

A BICENTENNIAL BIRTHDAY

Felix Mendelssohn: Schiller's Aesthetic Soul

by David Shavin

On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the birth of the Classical composer Felix Mendelssohn, nearly every commemorative article will emit the obligatory characterization, “gentlemanly”—almost as a Pavlovian reflex. However, one might as well praise Martin Luther King, for example, for “speaking like a white man.” It misses the point—and in a rather ugly fashion.

This damning praise of Mendelssohn originated with Richard Wagner’s infamous 1850 article, “Jewishness in Music”—his anonymous attack on the recently deceased Mendelssohn. The English-speaking world would get a version of this from the Wagnerite, George Bernard Shaw. Perhaps, no better honor for Mendelssohn’s 200th birthday could be imagined, than to expunge the besmirching of his name by these white-gloved Nazis.

Felix Mendelssohn was not “gentlemanly”—he was *civilized*. He was perhaps the best example of that which Friedrich Schiller had fought for: a beautiful soul, aesthetically educated. It would enrage Wagner, but Mendelssohn’s music was both elevated and passionate. Felix painted masterfully; he read his Plato in the original Greek; he acted in plays (Shakespeare, being his favorite); he treated his fellow humans with the same grace with which his music was showered; and, reportedly, he could swim faster than any of his peers. Felix shared with Edgar Allan Poe and Abraham Lincoln, his

two bicentennial birthday mates,¹ the quintessentially “American” quality of a human who draws upon the strengths of his heritage, without being defined by that heritage.

His grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, had risen out of a ghetto to revive Germany’s greatest thinker, Gottfried Leibniz, and (with his collaborator Gotthold Lessing) to breathe depth, irony, and humor into the German language. But frequently overlooked, is Felix’s mother, Lea Salomon, the granddaughter of Moses Mendelssohn’s good friend Daniel Itzig. Lea wrote of her grandfather’s garden, where she grew up: “. . . [H]ere I learned to understand and appreciate the advocates of liberty, justice, and truth; and I even fancy that the weak notes my unskilled fingers produce are here more melodious and pure.”

Several Itzig daughters, including Lea’s mother and two of her aunts, were prominent defenders and promoters of J.S. Bach’s works. Lea herself was raised on Bach’s “Well-Tempered Clavier”—even describing her own first-born infant as having “Bach-fugue fingers.” But Lea was also, at age 22, an astute admirer of Schiller. Writing to a friend, who had objected to Schiller’s “Piccolomini,” from the *Wallenstein* trilogy, she retorted: “According to my imperfect notions, it is a masterpiece. The abundance of thought, the charm of ex-

1. For coverage of Lincoln’s Bicentennial, see *EIR*, Jan. 9, 2009; for Poe’s 200th birthday, see *EIR*, Jan. 16, 2009.



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Felix Mendelssohn shares his birthday bicentennial with the American poet and patriot Edgar Allan Poe, and with our greatest President, Abraham Lincoln; he also shares with them, a quintessentially “American” quality: that of drawing upon the strengths of his heritage, without being defined by that heritage.

pression, the noble simplicity and poetical beauty, added to the interesting subject, will not be equaled nor even imitated for a long time. . . . Thekla. . . . This sublime, heavenly character. . . ! You could not resist this angel of light and human greatness!” Or, again: “Pray do not give me the [public] as an authority against the merits of ‘Wallenstein.’ . . . [I]f [Schiller’s] hero is powerless against his fate, it is in consequence of his own superstition, which lets him see the approaching catastrophe only when it is too late.”

If Felix’s optimism, beauty, and grace reflect an aesthetically educated soul, then Lea must be given more than a little credit for having passionately taken Schiller into her heart. Lea raised her four children on Bach and Schiller. Or, as Sebastian Hensel (Lea’s grandchild) de-

scribed her four children: The “grandchildren of Moses Mendelssohn were well acquainted with Lessing’s writings,” along with those of Goethe, but those of Schiller were “ever present to their minds.”

