

## EARLY MENDELSSOHN AND LATE BEETHOVEN

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"EVERYTHING here is different, very different from anything ever heard before, even from the composer himself. We hope that he will not take it amiss when we add that it does not appear an unimportant work, and as it seems to be well-ordered, well-divided, well-formed, its effect is all the more bizarre".<sup>1</sup> It is with precisely such thoughts that one is struck on first meeting with certain of Mendelssohn's early works. The 'conservative' Mendelssohn—bastion of Victorian respectability or inheritor of Rococo elegance, depending on one's point of view—is seldom credited with a spirit of adventure. Yet in his brilliant youth he wrote works which are astonishing for this very quality, as well as for the fact that they show an appreciation and emulation of certain features of Beethoven's later works that must be unique for their time. All the important writers on Mendelssohn have felt obliged to comment, at least briefly, on this. But in view of the still widespread undervaluing of Mendelssohn, I think it pertinent to enlarge upon and illustrate this aspect of his music.

The works concerned are the piano sonata in E major (Op. 6), the fantasies for piano in F# minor (Op. 28) and E major (Op. 15), and the string quartet in A minor (Op. 13). By the time the earliest of these was written (E major sonata, 1826), Mendelssohn was probably acquainted with all the important music of his time: as Eric Werner has pointed out, the composer's father was able, and interested enough, to buy him copies of anything significant.<sup>2</sup> I do not doubt, therefore, that he knew all the pieces I shall cite. To avoid confusion, I shall call Mendelssohn's works by their keys and Beethoven's by their familiar opus numbers.

Robert Schumann, writing in 1835, detected the inspiration of the opening of the E major sonata:

If the first movement of this sonata reminds one of the thoughtful melancholy of Beethoven's last A major sonata—though the last movement recalls Weber's manner—yet this is not caused by weak

<sup>1</sup> *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, xx (1818), p. 792; quoted from Anton Schindler, 'Beethoven as I knew him', edited by Donald MacArdle and translated by Constance Jolly (London, 1966). This quotation is actually from a review of Beethoven's late cello sonatas, Op. 102.

<sup>2</sup> This point is made in Werner's 'Mendelssohn; a New Image of the Composer and his Age', translated by Dika Newlin (London, 1963), p. 107. Werner's book and Philip Radcliffe's 'Mendelssohn' in the 'Master Musicians' series (revised ed., London, 1967), are the only useful books in English. For the Mendelssohn bibliography, see the article on him in 'Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart'.

unoriginality, but rather by intellectual relationship:<sup>3</sup>

E major Sonata, i

Allegretto con espressione

Op. 101, i *Etwas lebhaft und mit der innigsten Empfindung*

The question of deliberate, accidental, or coincidental relationship arises immediately. Was Mendelssohn thinking of Op. 101, was he so imbued with it that this just flowed from him, or is this material as common to its time as the Alberti bass? I hope I have excluded instances of the third alternative. Both of the others, here and throughout this study, are probable. Anyone who has composed in his youth may remember how he would appropriate an occasional feature from an admired composer—a chord-progression here, an instrumentation there—in a spirit of homage, and in the hope that a happy fertilization might thereby occur. Such appears to be the case here. The early piano works are full of such similarities, showing

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from Robert Schumann, 'Music and Musicians', second series, translated by Fanny Raymond Ritter (4th ed., London, n.d.), p. 253.

that the young composer was fully as steeped in the Beethoven sonatas as he was in Bach's '48'. In the E major sonata, for example, there are also clear echoes of Beethoven's Op. 90 and Op. 81a:

E major Sonata, i (cf. Op. 90, ii, bars 40 and 49)

E major Sonata, i (cf. Op. 81a, i, bars 201 foll.)

These are the echoes of one who knows the originals, loves them, and has them thoroughly beneath his fingers—all to such an extent that he cannot keep them from recurring in his own music. The strangely articulated cadence on to a rippling diminished seventh chord (bar 116 above) also sounds faintly familiar, but its source is not so easily traced, nor so indisputable when we find it.

The second movement of the E major sonata is a delicate minuet with a warm trio, of great charm but no interest for our present purposes. With the third, however, we meet a most extraordinary idea: an instrumental recitative treated as the subject of a fugue:

E major Sonata, iii  
Adagio e senza tempo

The harmonies implicit in the subject (V—I—V<sup>0</sup>—V<sup>7</sup>—I) are very similar to those of the corresponding moment in Op. 101:

Op. 101, iii  
Langsam und sehnsuchtsvoll

The fugue, reaching the limits of feasibility within an arhythmic structure, turns *via* arpeggios to a new theme, equally short-lived, and the rippling motif from the first movement follows:

E major Sonata, iii  
[1] Senza tempo

Andante

pp dolce u.c.

