

**FELIX MENDELSSOHN'S CHURCH MUSIC**  
**An Address given to Members of the Church Music Society and their**  
**guests at Doncaster Minster on Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> September 2008**  
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In 1829 Felix, aged twenty, was already a composer and musical executant of considerable renown, who at the Berlin Singakademie had directed the first full-scale performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* since its composer's death. With his friend Karl Klingemann, Felix went on a walking tour of Scotland. They left Charing Cross by coach on 22<sup>nd</sup> July, travelled to York, and reached Durham on the 24<sup>th</sup>. If they used the most likely route which is now the A1, they probably stayed overnight at one of the coaching inns at Doncaster. The largest, possibly longest-established and most famous of these was the Old Angel, succeeded in 1810 by the New Angel across the way, later known as the Royal after a visit by Queen Victoria. Picture of the New Angel Inn, Doncaster, Tom Bradley p 25. Example 1. Contemporaneous accounts mention 'sack and brisket', a favoured meal at the inn, and perhaps the two young travellers feasted on this. They returned from Scotland via the west: Glasgow, north Wales and Liverpool, reaching London by 6<sup>th</sup> September. This was one of at least ten visits that Mendelssohn made to London, but his music was available far beyond the capital, thanks partly to technological advances in music printing and the consequent decrease in the unit cost of mass-produced music.

The name Felix should be included in the title, since he was not the only Mendelssohn to write sacred music. His elder sister Fanny (1805-47) composed at least one oratorio with a sacred text as well as some organ preludes. A more distant relative, Arnold Mendelssohn (1855-1933) composed sacred motets and a cantata strongly influenced by Bach's polyphony. Their contributions to the repertory are not well known, and it is not always easy to ascertain the purposes for which they were written. Even with much of Felix's work, we cannot always be sure that a piece with a sacred text was written for use in church. In cases where we can be sure, such as the Op 79 *Sechs Sprüche* (Six Seasonal Motets) for Berlin Cathedral, there are still questions that go far beyond Felix Mendelssohn's work, concerning much if not all church music, past and present. Does composition primarily for use in church diminish performance in a different context, for example a concert elsewhere than in a church? Conversely, do allusions to God in, say, the text of a parlour ballad or sacred partsong, perhaps even written for use outdoors, for example 'Morgengebet' (Morning Prayer) from the Op 48 *Sechs Lieder im Freien zu singen*, mean that it is a sacred piece and can therefore be categorized as church music?

Following from those questions, if church music cannot be defined by its text, can it be defined by its original intent or context? If the answer is yes, then what about some of Felix Mendelssohn's 'occasional' choral pieces such as *Gott segne Sachsenland* and *Festgesang*, or organ music such as the handful of chorale-based pieces? If the answer is no, then we envisage a blurring and overlapping of categories, with no rigid formulae or parameters for church music. Labels such as 'church music' are convenient for

booksellers, librarians, cataloguers and writers, but they are artificial. Deliberately to confuse the issue further in Mendelssohn's case, we can consider a memoir about Felix from his friend Julius Schubring (1806-89):

On one occasion, he expressly said that sacred music, as such, did not stand higher in his estimation than any other, because every kind of music ought, in its peculiar way, to tend to the glory of God.

Many would agree.

So what constitutes Felix Mendelssohn's church music? We shall hear some examples later, but there are many more pieces that masquerade as such, and some of these may be more familiar to many people than music that meets a narrower definition of church music, if such a thing is possible. For me, familiarity with some of Mendelssohn's larger-scale free-standing motets has been a formative and sometimes inspirational experience. Not everyone shares this view, perhaps because the music is not so familiar in Britain, and perhaps because it is sometimes adversely pre-judged, simply because it is by Mendelssohn, a controversial figure in many respects.

Why should this be so? The glib response would be to ask if there was ever a great composer who was *not* controversial, either in life or after death. Mendelssohn's rise to fame was meteoric in his lifetime, though not without its enmities and disappointments. Highly regarded in Germany, he was even more highly regarded in Britain, and in effect was accepted as one of many illustrious Victorians. Eleven years after his death, when Victoria, Princess Royal, married Crown Prince Wilhelm Friedrich of Prussia in the Chapel Royal of St James's Palace, the wedding march was adapted from Mendelssohn's incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The marriage seemed to cement Anglo-German relations with Mendelssohn's music astride both cultures. The use of this music inaugurated a British custom followed in many a church wedding ceremony, rather like the present-day use of Widor's *Toccata* from the Fifth Organ Symphony, and it provides a neat example of Mendelssohn's secular music, never intended for church, that has nevertheless been appropriated for church use.