Missionaries for Bach

Felix and his older sister Fanny, she of the Bach-fugue fingers, were missionaries, even as teenagers, for the scientific art of Bach, especially as developed by Beethoven. At 13, Fanny played the “Well-Tempered Clavier,” by heart, “as a surprise for her father.” By the time Felix was 13, he was educating the poet Goethe on Beethoven’s music. At 16, Felix visited Paris, and wrote to Fanny about the lack of musical culture there: “You say I should try and convert the people here, and teach Onslow and Reicha to love Beethoven and Sebastian Bach. That is just what I am endeavoring to do. But remember, my dear child, that these people do not know a single note of *Fidelio*, and believe Bach to be a mere old-fashioned wig stuffed with learning. . . . I played the organ preludes in E minor and B minor. My audience pronounced them both ‘wonderfully pretty,’ and one of them remarked that the beginning of the prelude in A minor was very much like a favorite duet in an opera by Monsigny. Anybody might have knocked me down with a feather.”

A few months later, Felix presented Fanny, for her 20th birthday, with Beethoven’s notoriously challenging “Hammerklavier” Sonata (Opus 106). One can glimpse from their private humor how they viewed their too lonely task. Felix composed a letter to accompany his gift, writing as if it were Beethoven addressing Fanny: “Most respected young lady! News of the service you have done me has redounded as far as Vienna. . . . When I encounter people who embrace this music of mine, and thus the utmost secrets of my soul; when such persons treat the solitary old man I am in a friendly manner, they render me a service for which I am most grateful. Such people are my true friends. . . . On account of this friendship I am taking the liberty of sending you my Sonata in B-flat Major Opus 106, for your birthday, with my sincere congratulations. I did not create it to throw dust in people’s eyes: play it only when you have sufficient time, for it needs time, it is not one of the shortest!—but I had much to say. . . . Moreover, it is a particular pleasure for me to offer a sonata written not for pianoforte [the Italian term for the instrument], but for the Hammerklavier [the German term that Beethoven insisted upon using] to a lady as German

as you have been described to me.”

It was a completely natural outgrowth for the two Mendelssohn siblings that developing the powers of mind and of beauty was a process integral to developing the culture and the nation as a whole. The two were quite sure that they recognized in Beethoven the same intelligent patriotism. In 1827, when Beethoven died at age 56, Felix’s mature reflections can be heard in his first string quartet (Opus 13)—based on an intense study of Beethoven’s late string quartets. The remarkable fugal treatment in the “Adagio non lento” by the 18-year-old is all Bach, but heard through ears cultivated by Beethoven.

Fanny’s son, Sebastian Hensel, would describe the situation: “The profound masterpieces Bach and Beethoven had bequeathed to posterity were a treasure hardly known at the time [1828]. Only just then, the most intelligent musical people began to comprehend that something must be done to bring this treasure [Bach’s “St. Matthew Passion”] to daylight, and that this was, in a musical point of view, the greatest task of the period. . . . Felix has devoted to it, alongside of his own compositions, a life-long, earnest, and conscientious pursuit, and the fact that Bach and Beethoven are now [1869] known and appreciated by the German nation is in a great degree his merit.”

Bach: Intellect or Passion?

The centenary of Bach’s “St. Matthew Passion” would occur in 1829; it was also the centenary year of the birth of both Felix’s grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, and of his colleague, Lessing. In 1828, the 19-year-old Felix, along with Fanny, spent Saturdays rehearsing a group of their friends to become the core of the revival of Bach’s work. In April, in the midst of this project, Felix also composed and conducted a 75-minute Grand Cantata, for the 300th anniversary of the death of the great German artist, Albrecht Dürer. Then, Alexander von Humboldt commissioned Felix to compose a cantata for the scientific congress in Berlin, in September of that same year.

Humboldt was a regular visitor to the Mendelssohn household, and Felix’s father Abraham set up in their garden a non-ferrous laboratory for magnetic measurements, part of the famous Gauss-Humboldt project to map the geomagnetic world. Over 40 years earlier, Humboldt, his brother, Wilhelm, and Abraham’s brother, Joseph, had studied Leibniz at the feet of Moses Mendelssohn—studies written up as *Morgenstunden*.

