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# Mendelssohn and His World

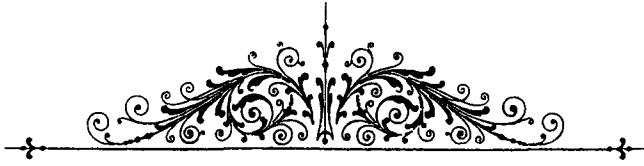
R. LARRY TODD



PRINCETON

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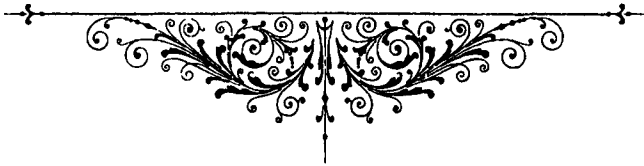




MENDELSSOHN  
AND HIS WORLD

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EDITED BY

R. LARRY TODD



PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,  
Princeton, New Jersey 08540  
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, Chichester, West Sussex

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mendelssohn and his world / edited by R. Larry Todd.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-691-09143-9 (CL) — ISBN 0-691-02715-3 (PB)

1. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Felix, 1809-1847. I. Todd, R. Larry.  
ML410.M5M47 1991 780'.92—dc20 [B] 91-16124

This book has been composed in Linotron Baskerville

Princeton University Press books are printed on acid-free paper  
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Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the  
Council on Library Resources

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Designed by Laury A. Egan

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## Preface

To speak of a twentieth-century Mendelssohn revival, Carl Dahlhaus observed as recently as 1974, would be a gross exaggeration.<sup>1</sup> At that time, Mendelssohn was still chiefly remembered as the youthful composer of the Octet and the *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture, as a facile genius whose art neither plumbed the profound depths of Beethoven's music nor adequately anticipated the mythic-poetic dimensions of Wagner's music dramas. As we approach the 150th anniversary of Mendelssohn's death (1997), the broader view continues to encourage fresh reassessments of the composer's reception: to dismiss much of his music as superficial, as overly sentimental, is actually to reinforce and perpetuate a tangled part of the Mendelssohn critical reception that became established largely in the latter part of the nineteenth century and entrenched in the first part of the twentieth.

In 1850, of course, Richard Wagner had launched a scurrilous anti-Semitic attack on Mendelssohn in his "Das Judenthum in der Musik," which first appeared anonymously in the pages of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, the journal founded in 1834 and edited, until 1845, by Mendelssohn's friend and staunch admirer, Robert Schumann. By 1875, Friedrich Niecks took up his pen to defend Mendelssohn's music; but while he extolled the composer's elevation and mastery of the fanciful as an aesthetic category, Niecks had to admit that "the serene beauty of Mendelssohn's music has to most of us not the same charm as the rugged energy, the subtle thoughtfulness and morbid world-weariness of other composers."<sup>2</sup> During the 1880s, in a reaction against Victorian mores, George Bernard Shaw decried Mendelssohn's "kid-glove gentility, his conventional sentimentality, and his despicable oratorio mongering."<sup>3</sup> And, of course, Mendelssohn's place in history suffered a final blow during the 1930s, when the Nazis destroyed his statue in Leipzig and banned his music.<sup>4</sup>

This decline in Mendelssohn's stature contrasted sharply with the esteem he actually enjoyed during his lifetime. Indeed, during the 1830s and 1840s Mendelssohn arguably stood at the forefront of musical culture in Germany and England. What is more, after his death in 1847 at the age of thirty-eight, his memory was celebrated by a kind of hero worship that expressed itself probably most ardently in

## PREFACE

Elizabeth Sheppard's fictional-historical romance *Charles Auchester*, which appeared in England in 1853 and offered a thinly veiled allusion to the idealized Mendelssohn in the character Seraphael. No doubt, too, the practice of devising fanciful titles and texts for Mendelssohn's textless *Lieder ohne Worte* (*Songs without Words*), a practice increasingly common after his death, added layer upon layer of that "conventional sentimentality" to which Shaw objected. To a large degree, this posthumous idealization of Mendelssohn encouraged a counterreaction, and so the view of Mendelssohn's music as overly sentimental—as, for example, of the *Songs without Words* as at best insipid, at worst saccharine creations, in contrast to Robert Schumann's view of them as exquisitely refined miniatures—took hold.

Now, in the closing years of the twentieth century, Mendelssohn scholarship shows healthy signs of revival. The "new image" of the composer proposed by Eric Werner in 1963 and the Mendelssohn "problem" articulated by Carl Dahlhaus in 1974 now engage the attention of numerous scholars approaching Mendelssohn's historical position from a variety of perspectives. The present volume, inspired by the Mendelssohn Music Festival held at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, in August 1991, seeks to explore various facets of the composer's life and work through several newly contributed essays, through a selection of primary sources, and through a sampling of nineteenth-century critical views.

In part I, eight essays address Mendelssohn's reception and his circle (Botstein, Little, and Reich), his critical approach to composition (Todd), and such works as the oratorio *Elijah*, the *Italian* Symphony and selected concert overtures, the anthem setting of Psalm 13, op. 96, and the music to Sophocles' *Antigone* (Staehelin, Spies, Brodbeck, and Steinberg). In part II, six relatively little known nineteenth-century memoirs of Mendelssohn provide enriched views of his activities as a composer, pianist, conductor, teacher, and man of letters. The authors include J. C. Lobe, who recorded notes of conversations he had with Mendelssohn in Leipzig; Adolf Bernhard Marx, the Berlin music critic and composer who was a close friend of Mendelssohn during the 1820s and 1830s; Julius Schubring, who prepared the librettos for Mendelssohn's oratorios *St. Paul* and *Elijah*; Charles Edward Horsley, an English musician who studied with Mendelssohn in Leipzig; F. Max Müller, the son of the poet Wilhelm Müller; and Ernst Rudorff, whose mother, Betty Pistor, was the secret dedicatée of Mendelssohn's String Quartet in E♭ major, op. 12. Of these memoirs, the pages from Ernst Rudorff's *Aus den Tagen der Romantik*, translated and edited by Nancy Reich, appear for the first time, while

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the Lobe and Marx memoirs appear here in translations by Susan Gillespie for the first time.

Mendelssohn was a prolific letter-writer whose correspondence began to be gathered into several volumes by his friends and relatives during the second part of the nineteenth century. (Regrettably, these early collections often employed uncritical editorial methods, so that they must be used with caution; a complete critical edition of Mendelssohn's letters remains a fundamental desideratum in Mendelssohn research.) Part III offers a selection of letters—here translated for the first time by Susan Gillespie—including portions of Mendelssohn's correspondence with Wilhelm von Boguslawski, who turned to Mendelssohn for advice about composition, and Aloys Fuchs, with whom Mendelssohn exchanged musical autographs. Finally, part IV contains several examples of nineteenth-century Mendelssohn criticism and reception from about 1840 to 1880, with viewpoints both pro and con. The selections from Heinrich Heine were chosen and prepared by Leon Botstein. The articles by Brendel, Jahn, and von Bülow, translated by Susan Gillespie, appear in English for the first time.

R. L. T.

MARCH 1991

## NOTES

1. *Das Problem Mendelssohn*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus (Regensburg, 1974), "Vorwort."
2. See p. 386.
3. *London Music in 1888–1889 as Heard by Corno di Bassetto (Later Known as Bernard Shaw) with Some Further Autobiographical Particulars* (London, 1937; 3d ed., 1950), pp. 68ff.
4. For a consideration of "Mendelssohn and Posterity," see Eric Werner, *Mendelssohn: A New Image of the Composer and His Age* (New York, 1963), pp. 503–23.



