have a very narrow understanding of Mendelssohn,” said Edward Sweeney,

festival executive director, noting that many are not familiar with the composer’s chamber music, particularly the string quartets. Two piano trios and Mendelssohn’s Octet (composed when he was only 16) are also on the program.

“As David and Wu Han have pointed out, the choice of Mendelssohn is very appropriate for Music@Menlo,” Sweeney added. More than just a composer and instrumentalist, Mendelssohn was a painter and an educator. “Throughout his very short life (Mendelssohn died in 1847 of multiple strokes at age 38), he was interested in all the various arts and that’s why it seems particularly fitting in keeping with Music@Menlo’s longtime goal of arts education. Mendelssohn would have felt right at home at Music@Menlo.”

Enriching the musical performances, four scholars and musicians will lecture on Mendelssohn and his accomplishments, not only as a composer who straddles the period between the classicists and romanticists, but also as a painter, Bach scholar and intellectual. Among them is R. Larry Todd, whom Sweeney called “the foremost expert on Mendelssohn.” The Duke University musicology professor is the author of the award-winning “Mendelssohn: A Life in Music” and the soon-to-be released biography of his sister, “Fanny Hensel: The Other Mendelssohn” (both from Oxford University Press).

In a phone interview from North Carolina, Todd said a number of critics have dismissed Mendelssohn as outside the firma-



Trishan Cook

ment, as “moonlight with sugar water.” But “that’s sort of the old-line conventional view ... an old myth more or less exploded by Mendelssohn research in the last few years.” The conventional wisdom was that “to be a great composer you have to suffer.” Because Mendelssohn came from a wealthy family and had a happy life, he didn’t suffer enough and therefore couldn’t be great.

But “that’s nonsense,” he emphasized. “Even if we set aside his music for the moment, he was one of the incredible geniuses of all time.” In addition to his native German, he knew French, Latin and English, he was a poet and translator, a draftsman, and his “watercolors were very close to a professional level. ... His letters are prized for their literary value.”

As far as his music, much of it wasn’t even published until the 20th century, and his watercolors are not widely known. Yet Todd sees an indelible link between Mendelssohn the painter and Mendelssohn the composer. In his watercolor of Amalfi, which

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This summer, Music@Menlo commemorates the 200th anniversary of composer Felix Mendelssohn’s (left) birth. International students (above) perform during a previous Music@Menlo summer.

Three-week festival celebrates composer’s 200th birthday

Mendelssohn

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shows Roman ruins below a mountain, one can envision the opening of his "Italian" Symphony. "Music and image became enmeshed," Todd noted. "He used the orchestra the way a painter chooses a palette."

While Mendelssohn is often compared unfavorably to Beethoven and Wagner, "these are dramatic composers. We tend to forget there are other ways." Although Mendelssohn's "Elijah" Oratorio is a dramatic piece, others, like the "Hebrides" overture, reveal "suggestion and nuance. The 'Italian' Symphony is really a tone painting."

As the son of a banker, Mendelssohn did not live penniless in the proverbial garret. He led a relatively happy life until his final months. Nonetheless, he confronted problematic issues, including his identity as a German, as a Christian who was born Jewish and as the grandson of a famous Jewish theologian and philosopher. Moses Mendelssohn, his grandfather, opened up Judaism to the teachings of the Enlightenment and was widely known throughout Europe. Felix's father, Abraham, however, didn't want Judaism to become an obstacle to his children's musical careers and had them both baptized. He and his wife later converted as well. Yet unlike Abraham, who changed the family name to Bartholdy, Felix continued to use his birth name, in part because of his grandfather's fame.

Did Felix consider himself Jewish? The short answer, said Todd, is that "he became a Christian at age 7 and remained a devout Christian." He explored Old Testament themes with "Elijah" and the Psalms, and he examined a number of faiths, writing liturgical music for the Catholic and Anglican churches while remaining a Lutheran. But despite their conversions, "his family was still subjected to anti-Judaic comments." Under the Third Reich, Mendelssohn's music was banned.

His Jewish identify was inescapable, although not always a liability. In her journal, quoted in Todd's biography, Queen Victoria describes Mendelssohn as "short, dark & Jewish looking," as well as "very pleasing & modest. ... We were all filled with the greatest admiration." In his Music@Menlo talk, Todd will address the composer's Grand

Tour, which took him not only to the court of Queen Victoria, but also to Scotland. For Mendelssohn, traveling to Iona in the Hebrides, where the Scottish kings are buried, was a journey "to the edge of the universe." Not only did the rugged scenery overwhelm the composer but his musical horizons were expanded by "listening to folk music and getting Bach out of his ears." Those folk themes emerge in the "Hebrides" Overture as well as the "Scottish" Symphony.

Todd undertook his Mendelssohn study for his doctoral thesis as a challenge — his professor discouraged him. Since then, hundreds of letters, drawings and other works of the composer have been rediscovered. So have more than 400 compositions by his sister, Fanny Hensel. "I fell into it, working on it for 30 years," he said, "and it's been a wonderful experience."

Adding other dimensions to the Music@Menlo Mendelssohn experience are talks by Orli Shaham, Bruce Adolphe and Ara Guzelimian. And of course, there is the music, with performances, master classes and free Prelude Performances and Koret Young Performers Concerts during the three-week festival.

Said Sweeney: "The overall experience people will come away with is a greater understanding of the composer and the man as an artist." ■

What: The annual Music@Menlo chamber-musical festival, with concerts, lectures and programs.

Where: Events are held at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park and Menlo School in Atherton.

When: July 17 through Aug. 8. R. Larry Todd will speak at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, July 25, in Martin Family Hall at Menlo School at 50 Valparaiso Ave. in Atherton.

Cost: Ticket prices for events vary, with some activities free. The Todd lecture is \$40 general and \$20 for students.

Info: For a detailed event schedule, go to www.musicatmenlo.org. Tickets can be ordered online or by calling 650-331-0202.



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