Allegretto con espressione

rit.

pp

pp

P

sempre

These four elements are then repeated in different keys, making an alternating form reminiscent of Op. 109, i and Op. 110, iii. As for the musical substance, Op. 31, no. 2, i, comes readily enough to mind; and perhaps Op. 106, iii is lurking somewhere in Mendelssohn's unconscious:<sup>4</sup>

Op. 106, iii

142

una corda

cresc. tutte le corde

con 8

P

dimin.

pp

P

\* P \*

Was it not a ghost of this that we heard at bar 116 of the E major sonata, i? The same passage recurs at the very end of the sonata, culminating in three final chords which I cite as an example of the more conscious borrowing of an effect:

<sup>4</sup> Werner, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-9, gives a letter from Mendelssohn to his sister, dated 8 November 1825, in which he mentions (impersonating Beethoven himself) that he is sending her his sonata in B $\flat$  major, Op. 106; "I did not write the sonata out of thin air. Play it only if you have ample time, which is indispensable for it".

E major Sonata, iv (ending) Op. 106, iii (ending)

tutte le corde

pp

pp

tutte le corde

The E major sonata shows adventurousness in form to a rare degree, using a motto theme in three different movements as well as a reminiscence of the opening theme near the end of the finale (not quoted here). Surely the young Mendelssohn was the first to experiment with 'cyclic' form to this degree. He may have known Schubert's 'Wanderer Fantasie', but his practice is not so much a thematic transformation, such as was to be used by Liszt and Franck, as an extension of the principle of literal quotation found in Beethoven's fifth and ninth symphonies and late piano sonatas.

Of Mendelssohn's other early sonatas, Op. 105 in G minor (1821) and Op. 106 in B $\flat$  major (1827), the first draws its inspiration from Mozart. Both were published posthumously (1868) by Julius Rietz, who was surely guilty of cynicism in his assignment of the opus number 106 to a piano sonata in B $\flat$  major which begins:

B $\flat$  major Sonata, i (opening)


Allegro vivace

P

modulates to G for its second subject, and begins the development with a *fugato*. The resemblance ends there.

Two years later (1829) we find the remarkable F $\sharp$  minor 'Phantasic', Op. 28, an ambitious work in three movements, rich in Beethovenian reminiscences. I am continually surprised by the number of non-specialist authors who, doubtless parroting each other, call the 'Variations Sérieuses' Mendelssohn's only significant large-scale piano work.<sup>5</sup> The F $\sharp$  minor 'Phantasic' seems to me to have an equal claim, not so much for its perfection in technique as

<sup>5</sup> Only Radcliffe, *op. cit.*, p. 78, sees the virtues of this work, mentioning the "stormy and grandiose return of its highly characteristic main theme... In this work, as elsewhere, the key of F $\sharp$  minor seems to have stimulated Mendelssohn to an unusually high level of intensity".

for its continuity, vigour, passion and absence of the cloying harmonies of the later work. Late Beethoven does not come into question here (though some may hear Op. 109, i in the plunge into the first Allegro), but the influence of the middle-period sonatas is much in evidence: the third movement (Presto) is like a combination of ideas from the finales of Op. 31, no. 2 and Op. 81a, together with the  motif of Op. 57, i (not shown here):

F# minor Phantasie, iii

51

Op. 81a, iii

69

F# minor Phantasie, iii

153

*con anima e calore*

Op. 31 no. 2, iii

283

Despite appearances Mendelssohn shows himself a worthy pupil of the great man, and no mere compiler: he visits Beethoven's inexhaustible fount of ideas for inspiration and refreshment, not for lack of his own initiative.

The last piano work which concerns us is the 'Fantasie sur une Chanson Irlandaise', Op. 15 (1833), based on the song 'The Last Rose of Summer'. Doomed to silence in our unsentimental age, this one-movement essay has its remarkable moments. It harks back to Beethoven's Op. 109 (and is in the same key):

Fantasia in E major (cf. Op. 109, i, bars 25 foll.)

23

Mendelssohn's treatment of the song itself, especially when it returns transformed at the end, is close in texture and general feeling to the theme of Op. 109, iii. In the middle of the Fantasia, however, another influence appears, that of Op. 110, iii, with its hesitant alternations between recitative and stricter rhythms. Note that the Mendelssohn extract (below) closes with the same pair of diminished seventh chords as its presumed model:

Fantasia in E major (cf. Op. 109, iii, bars 4-7)

53

*Recitativo*

*pp* *ff* *f*

*dim.* *a tempo pp* *f* *p* \*

*Recit.*

*pp* *f* *cresc.*



*p* \*



This is not an early work: it was written at the mature age (for Mendelssohn) of 24. But it is unusual among the middle-period works in these echoes: apparently it is the last of its kind.