## Acknowledgments

Without the assistance of many individuals the present volume would not have come to full fruition. The idea for a Mendelssohn festival originated with Leon Botstein, who, with the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, founded the Bard Music Festival in 1990 as a means of exploring the music of major composers by placing it in the context of the work of their contemporaries. At Bard College, Susan Gillespie deserves a special acknowledgment: in remarkably short order, with unwavering attention to detail and characteristic stylistic grace, she rendered into English a sizeable amount of German prose. At Princeton University Press, Elizabeth Powers offered advice and encouragement at every turn and considerably smoothed the production process. I am grateful as well to members of the staff of the Press, including Lauren Oppenheim and Linda Truilo, for their expertise in the copy editing and related matters. At Duke University I owe a special debt to my research assistant, J. Michael Cooper, Mendelssohnian extraordinaire, who brought his remarkable energies to bear on the manuscript in any number of ways and diligently assisted in the often intractable editing of the nineteenth-century sources in parts II, III, and IV. Isabelle Béalance-Zank and Stephen Zank, also of Duke University, carefully proofread the volume in its later stages. Finally, we are indebted to Peter Ward Jones of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and to the Rudorff-Archiv for permission to include illustrative material and to publish for the first time the deleted materials from Ernst Rudorff's *Aus den Tagen der Romantik*, and to Voggenreiter Verlag for permission to translate Martin Staehelin's article on *Elijah*.

R. L. T.



## NOTE

As this volume went to press, word was received of the passing of Felix Gilbert, Emeritus Professor of History at Princeton, and a descendant of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. In 1975, Professor Gilbert edited a widely acclaimed volume of letters of the Mendelssohn family, *Bankiers, Künstler und Gelehrte: unveröffentlichte Briefe der Familie Mendelssohn aus dem 19. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 1975). This volume is dedicated to his memory.





**MENDELSSOHN**  
**AND HIS WORLD**





PART

· I ·

ESSAYS





# The Aesthetics of Assimilation and Affirmation: Reconstructing the Career of Felix Mendelssohn

LEON BOTSTEIN

## The Mendelssohn Problem

Since the end of World War II, attempts to restore the stature of Felix Mendelssohn and bring more of his music onto the concert stage have become increasingly frequent. Among the reasons for this phenomenon is the postwar German guilt about the Nazis who sought to desecrate Mendelssohn's memory, suppress his music, and falsify his role in history in accordance with theories concerning race and art.<sup>1</sup> The postwar reaction to the Nazi campaign was significant, considering the extent of collusion by the musicological community in these efforts.<sup>2</sup> Interest in Mendelssohn since 1945 has spurred significant research and discoveries, which in turn have helped to strengthen Mendelssohn's reputation, particularly in view of the vitality and novelty of the early musical works that have entered the repertoire.

The Nazi interpretation of Mendelssohn was not exactly novel. It culminated a long history of antipathy, particularly in Germany. Even though some contemporaries, including Schumann and Berlioz, maintained certain doubts about much of Mendelssohn's output, the anti-Mendelssohn campaign began in earnest in 1850 with the publication of Wagner's essay "Judaism in Music."<sup>3</sup> The success of the contemptuous Wagnerian view of Mendelssohn the man, his music, and its social and cultural influence was profound. Wagner's aesthetics were framed in explicit opposition to Mendelssohn. Wagner even succeeded in obscuring the extent to which he, as a composer, was indebted to Mendelssohn's musical work.

The triumph of Wagnerianism by the end of the century created a

barrier to wide-ranging appreciation of Mendelssohn's music. By the early twentieth century, much of the music had vanished from the repertory. Some—the piano music in particular—had been relegated to the category of well-written music adequate for amateur performance but lacking in profundity. The concert canon circa 1900 included a few overtures, the Third and Fourth Symphonies, the Octet, and the E-minor Violin Concerto. The programs conducted by Gustav Mahler in his career from 1870 to 1911 and performed by the Rosé Quartet in the years 1883–1932 exemplify this phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

The transformation of aesthetic taste during the second half of the nineteenth century lent Mendelssohn's music an undeserved and pejorative symbolic meaning. After the 1880s, in England, Germany, and also America, the tenets of cultural modernism were linked to a generational revolt and a rejection of middle-class conceits of culture and art.<sup>5</sup> This triggered an aversion to Mendelssohn. His music, in part because of its affectionate refinement and the relative ease of performance and comprehension, had come to signify glib amateur music making—a facile consumption of an art of optimism by educated urban classes, an art that neither questioned nor resisted the presumed smugness of bourgeois aesthetic and moral values. *Elijah* and *St. Paul* and the *Songs without Words*, for example, were viewed as emblematic of a vacuous and affirmative tradition of music making, undertaken thoughtlessly within a hypocritical and exploitative world. George Bernard Shaw's 1889 denigration of Mendelssohn as "not in the foremost rank of composers" must be seen in the context of cultural politics of an era in which George Grove's enthusiasm can be placed at the opposite end of the spectrum. Shaw decried Mendelssohn's "kid-glove gentility, his conventional sentimentality, and his despicable oratorio mongering." At Mendelssohn's best, Shaw argued, his music was merely touching, tender, and refined. Even George Grove accepted the idea that cheerfulness and the absence of any hints of "misery and sorrow" characterized Mendelssohn's achievement. After all, Grove wrote, "surely there is enough of conflict and violence in life and in art. When we want to be unhappy we can turn to others. It is well in these agitated modern days to be able to point to one perfectly balanced nature . . . whose music . . . is at once manly and refined, clever and pure, brilliant and solid."<sup>6</sup>

The failure to penetrate the surface of Mendelssohn on the part of these notable English advocates and detractors can be compared with Nietzsche's oft-cited but misconstrued comment about Mendelssohn in the eighth section of *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). With characteristic irony, Nietzsche mirrored dialectically why Mendels-

sohn "was so quickly forgotten," as well as why Mendelssohn's fate was undeserved. Nietzsche, himself an accomplished musical amateur, in his anti-Wagnerian phase recognized the dimensions of Mendelssohn's unique greatness within musical romanticism overlooked by most of Nietzsche's contemporaries. For Nietzsche, the lightness, elegance, and purity of Mendelssohn's music made him the beautiful "interlude" (*Zwischenfall*) in German music—better than Weber, early Wagner, Marschner, and others—which was why his music was so quickly honored and then so rapidly abandoned. In the same section, Nietzsche took care to link—in a positive sense—Mendelssohn with Beethoven, whom he declared had been a "passing occurrence" (*Zwischen-Begebniss*) in music history.<sup>7</sup>

Most of Mendelssohn's music, unlike that of his contemporaries (Schumann or Chopin), still fails to elicit loyalty from critics and listeners. Philip Radcliffe and Eric Werner published Mendelssohn biographies in 1954 and 1963 respectively. Although these books were overt attempts to make a new case for the composer, both writers were shockingly brutal in their criticism of much of the composer's music. They echoed the commonplace charge of sentimentality, superficiality, excessive regularity, weakness of invention, and sheer thinness. Their criticisms were applied even to such works as *St. Paul*, the D-minor Piano Concerto, and the *Lobgesang* Symphony-cantata (*Hymn of Praise*).<sup>8</sup>