Mendelssohn died in 1847, and as late as the 1880s he was the subject of a substantial article in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, hindsight and circumstances had begun to cloud the picture. Standing chronologically between Beethoven and Wagner, and with no major opera to his credit, Mendelssohn triumphant seemed hollow to some, although comparison among these three composers in the name of 'progress' (a concept beloved of the Victorians) is hardly appropriate. Subsequent musical developments made Mendelssohn seem less of a conspicuous innovator than some of his successors, though a case could be made for his innovations having been in different musical spheres from those of his contemporaries. Despite having been baptised into the Christian faith at the age of seven, Mendelssohn and his Jewish background began to be frowned upon in some quarters. Adherents to the growing tide of anti-Victorianism caricatured Mendelssohn's music as effeminate and dainty, George Bernard Shaw accused him of 'despicable oratorio-mongering' (although he wrote only two oratorios, and part of a third), and by 1911 Donald Francis Tovey, the distinguished music analyst, could assert that

Mendelssohn's reputation has vanished.

One need look no further than the pathway trodden by the English hymn to see partly how and why this happened. Whatever congregations may have wanted to cling on to, volumes such as *The English Hymnal* and *Songs of Praise* in the early twentieth century set themselves up as mirrors of informed musical taste. The newly-published tunes in these volumes had strong, forthright, self-sufficient melodies often designed for unison singing; mobile, purposeful bass-lines and robust harmonies often redolent of the healthy outdoors rather than the curtained parlour. Out went numerous 'old favourites': mostly Victorian or slightly earlier tunes. Meanwhile, the Mendelssohn pieces that people knew best, apart from *Elijah* and perhaps a symphony or two, were probably his *Songs without Words* for piano solo, and maybe the *A Midsummer Night's Dream* music. Most of the remainder of Mendelssohn's output, including nearly all the church music, passed into oblivion. Its passing thither was accompanied by the passing of hosts of oratorios, cantatas, anthems, piano pieces, partsongs, ballads and works in other genres, in Britain largely published by Novello, by other composers who had tried to jump on to the Mendelssohn bandwagon but who had found that his style, fatally easy to imitate in a superficial way, was well nigh impossible to emulate.

Not all were imitators, and nor did Mendelssohn shrink from imitating. It might be safer to say that all these nineteenth and early twentieth-century composers were speaking in a single European romantic musical language: some with little originality or finesse, others at the cutting edge of innovation or the highest and most lucid degree of refinement. An obvious example of the different but similar ways composers used aspects of this language is the strategic use of pedal-notes, such as in the build-up towards a cadence. In the nineteenth century if not before, some composers began to utilise tonic pedal-notes at the start of a piece or movement, often to support a rising melodic line. One of the most conspicuous British examples is the opening of *The Lost Chord* by Sir Arthur Sullivan, clearly in imitation of an organ pedal.

Hymns sometimes reflect this and other structural features in miniature. Here is an example:

John Bacchus Dykes 'Lux benigna' (Lead, kindly light) EH425, in A flat. This, perhaps the epitome of the Victorian hymn, is likely to produce an adverse reaction from those who dislike the genre. But here is Mendelssohn: Opening of Kyrie, in A major, He is doing exactly the same but on a larger scale, using two choirs in canon, and retracting the tonic pedal in time to allow a strong cadence before introducing changes of key. And here, from the early 1820s, is Schubert: **Moment Musical for piano, Op 94 No 3, in F minor**. This piece is one of six *Moments Musicaux*, together catalogued as D780, and it is not the only one of Schubert's shorter piano pieces (in addition to songs and other works) to show the composer's strategic structural use of pedal notes. As here, these often contribute to the slow harmonic pace which is characteristic of much of Schubert's writing. Mendelssohn and a host of other composers capitalised on this strategy when it suited them, manipulating the idea to fit in with their own uses of the musical language and its riches at their disposal.