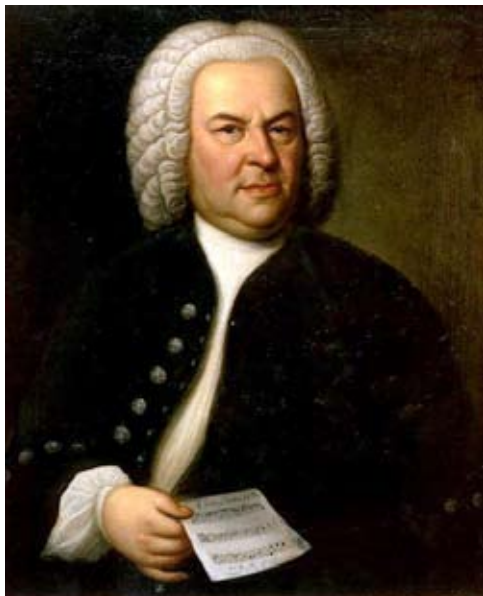
(Abraham, who was only nine years old at the time, was absent.) Now, Felix attended Humboldt’s lectures on physical geography at the university, Fanny was also able to hear them at “a second course of lectures in the hall of the Singakademie, attended by everybody who lays any claim to good breeding and fashion, from the king and the whole court, ministers, generals, officers, artists, authors . . . students, and ladies, down to your unworthy correspondent. . . . [T]he lectures are very interesting indeed. Gentlemen may laugh as much as they like, but it is delightful that we too have the opportunity given us of listening to clever men. We fully enjoy this happiness. . . . [W]e are hearing another course of lectures . . . about experimental physics. These lectures are likewise attended by ladies chiefly.”

Fanny summarized her brother’s progress at the end of his busy 19th year, just before his revolutionary performance of Bach’s “St. Matthew Passion”—as she watched her brother and student move beyond her:

“On the whole, I feel no doubt that with every new work, he makes an advance in clearness and depth. His ideas take more and more a fixed direction, and he steadily advances towards the aim he has set himself, and of which he is clearly conscious. I know not how to define this aim . . . perhaps also because I can only watch his progress with loving eyes, and not on the wings of thought lead the way and foresee his aim. He has full command over all his talents, and, day by day, enlarges his domain, ruling like a general over all the means of development art can offer him.”

And then, the famous March 1829 performances of Bach’s “St Matthew Passion,” led by Felix—again related by Fanny:

“What used to appear to us as a dream, to be realized in far-off future times, has now become real. . . . The people were astonished, stared, admired, and when, after a few weeks, the rehearsals [of Felix’s handful of friends grew to rehearsals of the full Singakademie, and rehearsals of hundreds] in the Academy itself commenced, their faces became *very* long with surprise at the existence of such a work, about which they, the members of the Berlin Academy, knew nothing. After having got over their astonishment, they began to study with true, warm interest. The thing itself, the novelty and originality of the form, took hold of them, the subject was universally comprehensible and engaging, and [Felix’s actor friend, Eduard] Devrient sang the recitatives most beautifully. The genial spirit and enthusiasm evinced by all the singers during the very first rehears-



Mendelssohn's mother, Lea Solomon, the granddaughter of Moses Mendelssohn, gave her four children an aesthetical education, based on Bach and Schiller. Clockwise from top left: Johann Sebastian Bach, Moses Mendelssohn, Friedrich Schiller.

als, and which each new rehearsal kindled to ever-increasing love and ardor; the delight and surprise created by each new element—the solos, the orchestra, Felix's splendid interpretation and his accompanying the first rehearsals at the piano from beginning to end *by heart*, all these were moments never to be forgotten. . . . And now, the members of the academy themselves spread such a favorable report about the music, and such a general and vivid interest was created in all classes, that on the very day after the first advertisement of the concert, all the tickets were taken, and during the latter days upwards of a thousand people applied in vain."