It is as if the aesthetic of Wagnerian criticism, shorn of its evident political and racist content, still reigns. There is perhaps no composer in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries whose premortem reputation and popularity have undergone such difficulty in being restored postmortem.<sup>9</sup> A locus classicus of this overhang of Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian musical expectations—without a crude political agenda—are Ludwig Wittgenstein's comments on Mendelssohn. Wittgenstein's musical tastes, despite their somewhat rigid conservative antimodernisms, reflected a fine and discriminating training not untypical of the Viennese *fin de siècle*. In notes written during the 1930s, Wittgenstein remarked that for him Mendelssohn did "half rigorously" what Brahms did completely. Mendelssohn, just a "reproductive" artist, lacked the ability to write a "courageous melody." He produced no music "that is hard to understand." Mendelssohn was "like a man who is only jolly when the people he is with are jolly anyway, or like one who is only good when he is surrounded by good men; he does not have the integrity of a tree which stands firmly in its place whatever may be going on around it."<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein con-



cluded this observation with the confession "I too am like that and am attracted to being so."

Perhaps Wittgenstein (ironically, like Mendelssohn, the scion of a prominent, highly educated and wealthy family of Jewish origin) was right. If so, then an analogy between the two only heightens our need to locate Mendelssohn's greatness, as we already have that of Wittgenstein. Is the capacity to connect with one's proximate public necessarily a sign of superficiality? Perhaps the failures Wittgenstein attributed to Mendelssohn and himself are residues of Wagnerian notions, internalized by Wittgenstein and still broadly accepted as normative sixty years later.

The distinction between the individual with a fixed inner integrity (a rooted tree) and one who meets the expectations of those around him reflects the claim that in order to be great the artist is obliged to stand firmly and bravely apart from his audience somehow. Discordance between one's work and one's audience, a degree of difficulty in understanding on the part of the audience, and the derivation of inspiration from some original, individualistic source overtly out of step with the world in which one lives become, in this view, hallmarks of the creative genius.

These prejudices are in large measure the work of Wagner's self-image as expressed in his writings, particularly about himself, the public, and the significance of Beethoven in music history. That these Wagnerian views were in part hypocritical and dishonestly self-serving did not prevent their having an enormous influence on Wittgenstein's generation. The failure to grasp integrity, courage, and originality in Mendelssohn—in meanings understood perhaps in different terms from those shared by Wagner and even Brahms (who admired Mendelssohn greatly)—still represents the essence of the current obstacle to a broader and more admiring Mendelssohn reception.

Indeed, as the standard critique of Mendelssohn—echoed by Richard Hausser in his 1980 effort to show how, in *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*, Mendelssohn fell short of Goethe's text—makes plain, an overlay of musical and political interpretations that have developed since 1850, and still have not been understood adequately, must be taken apart.<sup>11</sup> This process should begin with another look at the Wagnerian critique. An analysis of the relationship of Mendelssohn's musical intentions to his Jewish identity and his social and economic position can generate new insights. Subsequent generations may have been so put off by the Biedermeier and (later) Victorian attributes of the many Mendelssohn enthusiasts that they were unable to penetrate to the power of the music. By reconstructing Mendelssohn's aesthetic, ethi-

cal, and musical ambitions—the cultural project centered on music that Mendelssohn assumed for himself—a fresh vantage point from which to hear and evaluate Mendelssohn's music may be created. The hypothesis of this essay, therefore, is that, freed of the quite arbitrary aesthetic and implicitly ideological (in the political sense) assumptions that have been applied to Mendelssohn's music since the middle of the nineteenth century, the audience at the end of our century might be able to recognize once again the invention, depth, significance, and emotional power of practically all of Mendelssohn's music.

### The Wagnerian Critique

Richard Wagner's intense lifelong preoccupation with Felix Mendelssohn was more than the result of principled aesthetic misgivings on the part of a younger man. In her diaries, Cosima Wagner documented her husband's nearly obsessive engagement with Mendelssohn.<sup>12</sup> Until the last year of his life, Wagner regularly returned to playing Mendelssohn's works on the piano to his entourage only to demonstrate their "poverty of invention" or their "Semitic excitability."<sup>13</sup> Wagner repeatedly referred to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, severely criticizing it. At the same time he remarked on the flawed but gifted painterly dimensions of some of Mendelssohn's overtures. In 1879 Wagner woke up and recounted a dream about Mendelssohn, whom "he addressed in the second person singular." As the dream progressed he found himself unable to guide a pontoon across a body of water. Cosima wrote, "no one could tell him how, and R. turned to General Moltke with a military salute; but he was a total simpleton and R. said to himself, 'What false ideas people have of him!'" A cursory analysis of this dream (much less a more ambitious psychoanalytic speculation) reveals the main themes of Wagner's obsession. Mendelssohn was the authority and the overt object of envy, with whom intimacy was sought. Help with a dangerous task (i.e., composing), however, was not forthcoming. In the dream, Wagner unmasks both his own fear of failure and his wish to reveal the fraud and illegitimacy of the reputation for excellence associated with the authority figure, who shifts from the Jew Mendelssohn to the quintessential German military hero, Moltke. Wagner's dreamwork mirrored Wagner's characteristic amalgam of musical and nationalist ambitions. As late as 1855, eight years after Mendelssohn's death, Wagner proudly described himself in a letter to Otto Wesendonck as having achieved the status of becoming Mendelssohn's "rival."<sup>14</sup>

Wagner's struggle at self-definition always possessed a link to the figure of Mendelssohn. In Wagner's first significant foray into polemics, his 1834 article "German Opera," he crudely tried to describe a new German national agenda for musical and dramatic art. Foreign influence needed to be fought. In writing this essay—as Glasenapp, his "official" biographer, noted—Wagner had already identified the enemy, the "other," as Felix Mendelssohn. From the start of his career, Wagner's conception of the new aesthetic agenda was measured, often artificially, against the example of Mendelssohn.<sup>15</sup>

Leipzig, Wagner's birthplace, which remained relatively resistant to his early attempts at recognition, was Mendelssohn's adopted home, the place where Mendelssohn created a conservatory, led the *Gewandhaus* concerts, and dominated much of the city's cultural life. In creating the narrative of his life, Wagner accused Mendelssohn alternately of slighting him and of being envious. Wagner recognized that Mendelssohn had been the most powerful man in German musical life. Wagner, one of the few who truly grasped the scale of Mendelssohn's ambitions, sought consciously to outdo Mendelssohn.

The family histories of the two men could not have been more different. Wagner lost his father early in life. Wagner's life and work reflected an ambivalent engagement with intimacy and family. In contrast, Mendelssohn was intensely close to his family, particularly to his father and his sister Fanny. Family framed his artistic and moral existence. If Wagner had little instinct for privacy and the intimate, Mendelssohn possessed it in excess. After marrying Cécile Jeanrenaud, his personal habits (externally at least) approached nearly the Biedermeier ideal: love of wife and children and a growing penchant for the pleasures of domesticity. As an adult, Mendelssohn sought to replicate the attachment to home life and the familial intimacy with which he had grown up. As many contemporary observers noted, both he in Leipzig and his father in Berlin achieved in their respective generations an enviable and widely admired model of domestic tranquility, graciousness, and bliss.<sup>16</sup> Although Wagner appeared externally to be the more complex personality, when compared to Mendelssohn, whose headaches, odd sleep patterns, and mood swings suggest a far more opaque psyche than is usually accounted for by biographers, Wagner may turn out to have been the more easily understood figure.

