

## **Saint Paul**

**Felix Mendelssohn (1809 – 1847)**

Mendelssohn was born into a wealthy and cultured Berlin family. His grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, was a renowned philosopher and his father, Abraham, was a highly successful banker. After Felix became famous Abraham would sometimes joke, '*I used to be known as the son of my father; now I am known as the father of my son!*'

Felix was a precociously gifted child, so much so that the finest musicians of the day hailed him as a second Mozart. This comparison was by no means without foundation; by the time he had reached his mid-teens Mendelssohn had composed a large number of mature works, including twelve string symphonies and his first symphony for full orchestra, written when he was only fifteen. He was sixteen when he wrote the *String Octet*, and the wonderful overture *A Midsummer Night's Dream* followed a year later. Mendelssohn's extraordinary gifts were not confined to composition; he went on to become a brilliant pianist and organist, a fine string player and an inspirational conductor. He was also a very good artist and was widely read.

Yet another dimension to Mendelssohn's glittering career was his far-reaching influence as an organiser and administrator. As a result of his tireless efforts with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and the Leipzig Conservatory, which he founded in 1843, he raised performance standards to new heights and created many opportunities for contemporary composers and performers. He made a major contribution to the revival of interest in Bach's music, which at that time was virtually unknown to the general public. In 1829, when he was still only twenty, he conducted the first public performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* since Bach's death, an event which, probably more than any other, provided the impetus for the 19<sup>th</sup> century rediscovery of Bach. He was also a great admirer of the music of Handel and Haydn, whose oratorios he conducted in Leipzig. Mendelssohn visited England many times, where he was received with adulation, feted by the press, and became a great favourite of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

In 1831 Mendelssohn was commissioned by Johann Schelble, conductor of the Cecilia Choir and Orchestra of Frankfurt, to compose an oratorio. Mendelssohn knew his Bible extremely well and invariably turned to it for inspiration when considering a new choral piece. It has been suggested that he chose the life of St Paul as a subject for his first oratorio because, like St Paul, the members of his own family were converted Jews, but this idea seems far too simplistic for a man of Mendelssohn's considerable intellect. A much more likely reason is quite simply that it offered tremendous dramatic possibilities.

Mendelssohn began work on the oratorio in March 1834. The libretto was compiled by Pastor Julius Schubring, a childhood friend whose help he regularly enlisted. When the opportunity arose, Mendelssohn was in the habit of playing his latest composition to his father Abraham, whose opinion he held in great esteem. Following Felix's visit to the family home in March 1835, his father had written a lengthy critique of the new oratorio, to which Mendelssohn responded, '*I am at a loss to understand how you, with no technical training in music, can have such acute musical judgement*'. Evidently Abraham had unerringly identified weaknesses in *St Paul* that the composer himself had overlooked. And so, when Abraham died suddenly in November 1835, the oratorio assumed an added significance, becoming Mendelssohn's musical tribute to his revered father.

The first performance on May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1836 took place not in Frankfurt as intended, since Schelble was seriously ill, but at the Lower Rhine Music Festival in Düsseldorf. Its first performance in England was given in Liverpool in October 1836, and the following year Mendelssohn himself conducted it at the Birmingham Festival, to enthusiastic acclaim. He enjoyed an even greater triumph ten years later, when *Elijah* received its first performance at the same Festival.

Given Mendelssohn's high regard for the choral masterpieces of Bach, Handel and Haydn, it is no surprise to find that *St Paul* is modelled on similar lines, with an integrated scheme of recitatives, arias and choruses. His use of chorales to demarcate important points in the story and to reflect on the action is clearly influenced by the Passion music of Bach. One of Bach's favourite chorales, 'Wachet auf' (Sleepers, wake), is heard at the very beginning of the overture and later on in the chorus. Handel's influence is also evident in the dramatic use of the chorus, which at times is central to the action, as for instance when the outraged mob calls for Paul to be killed, whilst at other times it provides appropriate commentary on the unfolding events. Of

course, the work is full of Mendelssohn's own innovations, the most striking of which is his use of a four-part chorus of women's voices – used only once in the whole piece – to represent the voice from heaven, 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?'

The text of the oratorio is based very largely on the Acts of the Apostles. After a lengthy overture, Part I opens with the martyrdom of Stephen and Saul's persecution of the Christians. This is followed by the conversion of Paul, his baptism and ordination as a minister by Ananias. Part II finds Paul and Barnabas becoming the ambassadors of the Church. Their duet is followed by one of the oratorio's best-loved choruses, 'How lovely are the messengers'. We then hear of the Jews' attempted entrapment of Paul and the miraculous healing at Lystra of a crippled man. The work ends with Paul leaving his church at Ephesus and sailing for Jerusalem, and new challenges.

During the austere post-war period there was a considerable reaction against Mendelssohn's music. To what extent this was an after-effect of the rampant German anti-Semitism of the 1930s and 40s is difficult to determine, but the generally held view, particularly in some sections of the musical establishment, was that his life had been too easy and too comfortable, and that as a consequence his music, with its classical elegance and understated emotion, was superficial and distinctly inferior. Thankfully, in recent years there has been a more balanced attitude to Mendelssohn, avoiding both the excessive adulation which surrounded him during his lifetime and the equally absurd denigration that he suffered later. Nevertheless, for many years *St Paul* was rarely heard, and only quite recently has it begun to re-appear in the repertoire. Another reason for its neglect is its length; when given in full it extends to well over two hours. Yet there is much to admire in the work's classical elegance, its romantic lyricism and the clarity of its superb orchestration. Mendelssohn handles the musical forces at his disposal with consummate mastery, so that soloists, chorus and orchestra all have an equally vital part to play in this wonderfully dramatic account of the life of the great apostle.

*programme notes by John Bawden*

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