At the performance, where Fanny sang alto:

"I sat at the corner, where I could see Felix very well, and had gathered the strongest alto voices around me. The choruses were sung with a fire, a striking

power, and also with a touching delicacy and softness the like of which I have never heard, except at the second concert, when they surpassed themselves. . . . The room was crowded, and had all the air of a church: the deepest quiet and most solemn devotion pervaded the whole, only now and then involuntary utterances of intense emotion were heard. What is so often erroneously maintained of such like undertakings, truly and fully applies to this one, that a peculiar spirit and general higher interest pervaded the concert, that everybody did his duty to the best of his powers, and many did more."

Indeed, as Schiller might have said, they had surpassed their destiny.

This revival of Bach and of the Singakademie should have led to the choice of Felix to become its new leader. He had had to challenge and fight for this revolutionary new direction for the Singakademie just to perform the Bach "Passion." The rejection of Felix, and the choice of a relative mediocrity, must have struck him as an ugly sign of an irrational immaturity still in the culture—whether it be called anti-Semitism or a fear of progress and happiness is not the issue. Felix noted the ugliness and retrenched for a longer fight.

Jew or Christian?

It should be mentioned at this point that the tired canard—"Did the Mendelssohns betray their heritage by conversion to Christianity?"—is yet another ugly piece of misdirection. In fact, they represented the best of both religions. Moses Mendelssohn remained a shining example of Judaism, at a time that he judged it was no impediment to bringing an "American Revolution" process to Europe. (See his 1783 *Jerusalem*.) After the medievalist reaction of the 1815 Congress of Vienna, and, in particular, the 1819 Carlsbad Decrees, new barriers were erected against a Jew functioning as an actual citizen, including the practice of most professions. The ten-year-old Felix was even subjected to vile epithets accompanied by spitting.

Abraham Mendelssohn was clear to his daughter, Fanny, in explaining why he remained Jewish, while he chose to have his children baptized. In 1819, he provided this Socratic advice to his 13-year-old daughter: "There are in all religions only one God, one virtue, one

truth, one happiness. You will find all this, if you follow the voice of your heart; live so that it be ever in harmony with the voice of your reason.” The next year, he wrote to Fanny upon her confirmation:

“I know that there exists in me and in you and in all human beings an everlasting inclination towards all that is good, true, and right, and a conscience which warns and guides us when we go astray. I know it, I believe it, I live in this faith, and this is my religion. This I could not teach you, and nobody can learn it; but everybody has it who does not intentionally and knowingly cast it away.

“We have educated you and your brothers and sister in the Christian faith, because it is the creed of most civilized people, and contains nothing that can lead you away from what is good, and much that guides you to love, obedience, tolerance, and resignation, even if it offered nothing but the example of its Founder, understood by so few, and followed by still fewer.”

You have the “name of a Christian,” Abraham wrote to Fanny. “Now be what your duty as a human being demands of you, true, faithful, good ... and you will gain the highest happiness that is to be found on earth, harmony and contentedness with yourself.”

What did his children understand of their new religion? Fanny explains to Felix: “My favorite motet, ‘Gottes Zeit’ [the Leibnizian ‘God’s time is the very best time’].... Ah! How it makes a person feel good again! I know no preacher who is more insistent than old Bach, especially when he ascends the pulpit in an aria and holds on to his theme until he has utterly moved, or edified and convinced his congregation.” Anyone wishing to further evaluate whether his children took his advice to heart can explore Felix’s “St. Paul” or “Elijah” oratorios.

The point is that there is much heat and little light coming from the reductionist rants on both sides of the religious divide. The Mendelssohns’ methods and accomplishments do not truthfully allow for such reductionist assaults. However, the “Jew vs. Christian” word-strife (as Moses Mendelssohn loved to call such episodes) was replayed and amplified by Richard Wagner two years after Felix’s death.

Mendelssohns and Schumanns

Felix Mendelssohn was 20 when he left his Berlin home. In his remaining 18 years, he repeatedly turned to Bach as the richest vein of truth to make German culture flourish; to make a German nation possible.