Mendelssohn, as all scholars have noted, was wealthy and well educated, privileged since childhood by money and all the access money could purchase. The residue of distinction accorded the Mendelssohn name since the time of his grandfather (enhanced in part by his

aunt Dorothea Schlegel) combined with the family wealth to permit Felix to study with Zelter and Heyse and to enjoy direct contact with Schleiermacher, who attended the first performance of Mendelssohn's opera *Die Hochzeit des Camacho*, and Goethe. The letters of Mendelssohn are filled with hints of the ease and the conveniences of life and travel afforded by wealth and close contact with banking families and houses all around Europe.<sup>17</sup> The circumstances of Mendelssohn's youth stood in sharp contrast to the childhood experiences of all his professional musical contemporaries. It was a source of resentment and jealousy not only for detractors but also for Schumann, who counted himself among Mendelssohn's greatest admirers.

The musical careers of Wagner and Mendelssohn presented an even more striking study in contrasts. Mendelssohn, as Wagner knew, had been second only to Mozart in terms of his childhood success as player and composer. Wagner possessed no comparable early signs of talent, as either a performer or a composer. He lacked the depth of Mendelssohn's early musical and general education. Wagner succeeded in spinning these contrasts into a coherent social and political theory of culture and history that would explain his own difficulty in achieving recognition early in life and at the same time could undermine Mendelssohn's reputation.

Mendelssohn, despite periodic criticism, felt deeply attached to the idea of a distinctly German musical culture.<sup>18</sup> He was therefore eager to see Germany politically unified. In his correspondence with Moscheles, the differences between English and German musical life were constantly referred to. Despite gratitude for the warmth of the reception the English gave him, Mendelssohn's allegiance to what he perceived as the German tradition was clear. That cultural nationalism was even more pronounced when Mendelssohn compared the musical cultures of France and Italy to that of his native Germany. When comparing Wagner's nationalism with Mendelssohn's, one must recall a fact never lost on Wagner: that Mendelssohn and his contemporaries saw Mendelssohn as the leading force in the renewal of specifically German musical culture. The regeneration of the oratorio and the revival of Bach and Handel had catapulted Mendelssohn into prominence as a cultural leader of the nation. It is that role—as well as the more narrowly musical accomplishment—that Wagner coveted and envied.

Mendelssohn's career quickly became Wagner's model. As early as 1829 (the date of the *St. Matthew Passion* performance), Mendelssohn revealed his commitment to the idea of music as part of a national cultural project. Mendelssohn sought to assume the leadership of

the Berlin Singakademie after Zelter's death. He wrote his monumental oratorios with an eye to their social use and ethical impact. Mendelssohn accepted the task of reforming Leipzig's concert life. He founded the conservatory in 1843 and, despite misgivings, accepted an appointment at the Prussian Court in order to help chart a new era in the musical culture of Berlin.

Wagner's awareness of all this was evident in the sarcasm of his references during the 1840s to "the musical religion of Felix Mendelssohn" to which Germany "gives its heart."<sup>19</sup> Despite his admiration for a performance of *St. Paul* in 1843, Wagner was consistent in his effort to distance himself from Mendelssohn's influence. Wagner heaped contempt on Mendelssohn's brand of historicism, the effort to restore the grandeur of the oratorio, and the use of baroque models, calling them "sexless opera-embryos." Wagner's competitive focus was pronounced in an 1849 sketch for the organization of a German National Theater in Dresden. Wagner suggested closing the Leipzig conservatory and folding it into his own project in Dresden.<sup>20</sup>

Wagner's own comparison of himself to Mendelssohn can also be seen in the extent to which he repeatedly made references to the inadequacies of Mendelssohn as a conductor.<sup>21</sup> As the essay "On Conducting" from 1869 revealed, Wagner's own self-definition as a conductor was cast partly in contrast to the fast and inflexible tempi and the presumed disregard for the spirit of Beethoven that Wagner associated with Mendelssohn. If Liszt presented a positive model, then Mendelssohn defined the negative.<sup>22</sup>

Wagner's obsession with Mendelssohn helps to explain his single-minded focus on the operatic form. In 1841, writing from Paris, Wagner noted that Mendelssohn was too intellectual and wanting in "passion" to write an opera. By succeeding in the theater and at the same time redefining it in a way that would undercut the aesthetic legitimacy of the genres in which Mendelssohn excelled, a double triumph could be achieved without inviting any direct comparison. By arguing a theory of artistic progress that undercut Mendelssohn's neoclassic historicism, Wagner's own failures in the traditional arenas of chamber music and choral and symphonic form could be explained.

Wagner took particular pleasure in the weakness of Mendelssohn's incidental music to the plays of Sophocles. Wagner's 1872 letter to Nietzsche contained much of the psychological and social undertone in Wagner's critique. Wagner noted that, despite Mendelssohn's superior education and knowledge of antiquity, he (Wagner) had demonstrated "more respect for the spirit of Antiquity."<sup>23</sup>

It was only in this context that Wagner could openly express any admiration (e.g., for the *Hebrides* Overture). In this oblique manner Wagner periodically alluded to the musical debt he owed to Mendelssohn. Too little work has been done to highlight how much Wagner took from Mendelssohn in terms of orchestration, choral writing, melodic figuration, length of line, dramatic gesture, and above all the rhetorical uses of the solo voice in his effort to fashion an alternative to the secular and religious impact of Mendelssohn's oratorio and choral music.

*St. Paul*, *Elijah*, and the *Lobgesang* Symphony are just three examples of works that Mendelssohn hoped would engender two related results: mass participation in music and a heightened ethical sensibility supportive of normative canons of beauty; receptivity to tradition; faith in God; tolerance; and a sense of community. Wagner's work, particularly *Lohengrin*, *Die Meistersinger*, and *Parsifal*, reflected an implicit dialogue with these objectives. Few works were as influential on the dramatic sound and rhetorical scale of early Wagner as *St. Paul*. Given the ethical and moral intent of Mendelssohn's activities, Wagner was determined to outdo Mendelssohn and replace him as the leading figure, not only of German musical culture but of the way in which music influenced the values of the German nation.

What differentiated Wagner's strategy from Mendelssohn's was the enthusiasm with which Wagner formulated the ideology of the modern, of the illusion that the new and the contemporary constituted a triumph over the dead hand of the past. Wagner's assumption of a prophetic stance on behalf of the present and future was an explicit rejection of Mendelssohn's aesthetic credo. As Mendelssohn wrote to Wilhelm Taubert, "the first obligation of any artist should be to have respect for the great men and to bow down before them . . . and not to try to extinguish the great flames, in order that his own small tallow candle can seem a little brighter."<sup>24</sup>

Schumann, Chopin, and later Brahms each shared some extramusical polemical agendas, but these agendas were relatively restricted. Mendelssohn and Wagner (and to a lesser extent Liszt and Berlioz) were convinced of the possibilities inherent in musical culture vis-à-vis society as a whole. They undertook grandiose plans as composers and performers to reform national standards and secure a place for music in the creation of a self-image for the nation. For Mendelssohn, the project was largely conservative and classicist, if not historicist, characterized by a benign and admiring focus on active music making in the home, in public, and in church.