The perception of Mendelssohn as little more than a purveyor of the maudlin, sham, and second-rate was reinforced by the shackling of his music with editors' and publishers' accretions that would probably have horrified the composer. As if to rub salt into the wound, authors of musical commentaries in text-books seemed keen to tarnish everything by Mendelssohn in the same way simply because it was by Mendelssohn, and in their eyes not as worthy as music by, for example, Bach or Beethoven. This persisted for decades: for example Philip Radcliffe's study of Mendelssohn first published in 1954 was still being reprinted in 1976. In the survey of Mendelssohn's vocal music, the chapter headings themselves reveal something of the author's attitude. A section on 'Songs, duets and partsongs' is followed by one on 'Oratorios' and finally one on 'Other choral works', thereby bundling together, apparently in a kind of clearing-up process, a large group of works whose juxtaposition seems incongruous. In this section, the author, by using descriptions such as 'pleasant', 'amiable', 'workmanlike', 'efficient', 'comfortable', 'neat and charming' and, worst of all, 'faded', seems to convey disdain: this is the language of the examination marker trying – not too hard – to find something 'nice' to say about a candidate whose work he considers mediocre. The insertion of some counterpoint seems to have been the only compositional ploy to merit even the slightest enthusiasm on the part of this author. Percy Young, writing in the 1960s, despite dismissing *Lobgesang* (*Hymn of Praise*) in four words: 'an extremely dull work', is more even-handed. He notes the attractiveness of Mendelssohn's style to English musicians, and differentiates between composers influenced by Mendelssohn, and those who slavishly imitated him. Even so, there seems to be a paradox here. Surely it cannot be right to blame Mendelssohn for his supposedly malign influence on others who found aspects of his style appealing. And supposing Mendelssohn had influenced no other composers at all: would later commentators have found it easier to accept his music's inherent qualities and strengths?

In my own ignorance of all but the best-known Mendelssohn pieces, I was content to go along with a mildly derogatory view of the composer until in 1976 (the year in which Philip Radcliffe's book was republished) I was invited to participate in an international choral conducting workshop at the Vienna Konservatorium. We rehearsed, mainly with American singers, in huge rooms and sometimes in churches, towards a final concert in the Schottenkirche. The Bruckner and Mendelssohn repertory was ideal for its cavernous acoustic: one could almost imagine seeing each massive chord lose itself as it ascended the pillars. I was captivated by the whole experience, and eagerly sought out scores of unaccompanied Mendelssohn choral pieces, both sacred and secular. Later, back at work with my student chamber choir, I suggested we might do a programme of Bach and Mendelssohn motets for a couple of our forthcoming engagements. The student committee members reacted with utter disgust. All around the table, they edged their chairs away from mine as though I had just admitted to having a nasty infectious disease. 'Ugh!' they said, 'We don't want to sing any of *that* sentimental rubbish'. I managed to persuade them to give Mendelssohn's unaccompanied setting of Psalm 100: *Jauchzet dem Herrn alle Welt* a try. They liked it (though some clearly regarded doing so as a guilty pleasure) and it went well in rehearsals and concerts. When the student committee met me to decide on the following year's repertory and concerts, they said 'Have you got any more Mendelssohn we could sing?' Of course, the answer was yes, and I went on to

publish editions of *Jauchzet* and three eight-part motets in an edition of Mendelssohn's sacred choral pieces for Faber Music.

In the light of all this, and bearing in mind the inevitable blurring of genres already outlined, I would like now to say something more about Mendelssohn's so-called church music that was not intended for church, from which it should be clear why the composer's reputation is sullied by these misconceptions. Then I shall move on to a few thoughts about what people may think Mendelssohn's church music ought to be, and how these ideas, or perhaps ideals, have been arrived at. Finally, and as a prelude to the performance, I should like to tell you about some of the church music itself: its sheer beauty, its style, and the monumental quality of much of it that is anything but sentimental, sham or second-rate.

