

## **The Classical Beat**

**By STEPHEN DANKNER**

### **SPOTLIGHT ON MENDELSSOHN IN 2009**

Presenters love anniversaries and birthdays of the great composers. They'll tell you it's a special opportunity, every hundred years or so, to re-evaluate a master's legacy, to assess the familiar (and sometimes not so familiar) masterpieces in the context of our own time.

Since 1990, Leon Botstein and the Bard Music Festival in Annandale-on-Hudson has set the standard for the most all-encompassing specialty programming with the "Composer (you fill in the name) and His World" summer/fall mega-festival, putting Mahler, Schoenberg, Prokofiev, Liszt and many other composers under the musical-historical microscope.

Closer to home, Close Encounters With Music, the highly successful chamber music series directed by cellist Yehuda Hanani in Great Barrington, will, in two concerts, focus on the early-Romantic giant Felix Mendelssohn, born in 1809.

Everyone who loves classical music reveres Mendelssohn. His music is, along with Mozart's, about the most upbeat, audience-friendly ever composed. His life and work is the stuff of legend: composer of the "Octet" for strings at 16; the "Midsummer Night's Dream Overture" a year later; friend of Goethe at the age of 12; confidant of Sir Walter Scott; guest at the court of Queen Victoria; founder of Leipzig's Gewandhaus Orchestra and the man who brought Bach's music back to life with a performance of the St. Matthew Passion in 1829. Composer, pianist, violinist (!), watercolorist (see his paintings at the British Museum) and much more – Mendelssohn's genius outshines even Mozart's.

Yet, the composer is not without his critics. The great 19<sup>th</sup> century German conductor Hans von Bülow said of Mendelssohn "He was a composer of genius who became a talent." And it is true that Mendelssohn's early miraculous gifts eclipsed his later work, which appeared to some as workman-like rather than brilliant.

Yehuda Hanani would like to shine the light of recent research onto the Mendelssohn story by examining the work of Mendelssohn's protégé – Edouard Franck (1817-1893) – and, by contrasting this unknown composer with his mentor, shed new light on Mendelssohn as composer, teacher and performer.

“My colleague in Lübeck told me about Franck, who came from a well-to-do banking family in Breslau,” Hanani explained. “Franck was nine years younger than Mendelssohn and was a pianist, to begin with. They would perform Beethoven's “Kreutzer” Violin Sonata, with Felix playing the violin – how extraordinary!”

Franck's music – in this case, the String Sextet in E flat, Op. 22 - is unknown to me. In fact, the Sextet will receive its American premiere at the CEWM concert, February 21. It will be fascinating to hear the unfamiliar music of a composer who was so highly regarded by Mendelssohn.

Hanani further explained the reasons for Franck's obscurity. “According to most accounts, Franck was a shy and retiring man who made a successful career as a teacher and pianist. He wasn't interested in promoting his own music, and so it gradually fell into oblivion. By the time his music first found its way into print, around 1900, the early-Romantic style of the 1840s was considered passé. Only recently have Franck's heirs begun to rescue the music and to publish and record it anew. We hope, with these two concerts, to correct an unfortunate historical oversight.”

As for re-evaluating Mendelssohn for today's performers and audiences, Yehuda Hanani was insightful and eloquent.

“The old take on Mendelssohn was that his music was fluent, facile, glib and only surface-deep, reflecting his wealthy, pampered upbringing. There was also anti-Semitism directed at him by Richard Wagner, which found its way into print via the insidious essay ‘Jews and Music,’ published in 1850, three years after Mendelssohn's death. Professional jealousy even infected Mendelssohn's friend Schumann, who felt that if he were born into the same privileged milieu, he would have found much more success as a composer.”

“Now we look at Mendelssohn's music as a direct artistic continuation of his Judaic philosopher grandfather Moses Mendelssohn's theological path, and stand in awe of the composer's profound belief in the ennobling power of

art. In a work like the Piano Trio in C Minor, Mendelssohn's music sanctifies the concert hall. I believe that Mendelssohn felt that music is a tool towards realizing a better world."

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