In Wagner's case, the project became exclusive in racial and na-

tional terms, aestheticized and dependent on an audience of spectators. He focused on the vicarious experience of art and the glorification of the artist and dramatic hero as both surrogate and vehicle for the conventional religious experience. The denial of the characterized self and the resistance to dramatic illusionism evident in Mendelssohn's large-scale works reflected Mendelssohn's faith in the vitality of the official institution and practices of Christian religion. Not surprisingly, at the end of the 1880 essay "Religion and Art" Wagner artificially inserted an anecdote about Mendelssohn, not as a composer but as a political figure. According to Wagner, Mendelssohn pursued "barren aims" in the name of mankind. The barrenness was the result of a sterile historicist theology. Wagner called on the artist to base religion and art on morality and give them their proper place in order to insure the "better state of future man."<sup>25</sup>

Wagner's most elaborate open attack (despite the pseudonym Wagner used in the first edition) was the 1850 essay "Judaism in Music." Curiously, the other truly defamatory essay Wagner penned, directed at Mendelssohn and his circle—the 1869 review of Devrient's memoirs about Mendelssohn—was also published under a pseudonym.<sup>26</sup> Even at his worst, Wagner, in this display of cowardice, signaled some ambivalent sign of critical self-recognition.

The crux of Wagner's criticism in the essay on Jews was that Mendelssohn's failure was not ultimately personal. Mendelssohn's music failed to reach deep into the human heart and soul because of his own Jewishness. By framing the critique in terms of a racial and social theory, Wagner could at once praise Mendelssohn as the greatest of the Jews, undercut his influence as a celebrated and widely played composer of Protestant music in the nineteenth century, and depersonalize his attack on Mendelssohn.

The 1850 Wagnerian argument became the primary source of the claim that Mendelssohn's work was emotionally and dramatically superficial. Wagner described Mendelssohn's music as "vague" and merely allusive, evoking neither objects nor emotional experiences but mere shadows. Mendelssohn was a powerless artist. He was impotent. Only when he came close to expressing that impotence, Wagner argued, did the music begin to speak.<sup>27</sup>

The diagnosis of Mendelssohn's aesthetic impotence—linked directly to Mendelssohn's failure to write opera—became the centerpiece of Wagner's assessment of the place of the Jew in German culture. Mendelssohn, despite his assimilation, had not yet come to terms with his own incapacity for real, "organic" rooted life. He, like other Jews, could only reproduce and live as untrustworthy imitators, as frauds who, in the midst of a healthy culture, sought merely to

exploit that culture. This contrast between the rootless but wealthy, powerful, assimilated Jew and the native, poor, but rooted son of the "people," blessed with an inner security and capacity to evoke deep sentiments among his people, frames exactly the core of the Mendelssohn-Wagner contrast. It can help to illuminate the origins and significance of the way the Parsifal-Amfortas dynamic unfolds and is resolved in *Parsifal*. In *Parsifal* the music at the end of Act 1 is decidedly Mendelssohnian in both thematic material and orchestration. The drama reflects the autobiographical. Wagner (*Parsifal*) is inspired to undertake the redemptive agenda through art on behalf of the community by curing sickness and restoring purity. It is indeed ironic that at the end of his life Wagner, in *Parsifal*, not only extended musical language but brilliantly demonstrated his own mastery of the Mendelssohnian musical rhetoric of *St. Paul* and *Elijah*. In his last work Wagner reveals, both ideologically and musically, the lingering power of the image of Mendelssohn, particularly Mendelssohn's ambition to render music an ethical, cultural, and religious force. The contrast between *Parsifal*, the innocent fool, and Amfortas, the privileged son of a king, and the redemption of the latter by the former are distillations of Wagner's career and ambition.

The image of Mendelssohn was never far from the surface of Wagner's consciousness. Beckmesser may have been a satire on Hanslick, but the music was a parody not of Brahms but of Mendelssohn. Further, Wagner tried to demolish the oft-made comparison between Mozart and Mendelssohn, a comparison of which Schumann was particularly fond. Early in "Opera and Drama" (1851), Wagner took care to point out that Mendelssohn could not be compared to Mozart, despite his precociousness. He was not the "naive" artist and could never have written a great opera or great dramatic music. He failed to grasp the essential relation between speech and music, between the poetic, the dramatic, and the musical.<sup>28</sup>

The focus on power as a musical attribute in Wagner's mind—on the link between creativity and potency—explained his ambition to create the modern dramatic equivalent of Beethoven's symphonies. The Wagnerian reinterpretation of Beethoven was tacitly another means to extend the contrast with Mendelssohn. Wagner regarded Mendelssohn's symphonies as weak imitations of Beethoven's example. Wagner, in the 1849 essay "The Artwork of the Future," derided Mendelssohn's *Lobgesang* Symphony precisely in this context.<sup>29</sup> Despite Mendelssohn's overt purpose—the praise of God—the real essence of human expressiveness implicit in nature expressed in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony eluded him. For Mendelssohn, decorative melody—to Wagner, Mendelssohn's primary vehicle—although



ephemeral, seemed sufficient. Journalistic praise and financial reward in a corrupt present were forthcoming. In his own music Wagner sought to reconcile motivic coherence with a seamless extensive musical, dramatic narrative. He avoided the narrowly self-contained melodic form in which Mendelssohn excelled.

Wagner's progressive theory of art stood in stark contrast to Mendelssohn's more hesitant embrace of modernity. Yet Wagner's celebration of the future was the other side of a critique of the cultural present he shared with Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn's answer (which can be properly compared to Schumann's) to the philistine tastes he encountered during his lifetime was an aesthetic of creative restoration; a search for historic models; a backward glance tempered by a modern taste for the subjective, emotional, poetic voice of romanticism.

In 1879 Wagner published an essay in English, "The Work and Mission of My Life," in the American journal *North American Review*. As Ernest Newman suggested, Hans von Wolzogen may actually have written it.<sup>30</sup> But the essay certainly had Wagner's blessing. Wagner referred to Mendelssohn as "a member of that ubiquitous talented race." Warning Americans to be aware of their "taking the lead" in the New World, Wagner went on to recount the essential context against which his own agenda as an artist developed:

Mendelssohn undertook with his delicate hand—his exquisite special talent for a kind of musical landscape-painting—to lead the educated classes of Germany as far away from the dreaded and misunderstood extravagances of a Beethoven, and from the sublime prospect opened to national art by his later works. . . . He was the savior of music in the *salon*—and with him the concert-room, and now and then even the church, did duty as a *salon* also. Amid all the tempests of revolution he gave to his art a delicate, smooth, quiet, cool, and agreeably tranquil form that excited nobody, and had no aim but to please the modern cultivated taste, and to give it occasionally, amid the shifting and turmoil of the times, the consolation of a little pleasing and elegant entertainment. A new idea in art was developed—the embodiment in it of a graceful, good-society element, quite foreign to the nation's character and social life.<sup>31</sup>