Just as some of Mendelssohn's piano pieces were given inapt and superfluous editorial titles in attempts to make them more widely appealing, so some of his partsongs, in addition to at least two piano pieces, were given inapt texts and turned into hymns. Mendelssohn was not the only composer whose music was treated in this way. Piano pieces by Chopin and solo songs by Schubert provide further examples, and there may well be many more. The most easily accessible example occurs in *Hymns Ancient & Modern Revised* (1950), No 463. Entitled *Felix* in an adaptation by Sir Sydney Nicholson for the wedding hymn *O perfect Love*. The source of this, Mendelssohn's piano piece, Op 30 no 3 in E from the *Songs without Words*, though short, falls into three sections, with interesting changes of key and texture in the second, and a subtly modified reprise as the third. There is also a lovely airy arpeggio to introduce and round off the piece. Wonderfully idiomatic for the piano, this arpeggio has no place in a hymn so it is dispensed with. Only the first section of the piece is retained. This happens to end in the tonic, which suits the hymn-predator's purpose admirably. Hearing the complete piano piece must have been a revelation to anyone who knew only this vestige of it masquerading as a hymn.

Hymns borrowed from partsongs offer a different perspective because in these cases one text has been suppressed in favour of another. Several Mendelssohn examples occur in *The Bristol Tune Book*, current in the late nineteenth century, which contains very few texted hymn-tunes but in which the tunes are grouped by metre so they can be selected to fit chosen texts. Consequently these tunes are not inspired by particular texts. Here, for example, is 'Sherborne'. This piece is found in other hymnals too. It consists of extracts from Mendelssohn's partsong *Ruhetal*, published in England as *The vale of rest*. The partsong, another example of Mendelssohn's use of an opening tonic pedal, has a texturally varied and harmonically more mobile central section that accounts for about half the total length of the piece. The closing bars, in four-part harmony with an extended cadence, act as an appropriate gathering-point after the comparative waywardness of the central section. The adaptation as a hymn uses only the beginning of the first section and the final extended cadence. Consequently, half the hymn-tune has a tonic pedal as an undertow, after which the protracted cadence is of little relevance. The most interesting section of the partsong is omitted probably for practical reasons: it is not in homophonic four-part harmony. This large omission, combined with the diligent flattening out of



Mendelssohn's dotted rhythms, leaves only a forlorn reminiscence of the original. If people were led to believe that this dull hymn was typical of Mendelssohn's output, no wonder his reputation suffered.

A further part song borrowing gave the hymn *Ellesmere* **Bristol Tune Book No 246**. With a text that begins 'Bread of the world, in mercy broken'. It is from the part song *Morgengebet* (Morning Prayer) Op 48 no 5, mentioned earlier as a song to be sung out of doors. Like *Ruhetal*, this part song has been heavily abridged. It is mentioned here because the words of the part song are essentially words of Christian worship, and perhaps it was not such a big step to substitute one text for another in the worship of God. This is a striking portrayal of the blurring of boundaries between sacred and secular music that has probably always been part of much music-making, at least in European cultures.

This section about Mendelssohn's so-called church music that was never intended for church would not be complete without mention of one melody that many if not most people in Britain know from memory without knowing who composed it. Entitled 'Mendelssohn' in many hymnals, it is the tune most commonly sung to Charles Wesley's Christmas hymn published in 1739 beginning, in its present-day version, *Hark! The herald angels sing*. The tune is an adaptation of part of *Festgesang*, a secular cantata composed in 1840 as part of a commission for the Leipzig Festival to celebrate the quatercentenary of Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. There are four movements in the cantata, and the famous tune opens the second. The cantata is scored for male chorus and two separate brass groups. The text, by the German poet Adolf Prölss, has some sacred allusions but is predominantly in praise of Gutenberg 'the German [who] has set the torch ablaze'. The well-known tune, which Mendelssohn himself in 1843 asserted would never do to sacred words, had been turned into a carol by 1861 or possibly earlier, but certainly after Mendelssohn's death in 1847, by William Hayman Cummings, a highly respected English church musician with a profound knowledge of Mendelssohn's music. It is easy to understand Mendelssohn's consternation at any sacred use of the music, which moves at a rapid pace befitting the lively, patriotic original text. Whatever one thinks of this and other adaptations, the popularity of this tune was such that it supplanted other melodies to this text, as well as surviving beyond any English anti-German sentiments resulting from two world wars.