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Felix Mendelssohn and his older sister and soulmate Fanny were missionaries for the scientific art of Bach and Beethoven. Fanny hosted Sunday musikabends for their circle of young musical friends, like the Robert and Clara Schumann.

More and more, over those years, a deep collaboration developed with Clara Wieck and her future husband, Robert Schumann. Felix knew each of them well before they became a couple. In Leipzig, in 1835, Felix and Clara performed Bach’s “Triple Concerto” (along with Ignaz Moscheles)—a concert attended by Felix’s new brother-in-law, the mathematics genius Lejeune Dirichlet. A few weeks later, Felix heard Clara perform his “B-minor Capriccio,” which he “liked ... very well.”

In 1837, Felix reports to Fanny that he is dining at the same hotel as Robert Schumann, and he “is quite enthusiastic about” Fanny’s lieder compositions. In 1843, after the marriage of Clara and Robert, Clara joined Felix for the season premiere concert at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, where they performed Robert’s “Variations for Two Pianos.” (On the same program, Felix accompanied his 13-year-old student, the violinist Joseph Joachim, who had been trained by Beethoven’s violinist, Josef Bohm.)

And, finally, the Schumanns made an extensive visit to Berlin, where Clara joined Fanny in her Sunday musicales. Clara wanted to move to Berlin, in part to work with Fanny. “Fanny Hensel’s interpretive skills im-

pressed me even more than the great voices I heard at her house [alluding to Henriette Sontag and Pauline Viardot]. . . . The spirit of a work was grasped in its most intimate texture, pouring forth to fill the souls of listeners and singers alike. A *sforzando* from her little finger would flash across our souls like an electric discharge.”

Schumann enrolled Felix into his *Davidsbündler* (League of David), a fictional music society, as the character “Felix Meritus.” And in his private diaries, Schumann noted of Felix: “His judgments in musical matters—especially on composition—the most trenchant imaginable, go straight to the innermost core.—He instantly and everywhere recognized flaws and their cause. . . . I always considered his praise the highest—he was the highest authority, the court of last appeal. . . . The exaltation of associating with him. . . . It was as if every day he had been born anew. . . .”

Reaction to Mendelssohn and Schumann: Hegelian Racism

Given this brief sketch, what should we make of the 1845 attack, “Robert Schumann mit Rücksicht auf Mendelssohn-Bartholdy und die Entwicklung der modernen Tonkunst überhaupt” (Robert Schumann with regard to Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and the development of modern musical art as a whole), by one Franz Brendel? This proud Hegelian opposes the “formalist” Mendelssohn, too bound to Bach, against the “free spirit” of Schumann who had truly “deep inner feeling.” (Brendel may have been echoing a line from Wagner. Two years earlier, at a festival where both Wagner and Mendelssohn had offered compositions, Wagner had bragged that my “simple, heartfelt composition had entirely eclipsed the complex artificialities of Mendelssohn.”)

Brendel’s argument: Mendelssohn was a talented artificer with no inner soul. He was a “representative of Classicism in our time,” and so an anachronism, in violation of the new Hegelian age. He achieves “the goals of a bygone age, along with the polemic—expressed most particularly through his creations themselves—against purely romantic music . . . and against artistic tendencies themselves when they serve as an expression of the progressive movements of history. . . . [W]e are also justified in criticizing his lack of modern sensibilities. . . . Mendelssohn creates a stronger impression of the Classical and the perfect, in somewhat the same way as has been observed in the cases of Goethe and Schiller. . . . [H]e is the representative of the Classical in



A deep collaboration developed between Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn, and Robert and Clara Schumann (shown here), both in their love for Bach and Beethoven, and in their fight against the Hegelian nazism of Liszt and Wagner.

the present day, and thus not an expression of the character of the whole period, least of all its future striving.”

After Mendelssohn’s death, this same Brendel would publish Wagner’s continuation of this theme (“Das Judenthum in der Musik,” Jewishness in Music), under an alias, “K. Freigedank” (“K. Freethinker”).