### The Significance of Mendelssohn's Jewishness

The Wagner-Wolzogen 1879 argument was not new. Indeed, it represented an embarrassingly close paraphrase of the well-known analysis

written by Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1823–1897) in the mid-1850s. Five years after Mendelssohn's death, Riehl had noted critically that Mendelssohn "often composed like a diplomat." Mendelssohn had been unparalleled in his success with the public and with publishers. According to Riehl he "centralized the direction of musical taste in Germany" and inspired hundreds of far lesser talents to write poor music in outdated forms. Only the lyricism of the short song struck Riehl as more than just influential. It was authentic and inspired. But the core of Riehl's criticism was that Mendelssohn, who possessed "a unique social position," wrote from within "his society." He was not

the gnarled, self-contained Burgher like Bach, but a many sided, socially adept, rich, well-brought-up man, known personally throughout Germany and sought out by all circles of outstanding people. What a contrast this was to the old musicians of the last century! Therefore Mendelssohn wrote in the spirit of this educated society, which now extends across all classes, moderating their differences and facilitating communication. He made the old disciplined forms of chamber music more elegant, cleaner and distinguished; he cleaned up and restrained the aesthetic slovenliness of modern salon pieces; he sought to enliven the doctrines of the church with a heightened subjective emotionalism. One can then say that Mendelssohn's chamber and concert music, his pieces for the salon and the church can be performed equally well before selected circles of society. This represents the collapse of standards (*Nivellment*) in modern education. Were one to perform a piece of Bach's at tea time, one would profane it. But a piece of Mendelssohn's church music would not be profaned since it actually evokes and lifts the mood of tea-time society.<sup>32</sup>

Both Riehl and Wagner's characterizations pointed directly to the identification of Mendelssohn with a particular stratum in society. Within the context of the politics of the mid-century, the group with which Mendelssohn was connected was the *Grossbürgertum*—Marx's bourgeoisie. Furthermore, this group was associated more with liberalism and less with the radical new direction of German nationalism in the 1850s. They were, in short, antirevolutionary defenders and beneficiaries of the pre-March social order who, in Riehl's and Wagner's eyes, sought to falsify the past (despite an explicit respect for the historical) and prettify their surroundings and thereby deny the deeper political and social realities and national possibilities.

But it was not merely this glib social historical link between Mendelssohn's music and its success during his lifetime that both Riehl

and Wagner communicated. The underlying critique made a thinly veiled reference to Mendelssohn's status as Jew and to the Jew as exemplar of the salon bourgeois of the age. The interweaving of cultural criticism overtly based on class structure with anti-Semitic and nationalist polemic became a distinct pattern in the reception of Mendelssohn's music after his death. In Riehl's case, the framing of Mendelssohn as an apparent insider who was really foreign to the German spirit took two directions: the denial of Mendelssohn as legitimate heir (despite the historicist surface of his music) to the glorious German musical past; and the unmasking of Mendelssohn's claim to greatness as a Christian composer by stressing the nearly sinful superficiality of his religious music.

Wagner's reflections on the Jewish question and Riehl's cultural criticism from the 1840s and 1850s were contemporaneous with the writings of Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx on the same subject. The Jewish question had become a major part of the political discourse of German-speaking Europe since 1806, the date of the Prussian defeat at Jena. A new nationalism that sought to distinguish between the authentically German and the foreign began to take root. The link in the minds of many Germans between the dangers of French politics and culture and the Jewish presence was based in part on the identification of French liberalism with the emancipation of the Jews. The French Revolution and Napoleon were instrumental in the spread of religious tolerance. From 1806 to 1812, the granting of extensive civil liberties (beyond religious toleration) to Jews in German-speaking principalities was associated with French domination and influence.<sup>33</sup>

The resurgence of broad-based German anti-Semitism dates from 1806 and, later, 1819, when the "Hep Hep" riots took place in German-speaking lands. The irony in the anti-Semitism of the early nineteenth century was that it came on the heels of the promising first stage of emancipation within German-speaking regions—the golden era of Lessing, Kant, and Moses Mendelssohn. In the brief span of nearly thirty years—from the Habsburg emperor Joseph II's Edict of Toleration of 1781 to 1809, the year of Mendelssohn's birth—in most German principalities and monarchies Jews enjoyed new opportunities, and an elite of Jews achieved remarkable economic gains and social acceptance. The legendary salons of the high society of Berlin at the end of the century were one visible indication of the pace of assimilation (with and without conversion) and intermarriage.<sup>34</sup>

One consequence of the first phase of assimilation, which became apparent in the period 1806–1819, was the perception of social phenomena that ran parallel to emancipation. The transformation of

the economic system coincided, it seemed, with the entrance into Gentile life by Jews. The process of exit from the ghetto and assimilation progressed concurrently with the liberalization of economic activity and the end of the vestiges of a restrictive feudal economic order. As early as the late eighteenth century, the economic impact of toleration and Jewish emancipation—in terms of tax revenue and economic activity and its benefits for the state—had been widely discussed, but in a largely positive vein. By the time Bauer, Marx, and Wagner came to write their tracts on Jews, a negative linkage between Jews and the evils of capitalism had become commonplace—a radical transformation of earlier images of the Jew as Shylock and court financier.

Furthermore, the late-eighteenth-century expectation that most Jews would convert after being emancipated had not been realized. Rather, Jews sought—as did Moses Mendelssohn's followers (but not all his children)—to modernize Judaism and turn it into a religion of reason and humanism, into an autonomous equivalent of Protestantism. The techniques included a new movement for modern Jewish education, the making of a German-language sermon central to the ritual, and other reforms of traditional liturgical practices.<sup>35</sup>

The inflammatory, widespread, and radical linkages that the young Wagner absorbed into his anti-Semitic rhetoric were tripartite: first, of Jews and an old-style French liberalism; second, of Jews with capitalism; and third, an unreasonable and irrational refusal of Jews to accept Christianity, despite emancipation. The Jew wanted to be, still as Jew, a member of society who practiced a different religion. What was new was that in the years after 1806 the prejudice against the Jews was not limited to the character of their religious beliefs. The new national consciousness, bolstered by romanticism and theories of history formulated after the Reign of Terror in France, cast the development of language and society (e.g., Herder) in a new light. It inspired a new form of race-based national solidarity in which the Jews seemed a historically distinct race and foreign, who, despite appearances, were deemed fundamentally incapable of integration.

Given the revolutionary energies that developed after 1815, owing in part to the rapid economic and social changes in Europe, an eminently plausible and progressive anti-Semitic ideology, one that seemed to contain the promise of a better world in the future—without Jews—became dominant. Riehl's and Wagner's idealized picture of the potential new national audience for art was therefore revolutionary. (One must discount the startling gap between rhetoric and action in Wagner's case; he sought the approval of Mendelssohn's

public without restraint.) It was made up of the presumed victims of capitalism, the traditional peoples of the nation, and it excluded Jews and their cronies, the journalists.

Therefore, as Wagner recalled in 1879 (and Riehl in his characterization of Mendelssohn tacitly argued), the enemy was the assimilated Jew, not the evidently foreign ghetto Jew. The Jew who appeared to "pass" was the one who sought to prevent the development of a true and new national and social consciousness. This insidious outsider tried to camouflage himself as part of the society by assuming a place in (and ultimately controlling) the nation's cultural life. By insinuating themselves into the arts, the Jews undermined the national revolutionary potential of art through the medium of modern newspapers, and new fashion and trends.

The assimilated Jew was not only the most visible representative of capitalism. He assumed the leadership of a larger social class that sought to exploit the true historical "peoples." Jews fought to preserve political rights for themselves and all capitalists. The Jew became the symbol of both capitalism and liberalism, of possessive individualism and materialism. The cultural critique inherent in anti-Semitism—visible in Riehl—was the attack on the philistine, middle-class, self-conscious pursuit of refinement and culture. This consumption of art as entertainment sullied art and rendered it socially and morally irrelevant. The failure of the efforts, under the banner of liberalism, to unify Germany after the revolutions of 1848 only strengthened the strident critique of the 1850s. An alliance between liberalism and nationalism—which Mendelssohn himself hoped for in the late 1830s and early 1840s—was never realized.

