

The Charm of Mendelssohn

Several weeks ago a series of "Musical Portraits" of the famous music masters was inaugurated at 2YA, and has proved justly popular. Last Monday evening a further aspect of Mendelssohn's compositions was presented to listeners by a relay from the Taranaki Street Methodist Church of a programme consisting solely of this great composer's works. The accompanying article by Sacheverell Sitwell will be of interest to all those who would like to know something of Mendelssohn's life.

IT is an acknowledged fact that concert-halls are always ugly in themselves. Up till a few years ago their decoration, as often as not, used to rise to its climax in a series of names—they were names and nothing more—of famous composers. These names were spelt out in great gilt letters and sometimes they occurred at regular intervals round the ledge of the dress-circle, and sometimes they shone down from the roof.

There was something curious about those names. Beethoven was there. So was Handel, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Liszt, Rossini and Bellini, who really were names and little more, showed near composers of whom one had never even heard mention. Pleyel, Mehul, Gretry, Spohr: these were some of them. And among them there was always Mendelssohn. But, in a sense, he was in a different category from any of the others, and there were two reasons for this. He was neglected by the good taste of twenty years ago, while he was still a popular idol with the old-fashioned public.

It is easy to explain what I mean. When I was a child you could not find a village in Yorkshire or Derbyshire where there was not an old woman who would sing you "Oh, for the Wings of a Dove," or "Rest in the Lord," if you went to see her in her cottage. The English had taken Mendelssohn to their hearts as they had no other musician except Handel.

But while he was a pleasure to many he was a pain to some few. To the cultured he meant "Songs without Words," the "Bees' Wedding"; lots of little pieces the sound or mention of which drove one nearly mad, and a sort of general association, by analogy, with the Albert Memorial.

Now, when he has been dead some eighty years, the truth about Mendelssohn is beginning to emerge. The public have had to give him up because he was so bad for them, while the other fruits of his varied and prolific genius are being brought back again into their rightful position. Not that they have ever been forgotten, but simply that persons who despise and will not listen to his music are denying themselves many delightful experiences. The secret of this charm lies in his personality. This was formed from fertility and genius allied to a most unusual clarity and logic, qualities seldom found except in artists of the very highest rank.

BUT there are other reasons for it. His family were rich and cultured Jews. He never knew money worries, and I think the safety and comfort of that are audible in his music. He was a child-prodigy. The Mendelssohns had a small orchestra to play in their dining-room on alternate Sunday mornings, and at this there was always a piece composed and conducted by little Felix, even when he was so small that



he had to stand on a chair in order to be seen.

Hopes were formed of him that had hardly been allowed even to Mozart. There seemed to be nothing that Mendelssohn might not accomplish as he grew older. This is not to be wondered at when his music to the *Midsummer Night's Dream* is considered. He wrote this at the age of seventeen, and it is a beautiful and unique masterpiece unlike anything else in the world. It was written long before he had ever visited England, and it shows an instinctive understanding and appreciation of England such as it is hard to believe any person of foreign birth could have possessed. Nearly at the same time he wrote his beautiful *Octuor*. There seemed nothing, indeed, that Mendelssohn might not achieve when he showed so much promise at such an early age.

His father was anxious that he should travel and meet all the interesting personalities of his time. In this way he met all the leading musicians, Cherubini, Rossini, Spohr, Liszt, and made friends with the old Goethe. He was also sent to Italy to see the works of art, but it is related that nothing, however exciting, could distract

him from spending at least some hours of each day in composition. Nor did the praise and flattery, attendant on his being a prodigy and a favourite with all, in any way impair his simplicity of character. He kept himself unspoiled and uninjured through all this. But he worked too hard. Far too much music was produced by him; in his twelfth year alone, sixty finished pieces flowed from his pen. This fertility was a permanent danger to his health, and, indeed, in a sense, it killed him. He was formed of many things. He passed his early years in a kind of Mozartian identity. His piano-pieces have that mellifluous rapidity and grace. The *Rondo Capriccioso* is a sort of continuation in this Mozartian tradition, but it also shows the influence of Weber and of Hummel, the virtuoso who was taken into his house by Mozart as a pupil when he was only seven years old. In fact, a famous *Rondo* by Hummel affords the closest comparison with that of Mendelssohn. All the formulae for this kind of music were already invented and had long been in use. They cannot have given Mendelssohn much trouble.

IN this respect he only continued and did not enlarge the art. But it is a different thing with his orchestral works. In them, he was a pioneer searching after new effects, following, perhaps, a little farther along the directions that Weber had started. In his overture *Preciosa*, Weber had made use of Spanish tunes for the first time in serious music; and Mendelssohn did the same thing in *Ruy Blas*. Landscape-painting was being brought into music with its incidents of costume and local colour. Where Mendelssohn is concerned (*Concluded on page 2*).