There certainly are differences between Mendelssohn and Schumann, but they completely agreed about Wagner. After both examined “Tannhauser,” Schumann summed up: “[H]e is really incapable of conceiving and writing four beautiful bars, indeed, hardly [any] good ones in succession. . . . What lasting good can come of it?”

Wagner’s Puppetmaster

Richard Wagner was likely recruited to his role by the sophisticated Franz Liszt. In March 1848, Liszt visited Wagner in Dresden. Later that morning, Liszt, quite full of himself, demanded of Clara [Schumann] that she arrange a party for Liszt that very evening, and that he

wanted to hear Schumann's works. Clara hurriedly pulled together performances of Beethoven and Schumann piano trios and quartets. Wagner arrived an hour late, missing the Beethoven completely, and then commented that Schumann's work is "a bit Leipzig-like"—meaning, too much like Mendelssohn. According to Clara, after the meal, Liszt went to the piano, "and proceeded to play so abominably that I felt utterly ashamed at having to stay and listen...."

Even though Liszt must have known that Schumann had been a pallbearer at Mendelssohn's funeral, a mere four months earlier, he proceeded to attack Mendelssohn as not being up to the composer Meyerbeer. Robert Schumann, a quiet observer up to this point, burst out: "Meyerbeer is a nonentity compared with Mendelssohn! Mendelssohn's influence has been felt over the whole world, and you would do better to hold your tongue!" Then he stormed out. (Liszt's insult wasn't really in the not-credible comparison, but in the insinuation that one should only compare Jews with Jews, Meyerbeer having also been Jewish.) Liszt, seeing no support for his views among those in the room, took his leave, telling Clara that her husband was the only man in the world whom he would allow to treat him in such a manner.

The Schumanns weren't impressed by Liszt's playing or by his attacks upon Mendelssohn. Three years later, they heard Liszt perform in Dusseldorf. Clara wrote: "He played with a demonic brilliance, as always, with a mastery like that of the devil himself. (I can think of no better way of putting it.) But oh, what terrible compositions! If a youngster were to write such stuff, one could forgive him on account of age, but what can one say when a full-grown man is so deluded? We both felt very sad—it is so depressing. Liszt himself seemed offended that we did not say anything, but how can one, when one feels so angry?"

The famous Sanskrit scholar, Max Müller, witnessed a telling confrontation between Liszt and Mendelssohn years earlier. Liszt had attempted to take over a Mendelssohn event. "Liszt appeared in his Hungarian cos-



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Richard Wagner's (right) anti-Semitic attacks on Mendelssohn were likely orchestrated by the sophisticated Franz Liszt (left). Clara Schumann wrote of Liszt, "He played with a demonic brilliance, as always, with a mastery like that of the devil himself.... But oh, what terrible compositions!"

tume, wild and magnificent...." He played a Hungarian melody with three or four wild variations, and then pushed Felix to play. Felix said, "Well, I'll play, but you must promise me not to be angry." He proceeded to repeat, from memory, Liszt's whole performance—even "slightly imitating Liszt's movements and raptures." Perhaps Liszt—as Anytus with Socrates—had trouble keeping his promise not to be angry.

Regardless, in 1849, Wagner showed up at the Weimar castle of Liszt's paramour and financial patron, Countess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein. Wagner was on the run from the law, for his activities in the street demonstrations in Dresden. Liszt and the Countess would play a major role in Wagner's financial support and activities during the next several years of flight. From Paris, in 1850, Wagner submitted to Brendel his attack on Mendelssohn.

Wagner dismisses Mendelssohn as "sweet and tinkling, without depth": "So long as the separate art of music had a real organic life-need in it... there was nowhere to be found a Jewish composer.... Only when a body's inner death is manifest, do outside elements win the power of lodgement in it—yet merely to destroy it. Then, indeed, that body's flesh dissolves into a swarming colony of insect life: but who in looking on that

body's self, would hold it still for living?"