To the new generation it seemed clear that the mission of art was to arouse the imminent possibilities for national and social regeneration evident in the "shifting" times of the 1830s and 1840s. In Wagner's view, no Jew could undertake such a task. No doubt he suspected that Mendelssohn had little use for the new nationalism. In the midst of growing antipathy between French and Germans in 1840, Mendelssohn, hardly a Francophile, refused to set patriotic verses to music: "I do not feel in the least disposed to this kind of 'patriotism,'" he wrote to Fanny.

How Jewish was Felix Mendelssohn? Doubtless, as his father wrote to him, no one with the name Mendelssohn would ever pass as anything other than a Jew. Abraham Mendelssohn, unlike his father, Moses, confronted the logic of the new anti-Semitism. The major disappointment of Abraham's generation was in 1806, when, in the heat of national fervor, an ugly anti-Semitic sentiment was expressed

within the very circles of educated individuals who had embraced earlier the ethics and politics of emancipation. Mendelssohn's father and uncle, Bartholdy, unlike Moses Mendelssohn, believed that only by disappearing as a Jew over time, through conversion, intermarriage, and name change, could anti-Semitism possibly be avoided.<sup>36</sup>

However, Mendelssohn experienced his early childhood, before the conversion in his seventh year in 1816, as a Jew. Mendelssohn's parents converted six years later. Two years thereafter, while on vacation in 1824, Mendelssohn and his sister, as Jews, were roughed up by a roving gang. Jews were visibly identifiable as Jews to many non-Jews (or so they thought) at sight. Even Zelter, Mendelssohn's beloved teacher, noted to Goethe in 1821 that it would be exceptional for the son of a Jew to become a real artist. When the Goethe-Zelter letters were published in the 1830s, Mendelssohn was hurt by this evidence of Zelter's anti-Semitism.<sup>37</sup>

Being a Jew was not something that could easily be eradicated by a name change and the adoption of a new religion, particularly when anti-Semitism was as significant a force in daily life as it was during Felix Mendelssohn's lifetime. From the vantage point of late-twentieth-century standards, Mendelssohn's behavior on the Jewish question was exemplary. He never displayed the satirical discomfort of Heine. Nor did he waver in his religious ideas and allegiances as Heine did. Heine's sardonic attitude toward Mendelssohn and his music and Heine's mockery of its religious content and refined surface prefigured much of the tone and content of later criticism, including Wagner's. Heine's critique, however, was much more about the ironies and self-deceptions of Jewish behavior than about music. His mistrust of Mendelssohn's Christian faith, his ambitions, and self-image as Jew may, however, have been misplaced.<sup>38</sup> Mendelssohn insisted, contrary to his father's wishes, on using the Mendelssohn name together with the new name Bartholdy, a clear signal of identification with his Jewish past and of his resistance to the feelings of self-doubt, shame, confusion, and embarrassment shared by many contemporary Jews. He did not seem to share his father's definition of Judaism as "antiquated, distorted, and self-defeating." He took special interest in colleagues who were Jews with whom he felt particularly comfortable, such as Moscheles and later Joachim. When he wrote home expressing his delight at the successful passage in Parliament in England of legislation extending rights to Jews, he referred to the object of the legislation as "us."<sup>39</sup> The presence of anti-Semitism—from traumatic childhood incidents,<sup>40</sup> through the prejudiced selection process in the Singakademie, to Mendelssohn's profound

regret in 1834 at having to encounter anti-Semitism in the Goethe-Zelter correspondence—was never far removed from Mendelssohn's daily life.

Mendelssohn's prominent and public commitment to and interest in the theology of Christianity and his reverent use of music to evoke Christian faith and religious sentiment reflected a quality and depth of conviction that rivaled that of J. S. Bach. However, the residue of commitments to what Mendelssohn knew to be the heritage of his forebears is evident in his music. The texts Mendelssohn selected, the prominence played by the issues of conversion and graven images (in *St. Paul*), and the attraction to the figure of Elijah are markers of the extent to which Mendelssohn devoted his artistic energy to finding bridges between Judaism and Christianity, between his childhood and his adult life. Mendelssohn may have shared his father's view that Christianity was a "purified" form of Judaism. Mendelssohn's intense attraction to older models of vocal sacred music, to the organ and the historical tradition, may well have been, as Heine suspected, the result of Mendelssohn's strength to sustain psychological certainty about his status as a Christian. However, the letters and evidence point rather to the depth of Mendelssohn's theological convictions and his faith in the rituals of common Christian worship.

The most remarkable example of Mendelssohn's residual psychological loyalty to his Jewish heritage was the secular cantata *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*. The first version was completed in 1832; the work was subsequently revised in 1843. Mendelssohn wrote to Goethe: "the more I became occupied with the task, the more important it seemed to me . . . when the old Druid offers up his sacrifice . . . there is no need of inventing music; it is already there."<sup>41</sup> As was often the case with Mendelssohn, who was among the most self-critical composers in music history, this work underwent serious revision. It was overtly a tribute to Goethe's poetry. In its final form it became one of Mendelssohn's favorite works, and it remains one of Mendelssohn's finest achievements.

As Heinz Klaus Metzger has argued, Mendelssohn transformed Goethe's Druids and pagans into Jews who refuse to convert (as did some of Mendelssohn's extended family). The final scene of the pagans defending their faith against Christian soldiers while musing on the extent to which Christians perverted the meaning of their religious ideas—although taken straight from Goethe—can be understood, in terms of its emotional lure for Mendelssohn, by its obvious analogy to the historical and contemporary plight of Jewry, particularly in the context of the new anti-Semitism of the 1830s and 1840s.

The *Allwater* of Goethe was a metaphor for Mendelssohn of the Jewish God, which Arnold Schoenberg termed a century later, in the first line of *Moses und Aron*, the “single, eternal, all present, invisible and unrepresentable God.” Mendelssohn extended the ending of the Goethe poem by placing enormous stress, and a C-major grand choral finale, on the phrase “your light, who can steal it from you?”<sup>42</sup>

This ending provides one clue to Mendelssohn’s religious philosophy. If one compares this stress on the power of faith as the light of God to the Lutheran text Mendelssohn used in a work that may have been his favorite large choral composition, the B♭-major symphony of 1840, the *Lobgesang* (also subjected to revision), one realizes that there, too, the stress is on the contrast between darkness and light, on the transformation by God’s grace and man’s faith of night into day. Music was pivotal to the public celebration of faith in the divine work of enlightenment.

The high point of the symphony occurs before the soprano-tenor duet and final chorus. The praise of the Lord expressed in those two closing sections is a direct response to the changing of night into day. The dramatic center of the work occurs in the two preceding sections, during the soprano-tenor exchange about the coming of the day and the great chorus that ensues. It highlights the departure of night and God’s “armor of light.” For Mendelssohn the advent of Protestant Christianity was itself a sign of human progress, for through it the historic religious divisions between Jew and Christian could be reconciled.

