

## ***Hymn of Praise (Lobgesang)***

***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.

Although the choral movements of Mendelssohn's *Hymn of Praise* can be sung as a separate work, they are actually part of his Symphony No.2. (It was in fact the third symphony he wrote. The *Reformation* symphony - No.5 - was completed in 1830 and given its later opus number only after the composer's death). Symphony No.2 was written for the 1840 Gutenberg Festival in Leipzig - at that time one of the main centres of the publishing trade - to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the invention of printing. Mendelssohn's symphony was the final event of this important occasion, bringing the festivities to a suitably imposing conclusion.

Mendelssohn described the *Hymn of Praise* as a 'symphonic cantata', possibly to avoid comparisons with Beethoven's ninth symphony, though the two works have little in common other than the simple fact that they are both choral symphonies. More probably he used the term as an accurate description of the piece's form and content. The opening instrumental section is in three parts, loosely corresponding to the first three movements of a conventional symphony, though the second and third parts are noticeably shorter and less developed than they would normally be. The choral sections - much the longest part of the whole work - are clearly influenced by Bach's example in the layout of recitatives, arias and choruses, the fugal writing of the opening and closing choruses, and the use of the Lutheran chorale 'Nun Danket' (Now thank we all our God) in No.6. The whole symphony is, however, unmistakably Mendelssohn.

*programme notes by John Bawden*

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