Many people would consider the adaptations described above as repugnant, while at the same time finding other extracts from Mendelssohn's music perfectly acceptable for church use. The example of music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, used in church wedding ceremonies, has already been mentioned. In addition, extracts from oratorios, not just those by Mendelssohn, are frequently used as part of church services. One view of oratorio is that it can be regarded as 'pious recreation', and it is only a short step from that to its emergence as music in worship. Yet it was not originally intended as church music. A long oratorio such as *Elijah* is an enormous undertaking for any group of musicians, even if organ is substituted for the orchestra. It has always been beyond the scope of most churches, so it is natural that extracts should be performed, whether in services or concerts. One of the most popular extracts is *Lift thine eyes*, a trio for unaccompanied upper voices, much favoured by both boys' and girls' choirs. Extracts

from Mendelssohn's earlier oratorio *St Paul* find similar use, although in both cases nothing can equal the experience of performing or hearing this music in the context of its complete oratorio. The same applies to the well-known ensemble piece *I waited for the Lord*, part of Mendelssohn's *Lobgesang*, dismissed by Philip Radcliffe and Percy Young but full of riches such as this, several other fine choruses and solos, and a vigorous choral setting of *Now thank we all our God* to the familiar melody. This German chorale is sufficiently familiar in England as a hymn to endear the piece to congregations, and almost as familiar is *How brightly shines the morning star*, mainly because of Peter Cornelius's setting *Three kings from Persian lands afar*. But it occurs also in Mendelssohn's unfinished oratorio *Christus*, and forms part of the beautiful three-movement Epiphany anthem known in English as *When Jesus, our Lord*.

The popularity of oratorio was such that extracts from these works, disseminated as church music, may well have been seen as an ideal for church musicians to aspire to, and thus perhaps what congregations felt that church music ought to be like. But the ultimate 'crossover' piece, *Hear my Prayer*, which entered the English cathedral repertory about 1875, was not written originally for church use. Composed in 1844 to a text by William Bartholomew (translator into English of the text for *Elijah*) paraphrasing Psalm 55, it was intended to mark the reopening of the newly renovated Crosby Hall in Bishopsgate, London, and first performed in 1845. (In 1910 this building was moved, piece by piece, to Cheyne Walk in Chelsea.) In German, as *Hör' mein Bitten*, *Hear my Prayer* was dedicated by Mendelssohn to his friend and colleague the conductor Wilhelm Taubert. Indeed, the particular text may have been chosen because it includes the word 'Taubé' (dove), made prominent in Mendelssohn's setting and therefore probably a pun by the composer on the dedicatee's name. In contrast to the case in Britain, the work received scant attention in Germany. Although Mendelssohn was familiar with the verse anthems of composers such as Croft and Henry Purcell, there is no suggestion that he composed *Hear my Prayer* for church use, yet it has entered and retained its place in the church repertory in Britain.

Finally, emerging from among all the borrowings, extracts, abridgements, substitutions and appropriations, are the pieces that can most accurately be categorised as Felix Mendelssohn's church music. There are many of them, and only a few can be mentioned here. Paradoxically, this church music is probably less well known in Britain than any of the pieces already mentioned in this paper, almost all of which did not originate as church music but have been used as such. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second Edition*, published in 2001, contains the most up-to-date list, though convenience and expediency mean that this and other lists in the 'choral' category contain some of the 'crossover' pieces already mentioned. One remarkable feature of the works-list, however, is the amount of music by Mendelssohn that has entered it since 1980, when the previous edition of *Grove* was published. Much of this increase is attributable to the reunification of East and West Germany in 1989, after which many sources in libraries in the former Eastern bloc became available to researchers from a wider area.

Mendelssohn composed music for Christian church worship, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, from the age of ten until his death 27 years later. His teacher was Carl Friedrich



Zelter (1758-1832), who in 1800 became conductor of the Berlin Singakademie, at the forefront of performances of sacred music from the past. The Singakademie building still stands, and has been renovated for use as a theatre. The eleven-year-old Mendelssohn joined the Singakademie in 1820 as an alto, by which time he was already having composition lessons from Zelter. From then on, the renowned Singakademie became the medium for many if not most of Mendelssohn's sacred choral compositions, and it was there that Mendelssohn, nine years later, directed the performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* already mentioned. When aged thirteen, Mendelssohn composed *Jube Domine*, a colourful eight-part unaccompanied motet clearly modelled on the J S Bach exemplars that were part of Zelter's curriculum for him. The manuscript has become available fairly recently, and provides a fascinating glimpse into how the young Mendelssohn worked and was taught. Bach may have been the model, but the emerging style is Mendelssohn's own, and his mastery of the form, text and choral forces is astonishing. When aged fifteen he composed *Jesus, meine Zuversicht*, for soloists and a five-part choir, weaving the chorale melody through the texture in an ingenious and approachable manner. Perhaps it is only the unfamiliarity of the chorale melody in Britain that prevents this piece from becoming better known here.