Mendelssohn was syncretic, not sectarian. His Christian faith focused on the extent to which Christianity was a universalization of Judaism. Like his father, who argued that conversion implied no essential contradiction to the essence of Judaism, Mendelssohn believed in Christian religion as the proper route to human solidarity. The claim to universalism in Christianity appealed to Mendelssohn. Faith in and the acceptance of Christ were logical fulfillments of Judaism. Christian faith, given its universalist premise, if genuinely stirred in the soul of individuals, would permit them to see God’s light: brotherly love, tolerance, and reason. Reason, for Mendelssohn, meant a resistance to superstition, which he and his father identified as characteristic of traditional Judaism.

The themes of reconciliation and brotherhood are mirrored in Mendelssohn’s attraction to two musical forms—the chorale (whose use by Mendelssohn in the oratorio form was controversial) and majestic major-key choralelike finales in his large instrumental works designed for public use (the First, Third, and Fifth Symphonies,



for example). Both imply human unity—one through common singing, simplicity, emotional power, directness, comprehensibility, and shared recognition; and the other through melodic lines and instrumental timbres that lend a discursive musical form, a clear and affirmative resolution comprehensible to even the least sophisticated listener. Mendelssohn, writing to Pastor Bauer in 1835, compared his own ambitions to the “edification” generated by Bach’s Passion music. Mendelssohn sought to renew the relationship among human beings through the merger of music and faith.<sup>43</sup>

Mendelssohn’s definition of the theatrical in public music making was therefore didactic and participatory. The fact that his music for *Antigone* (arguably, for Mendelssohn, a quasi-Christian heroine) could be performed by schools pleased him. The theatrical impact of the *Lobgesang* Symphony and *St. Paul* was defined by the extent to which the singers and the audience, through the perception of the music, shared in the ethical sensibility of community. After the completion of *St. Paul*, in his search for a text for an oratorio, Mendelssohn asked Julius Schubring in 1837 whether the subject of St. Peter could “become something equally important and deeply intimate for every member of the community.”<sup>44</sup>

Mendelssohn’s use of so-called folk material in the Third and Fourth Symphonies was executed so as to transform the local into the universal. Comparison with later examples of musical symbols of locality—Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, and Sibelius—highlights the extent to which a realistic musical particularism in Mendelssohn is subordinated to an idealized and novel conception of the formal and universal language of instrumental musical discourse.<sup>45</sup>

These ideas and ambitions hark back to Felix Mendelssohn’s grandfather, particularly the vision outlined in the 1783 tract *Jerusalem*. Felix Mendelssohn’s conversion was not, as Heine might have implied, taken cynically by Felix. Rather, he embraced it as a logical extension of the reform and modernization of Judaism begun by his grandfather. Inherent in Mendelssohn’s extension of Judaic notions through Christianity was, of course, faith in the rational character of Christian doctrine and the possibilities of realizing freedom and faith in this world through reason. Mendelssohn’s negative reaction to the authoritarian tendencies among the followers of Saint Simon in Paris in the early 1830s did not prevent him from observing that “from time to time certain ideas appear—e.g., ideas of universal brotherly love, of disbelief in hell, the devil and damnation, of the annihilation of egoism—all ideas which in our country spring from nature, and

which prevail in every part of Christendom, ideas without which I would not wish to live, but which they regard as a new invention and discovery."<sup>46</sup>

In this letter Mendelssohn brought together the varied strands of his ethical and aesthetic credo: national pride framed by a respect for universalism, brotherhood, and reason, as well as some skepticism with respect to the claims of the moderns over the ancients. As with the relationship of Judaism to Christianity and the relationship of modern music to the classical past (Bach and Handel), the task was to find new effective expression for old truths. Historicist neoclassicism in the musical aesthetics of romanticism paralleled the belief in the essential humanistic link between Judaism and Christianity.

Mendelssohn's persistent dissatisfaction with the operatic librettos he asked for and was sent was not merely the result of perceived inadequacies in diction and the musicality of subject and language. Rather, subjects such as his friend Devrient's *Hans Heiling* seemed not to offer a framework in which music could exert a moral force.<sup>47</sup> In order to do that the true musical subject had to reflect not subjective individuality but generalizable truths whose ethical and aesthetic meaning was coincident with universal applicability. Mendelssohn wrote to Devrient in 1831, "If you can come to the point of not thinking about singers, decorations and situations but rather about presenting men, nature and life, I am convinced that you will write the best opera texts that we possess."<sup>48</sup> Mendelssohn, after all, was not an admirer of Meyerbeer and French grand opera.<sup>49</sup> It was precisely this paradox, perceived by Mendelssohn, about how alluring theatrical spectacles and the higher purposes of art could be reconciled on the operatic stage that Wagner took upon himself to solve. The theater could transcend the role of providing mere fantasy and entertainment and become a moral, emotional, and political force.

Mendelssohn's ambition to achieve in music more than personal success and originality—which he termed the "depressing, flighty and evanescent" aspects of musical life—and to further a humanistic cause was expressed in a letter to his brother Paul in 1837: "So little remains after performances and festivals, and of all which surrounds the personality; people certainly shout and applaud, but it disappears again so quickly, without any trace; and still it absorbs as much of life and strength as the *better* aims, if not more. . . . I dare not withdraw, not even once, lest the cause for which I stand suffer. Yet how much I would prefer to see that the cause be seen not merely as personal, but rather as one of the good as such, or of universality itself!"<sup>50</sup>

## Language and Music: The Mendelssohnian Aesthetic

Crucial to Mendelssohn's religious convictions and musical aesthetics was his conception of the relationship between words and music. What distinguished Felix Mendelssohn's credo from that of his grandfather was Felix's confidence in the ultimate coherence of Christianity and Judaism and the logic of conversion. Felix Mendelssohn, who admired literary romanticism—Jean Paul Richter and Ossian, in particular—and grew up under the spell of Goethe, sensed that human insight and communication were not limited to linguistic exchanges. Visual aesthetic perception rivaled the power and influence of the word.

Mendelssohn was strikingly gifted in the visual arts. He was among the most visual of composers. Drawing and painting came second only to making music. The letters from Mendelssohn's youth are filled with both drawings and vivid descriptions of nature, architecture, and people. In this sense, one can compare Mendelssohn's use of the visual in his extensive correspondence, with Goethe, for whom visual perception was even more crucial to the act of knowing and understanding. Mendelssohn formed pictures in his mind and frequently retained ideas as images. As with Goethe, the process of seeing was transformative. It carried with it insights and sensibilities for which the young Mendelssohn found adequate expression only through music. His 1831 descriptions of the Roman liturgy reveal the reciprocal workings of what was seen and heard in his mental processes.

As R. Larry Todd has argued, the genesis of the *Hebrides* Overture began with Mendelssohn's making a pen-and-ink drawing. A musical sketch of the basic thematic idea bears the same date. The elaboration of the music in ways that related to Macpherson's *Fingal*—to Ossianic poetry—was itself related to the visual impetus. The poetic was mediated through the visual into the musical.<sup>51</sup> Writing Fanny in 1840 in order to query her about the "Nibelungen" as a possible opera subject, Mendelssohn asked her particularly to evaluate its visual dimensions, its "colors and characteristics."<sup>52</sup>

Wagner's characterization of Mendelssohn as a painterly composer of landscapes was well earned. However, Wagner's perception that the *Hebrides* called for a program is striking evidence of the profound divergence in the views of the two men with respect to the relation between words and music. Music, for Mendelssohn, was never writ-