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Mendelssohn is inspiration for festival on Peninsula

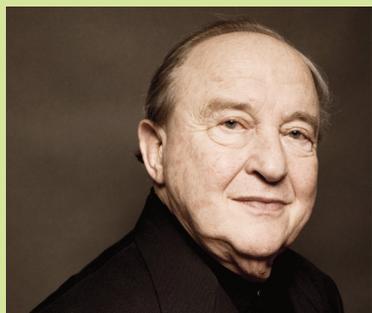
COMPOSER SEEN AS ROLE MODEL FOR MUSICIANS



McGill



Carr



Pressler



Fleezanis

By Richard Scheinen

We know him as a composer, for sure. But he was also a virtuoso pianist, a leading organist and a violinist, not to mention history's first great conductor — and the man who more or less rescued J.S. Bach from decades of popular neglect. And who founded one of the great European conservatories, in Leipzig. And who was an accomplished painter. An adventurer. A scholar of literature, theology and more.

Who are we discussing here? Felix Mendelssohn, whose example —

whose way of “being” in the world — will be the inspiration behind the seventh annual Music@Menlo festival on the Peninsula this summer, July 17-Aug. 8.

The chamber music festival — titled “Being Mendelssohn” this time around — is marking the 200th anniversary of Mendelssohn's birth by exploring his vast oeuvre in concert (performers include the Pacifica and St. Lawrence string quartets and Menahem Pressler, the iconic pianist); by hosting multimedia seminars and in-

formal conversations about this German polymath (his interest in Shakespeare and Göthe, in bees); and, basically, by holding up Mendelssohn as a human being worthy of emulation.

“We are studying his case,” says Wu Han, the pianist and one of the festival's two artistic directors, sitting in a Menlo Park restaurant one recent afternoon, a few blocks from the Menlo School in Atherton, where the festival is based.

“He writes poetry,” she waxes, slipping into the present tense as if Mendelssohn were still around, a personal friend who “speaks six languages, travels constantly and paints every day. Have you seen his paintings? They are incredible.

“And all this in a short 38 years,” she says. “He is such an example for all of us.”

“To always have that curiosity of new things,” chimes in her husband, David Finckel, the cellist and Menlo's other artistic director.

He and Wu Han give scores of performances each year, around the world in a variety of settings; Finckel is a long-standing member of the Emerson String Quartet, an eminent group.

They also co-direct the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in Manhattan, where they live, while running their own online record label, ArtistLed — and raising their daughter, 15-year-old Lilian, a pianist like her mom and a student at the festival's Chamber Music Institute for aspiring young players.

But alongside Mendelssohn, Wu Han says, “We feel like we’re totally lazy by comparison.”

This year, given the state of the economy, they are busy scrutinizing the festival’s \$1.5 million operating budget, squeezing out extravaganzas (i.e., no new banners along El Camino Real in 2009) in order to preserve the festival’s artistic mission. Last year, Menlo, which primarily relies on corporate, foundation and private funding, squeaked through with a \$54,000 surplus.

Still, this summer’s Mendelssohn immersion shows no signs of skimping.

Five core programs, stretching out over 11 performances, will showcase Mendelssohn (who lived from 1809 to 1847) alongside composers who preceded him (Bach, Mozart) and who were his contemporaries (Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Brahms).

“He is the most elegant bridge” between eras, Wu Han points out: between the bedrock of Bach and counterpoint, upon which his music rests, and extending out across the Classical period toward Romanticism.

And in the spirit of Mendelssohn, who famously supported new composers in his day, the programs will also include music of our day: György Ligeti and Pierre Jalbert.

This summer’s three dozen or so performers will include Wu Han and Finckel (each of whom will have a chance to perform with Pressler), as well as the pianists Jeffrey Kahane and Gilbert Kalish, violinists Jorja Fleezanis and Geoff Nuttall, violist Paul Neubauer, cellist Colin Carr, flutist Carol Wincenc and the astounding young clarinetist Anthony McGill, who performed for a worldwide television audience alongside Itzhak Perlman and Yo-Yo Ma at President Barack Obama’s

inauguration.

As part of Menlo’s series of “Café Conversations,” McGill will tell “the whole story of the inauguration,” Finckel says. “That way he’ll only have to tell it once, instead of a hundred times during the festival.”

Other festival highlights include a series of Carte Blanche concerts, allowing the artists to cherry-pick their dream programs.

These will feature Carr (playing eight sonatas by Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms, enough for two programs); Kahane and violinist Joseph Swensen (the Brahms sonatas for piano and violin); and Pressler (Beethoven’s A-flat major piano sonata, Op. 110, and Schubert’s B-flat major piano sonata, among their final works).

“I’m old enough to play them both,” Pressler, 85, told Wu Han, who will also join him for four-hand piano selections by Mendelssohn.

Over the course of three additional programs, the Grammy-winning Pacifica Quartet will perform the entire cycle of Mendelssohn’s string quartets. Finckel, who has recorded and performed them all with the Emerson, is enamored by these works, which, he thinks, offer the ultimate refutation of the idea that Mendelssohn is a “light” composer, a notion that bugs Finckel no end.

He mentions the A minor quartet, Op. 13, written when Mendelssohn was a teenager: “Oh, my God, the degree to which he assimilated the essence of late Beethoven at such a young age is astounding.”

And then there is his final quartet, in F minor, composed after the death of his sister Fanny (and only two months before his own demise): Its second movement is “a raging against the tragedy,” Finckel says. “For people who

know Mendelssohn only from ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ — this will open up another door for them.”

He sees Mendelssohn as a motivating example for practically anyone, but especially for young musicians, including those in the festival institute. They are growing up at a time when the economic shake-up and changing technologies have altered traditional routes to success: Forget those long-term recording contracts and a life on easy street.

“They’re going to have to carve their place in the world of the arts, to find their own way of finding a life in music,” he says.

“And the spirit of Mendelssohn is so important — being able to show these kids what was possible through music, even in the 19th century, is totally inspiring and a relevant example. Starting with making yourself an interesting person, having reverence for the great things of the past while learning something new every day. This guy embodied all that.

“Did you know he was also a gymnast?”

Music@Menlo chamber music festival Seventh season: “Being Mendelssohn”

When/where: July 17-Aug. 8 at venues in Menlo Park, Atherton and Palo Alto

Tickets: Most in the \$20-\$70 range; 650-331-0202,

www.musicatmenlo.org; student discounts available; some events, including concerts by students attending the festival’s Chamber Music Institute, are free.

**Full schedule and details:
www.musicatmenlo.org**