Numerous works followed, sometimes for large forces, such as the sixteen-part *Hora est* and *Tu es Petrus* for voices and orchestra. On a smaller scale, there were chorale harmonisations and settings, hymns, motets and cantatas. In 1830 Mendelssohn travelled to Bavaria, Vienna, Venice and Rome, further cultivating his interest in church music. He composed *Drei Kirchenmusiken*, three motets including an eight-part setting, with tenor solo and continuo, of *Ave Maria*. This is a monumental piece, yet not at all difficult to grasp because of its repeated four-note motto stated by the tenor (E, F sharp, A, E), and elaborated reprise after a middle section almost reminiscent of Venetian composers such as Giovanni Gabrieli. This *Ave Maria*, to be performed later, appears in an informative practical edition from the Church Music Society, which should lead to its increased circulation in English-speaking countries. For the English liturgy, Mendelssohn composed a *Te Deum* with Morning Service in A for solo voices, chorus and organ in 1832, and *Lord, have mercy upon us* for chorus, composed in 1833 and dedicated to Thomas Attwood. Mendelssohn's final church works were a *Magnificat*, a *Nunc dimittis* and a *Jubilate*, not linked by key or musical content, dating from 1847 and published together, apparently with many editorial alterations, as Op 69 after Mendelssohn's death in the same year.

Psalm-settings feature strongly in Mendelssohn's output. Among them are Psalm 2, *Warum toben die Heiden*, from Op 78, composed in 1843, Psalm 95, *Venite, exultemus*, Op 46, composed 1838, and Psalm 43, *Richte mich, Gott*, from Op 78, composed 1844. These are a joy to sing and to listen to, and even Philip Radcliffe, in 1954, was prepared to attest to their beauty and dignity, despite finding them too long! The Op 78 psalms were first performed in Berlin, where in late 1842 Mendelssohn had been put in charge of all sacred music in the city. In 1843 a new choir was established at Berlin Cathedral, but there was still confusion over Mendelssohn's onerous workload. This included teaching and conducting as well as composing, even before he and his family moved back from

Leipzig to Berlin in 1843. He was encouraged to write antiphonal *a cappella* sacred music, partly with the layout of Berlin Cathedral in mind.

The building which stands today is not the one Mendelssohn knew. The earlier cathedral was the work of the architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel in the 1820s, which had a life of only about seventy years before being torn down in 1893 to make way for the present structure at the behest of Emperor Wilhelm II. The painting by Eduard Gaertner shows clearly how Schinkel's building would have been ideal for the kind of antiphonal double-choir music at which Mendelssohn was so adept. The later building, with its nearly-circular main space, is much less suitable for this kind of music. After severe wartime bomb-damage this present Berlin Cathedral was restored mainly in the 1970s, the organ being restored in the 1990s.