Then, finally, a special poison reserved for "us Germans": Wagner says that his essay was written to "explain to ourselves our involuntary repulsion by the nature and personality of the Jews, so as to vindicate that instinctive dislike which we plainly recognize as stronger and more overpowering than our conscious zeal to rid ourselves thereof." That is, we may feel twinges of a conscience, but it is right that the inner beast emerge, to crush such a weak moral impulse.

Who manipulated this beastman? A bit of their dialogue provides the answer:

Wagner to Liszt: "Whatever my passions demand of me, I become for the time being—musician, poet, director, author, lecturer, or anything else."

Liszt: "Be careful in your articles in the newspapers to omit all political allusions to Germany, and leave royal princes alone. In case there should be an opportunity of paying Weimar a modest compliment *en passant*, give free vent to your reminiscences with the necessary kid gloves." (July 29, 1849)

Wagner: "I herewith send you my last finished work; it is a new version of the original article.... Whether you will be pleased with it I do not know, but I feel certain that your nature is at one with me. I hope you will find in it nothing of the political commonplaces, socialistic balderdash, or personal animosities, against which you warned me.... Whether you ought to show [the Countess] my manuscript I am not quite certain; in it, I am so much of a Greek [read "pagan"] that I have not been able quite to convert myself to Christianity. But what nonsense I talk! As if you were not the right people!" (Aug. 4, 1849)

Poe, Mendelssohn, and Lincoln

Fanny died at age 42, in May 1847, after having suffered a cerebral hemorrhage at the keyboard, rehearsing for another of her Sunday *musikabends*. Felix received the news returning from a concert trip to London, and was crushed. His life-long soulmate was ripped from this world. Felix's stroke followed within five months, his death within six—at the age of 38. As Max Müller testified: "With her [Fanny] he could speak and exchange whatever was uppermost or deepest in his heart. I have heard them extemporize together on the piano-forte, one holding with his little finger the finger of the other." Felix composed for his sister's memory, that last Summer, his last string quartet, Opus 81—a work with the passion and nobility of a human who took his mor-

tality seriously. Robert Schumann wrote in his diary, about the smile of the deceased Felix: "He looked ... like a warrior of God who had conquered."

In conclusion, Martin Luther King didn't "talk like a white man"—rather, he grasped Shelley's "impassioned truths with respect to man and nature," more powerfully than thousands of English professors. Felix Mendelssohn did not "tickle the ivories," or entertain with gentlemanly parlor music—rather, he was the best of German culture, of Schiller's aesthetically educated citizens; and his closest musical associates, the Schumanns and young Joseph Joachim, would respond to the Liszt-Wagner ugliness and recruit a new young genius, Johannes Brahms, into their effort to master Bach and Beethoven.

Years later, Joachim would relate that Brahms had been "quite enraptured" reading *The Mendelssohn Family* by Fanny's son, Sebastian. Brahms' summary: "Those are magnificent people, with whom I would have wanted to mingle."

Felix Mendelssohn was born 200 years ago, Feb. 3, 1809, fifteen days after Edgar Allan Poe, and nine days before Abraham Lincoln. The youngest of the genius-triplets, Lincoln, early in the Civil War was accosted by detractors of General Grant, who charged that Grant was a drunkard; to which Lincoln is reported to have said, "Find out what he's drinking, and send a case to each of my other generals!" One might also ask, back in the Spring of 1808, what were those three mothers drinking?

Of course, Lincoln's joke plays upon the conceit that drink had anything to do with Grant's critical military successes that kept the Union alive. So, while our fancy is drawn to the births of three geniuses in Richmond, Hamburg, and Kentucky, in those 24 days of 1809, hopefully the joke also draws our attention to look elsewhere in our reflections upon the three. Here, we've only covered the commitment and passion of Felix Mendelssohn, in the face of the Philistines, but Poe and Lincoln share in more than their close proximity in birth. They were all talented young people of the 1820s and 1830s, as they fought for truth and beauty, while the rising supremacy of the British Empire attempted to end the American experiment.

Any talented youth who doesn't flinch in the face of evil already has enhanced access to genius. So, perhaps the new question, which would best honor Felix's birthday, is: Couldn't our world do better than having a genius born only once every eight days?