In the last full year of his life, Mendelssohn received numerous commissions from Emperor Friedrich Wilhelm IV for sacred works mostly for the Berlin Cathedral choir. It is possible that singers working in Berlin opera choruses sang also in the Cathedral choir, which may account for the richness of sound from which some of these later pieces benefit. They include double-choir settings for the German liturgy: most notably the free-standing *Kyrie eleison* (of which the opening has already served to show how Mendelssohn builds a rising melody over a pedal-note) and the radiant, cascading *Heilig*, monumental but not difficult pieces which have been published in the Faber Choral Programme Series, initially edited for my own choir after my visit to Vienna. But perhaps the most interesting and varied church pieces of this late Berlin period are the Op 79 *Sechs Sprüche*, six short motets for double choir, one motet for each of the seasons of Advent, Christmas, New Year, Passiontide, Good Friday and Ascensiontide. They were written over a period of years, and not intended as a set until publication. Each ends with an Alleluia but that is as far as any hint of a cyclic plan goes. Indeed, they contrast markedly with one another in mood and texture. The Advent motet is diffuse, with imitation almost throughout except at the central climax: 'The Saviour appeareth'. The Christmas one, suitable for any festive occasion, positively effervesces, and the reprise of the opening motto just before the final 'Alleluia', so that the first tenor adds new counterpoint to the treble melody, has to be one of the best choral cadences of the era. The New Year piece is serious and monumental, though to be sung softly almost throughout. For Passiontide there is very effective antiphony between soloists and chorus (or small and large choir), and the piece is terse, restrained and almost completely chordal, modest polyphony being saved for the brief, quiet 'Alleluia'. The Good Friday piece, though very brief, makes its impact, not by the solid eight-part writing almost throughout, but by the short phrases with sudden changes of dynamic and – a masterstroke – of register and spread of the voices. The Ascensiontide motet, often sung in Britain in a four-part arrangement called *Above all praise and all majesty* which flattens out Mendelssohn's characteristic dotted-note rhythm in the first phrase and its reappearances, features a solo first tenor echoed by jubilant full choral writing. This piece has the most conspicuous 'Alleluia' of all, with a captivating and unexpected swing into the subdominant before the home key triumphs. All the pieces are published as *Six Seasonal Motets* under the Church Music Society imprint; a clear, practical edition with both German and English texts.

The contrast between an edition like this and some of the older editions of this music is stark. The collected edition of Mendelssohn's music published in Leipzig from 1874 still stands as a monument of scholarship, and as a research tool it is invaluable. But for performance purposes it is impracticable; although, to be fair, that was never its intention. Each volume is very heavy and expensive; it will not stand easily on an ordinary free-standing music stand, let alone encourage a singer to hold it while singing. The scholar's desk, the organist's or pianist's music stand or the library shelf is its home. The layout of some pieces, particularly the eight-part ones, is cramped and potentially misleading. The editorial notes and information on sources do not appear in each volume alongside the music. It is a sad likelihood that editions like this have formed a barrier to the performance (though not the study) of so much of this fine music, particularly in Britain where, unfortunately, German texts are not readily understood or grappled with easily by choirs in general. This, coupled with the distaste for Mendelssohn's music that grew up in the first half of the twentieth century, meant that almost all this fine music, intended for use in church, stood little chance of finding its way into any English choral repertory, let alone that for church use. Although many present-day church choirs find themselves constrained over what music their congregations or clergy find acceptable especially in the face of new liturgies, or even no liturgies, there is still a thirst for music like that of Mendelssohn in many quarters, especially now that the reaction against Victorianism is no longer so entrenched. Practical individual editions, at low cost, like those published by the Church Music Society, act as the bridge between this marvellous music and the people who want to perform it, worship with it, listen to it and above all enjoy it. Long may they prosper.

**A recital featuring sacred music by Mendelssohn was presented by  
St Peter's Singers  
conducted by the Society's Honorary Secretary, Simon Lindley  
with  
David Houlder  
at the famous Schulze organ of Doncaster Minster and soloists  
Claire Strafford soprano  
and  
Ben Leon Tan tenor**

**The programme was**  
O come, let us worship [from *Psalm 95*, Op 46]  
\*Six Seasonal Motets, Op 79 – edited by Richard Marlow  
\*Ave Maria, Op 23 No 2 – edited by Richard Lyne  
Verleih uns Frieden, Op Post – edited by John Rutter  
Jesus meine Zuversicht [1824] – edited by Judith Blezzard  
Hear my prayer, Op Post  
\* = published by the Church Music Society

#### **Note by the Lecturer, Dr Judith Blezzard**

The title of this paper may seem perfectly straightforward, but in fact it has caused much deliberation. This came about partly because of the way Simon Lindley put his invitation to me, and it gives me great pleasure here to pay tribute to Simon's resourcefulness and encouragement: his help has been invaluable. Simon first made sure I was not otherwise committed on the date in question. Then he telephoned me and said he would like me to speak on Mendelssohn in Doncaster. My reply, that I was not aware that Mendelssohn had ever visited Doncaster, elicited Simon's explanation of the present proceedings, and matters progressed from there. However, discussion with musical friends raised the possibility that Mendelssohn might indeed have visited Doncaster, and I am pleased to acknowledge Malcolm Ibbotson's help in finding out more about this.

## **FELIX MENDELSSOHN'S CHURCH MUSIC**

### **References and Further Reading**

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