The other compositions which concern us are the two early string quartets, Op. 12 in E♭ major (1829) and Op. 13 in A minor (1827). The later of the two is the less adventurous in style, as was the case with the two piano sonatas which we discussed above. It contains recitatives and various cyclical features, and is a fine work in what one would recognize as Mendelssohn's own style. More important for our purposes, however, is the A minor quartet, which I shall treat in some detail.

The primary model for this quartet is Beethoven's Op. 132, in the same key. Philip Radcliffe has enumerated others, identifying the fugal passage in the slow movement with the Allegretto of Op. 95, and the closing bars of the final coda with those of the Cavatina from Op. 130.<sup>6</sup> The parallels in the first movements of the A minor quartet and Op. 132 are instructive. Mendelssohn begins, as does

Beethoven, with a slow introduction incorporating the motif  from his song 'Ist es wahr?' (printed before the quartet). Perhaps this motto is a reminiscence of 'Muss es sein?': certainly it plays a significant part at the end of the quartet, where it provides a calm, major ending of great beauty. Another phrase in the introduction, in which all the instruments move in the rhythm 

recalls the parallel passage in Op. 130. I now tabulate the two movements, illustrating first their more important themes:



<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93-4



Mendelssohn		Beethoven
bar		bar
1	Slow introduction	1
19	Semi-quaver transition	9
23	Principal theme (a)	11
42	Semi-quaver transition	37
51	Transition	Transitional theme 40
59		Secondary theme (b) 48
77		Cadenential theme (c) 57
93		Development 73
124		Recapitulation 119
225-251		Coda 195-264

Beethoven is more of a developer: his expository sections are compressed in favour of a long development and coda, whereas with Mendelssohn development is reduced to a fairly insignificant role. The two codas, for example, are articulated thus:

Mendelssohn		Beethoven
bar		bar
225	Coda begins	Principal theme further developed 195
		Transitional theme further developed 214
		Secondary theme further developed 223
233		Principal theme developed over semiquavers 232
239		<i>crescendo</i> some new melodic material 241
244		<i>diminuendo</i> to <i>p</i> 248
245-251		<i>crescendo</i> to end 257-264

For all that, Mendelssohn's movement is thematically unified, permeated with the 'Ist es wahr?' rhythm, in contrast to the wealth

of disparate ideas that flood in one after another (yet with what miraculous inevitability!) in Op. 132, i. Mendelssohn had obviously been impressed by more than the textures and rhythms which are all that our short examples can show adequately: he was also aware of the principles of motivic unity at work.

For the slow movement of the A minor quartet Mendelssohn chooses the same F keynote as Beethoven's 'Heiliger Dankgesang'. The mood at which he aims is evidently one of serenity and profundity, perhaps with Op. 130, iv and Op. 135, iii in mind:

A minor Quartet, ii

Adagio non lento  
cantabile



A melancholy fugal passage follows this, recalling the opening fugue of Op. 131 in its intensity and the strangeness of its harmonies. Eric Werner sees these as "the most excessive chromaticisms ever written before *Tristan*"—an opinion which I would modify with the suggestion that Mendelssohn knew Bach's 'Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue'. Some might see in the subject a remembrance—surely unconscious—of the slow movement of Beethoven's seventh symphony:

A minor Quartet, ii



The chromaticisms become much more pronounced later on, when all four parts have entered: then the fugue melts beautifully into a more cheerful theme with accompaniment, a spiritual child of

Op. 130, iii, though not without something of the contrasting section of the 'Heiliger Dankgesang' in its ancestry:



A further development of the fugue subject against a semiquaver background leads to a passionate climax similar to the apotheosis of the theme in the F# minor Fantasia, and the movement ends with a restoration of the original slow theme, with yet another development of the fugue. This is an extremely rich movement, traversing an astonishing number and variety of moods, situations and textures; I feel that it approaches more closely to its models than any other music of Mendelssohn's.

The third movement is an Intermezzo, the first eight bars of which have virtually the same harmonies and bass line as Op. 130, ii:

A minor Quartet, iii  
Allegretto con moto



and who could fail to be reminded of Op. 130, iii in the first phrase? Here, as in all the other movements, there is a fugal development, in this case constituting a trio section, light and elfin in Mendelssohn's best *scherzando* manner. The movement is, as its title suggests, a moment of release from the tension of the quartet as a whole.

The transition to the finale (see p. 284) is one of the most obvious borrowings with which Mendelssohn must have been so pleased that he introduced similar recitatives at two further strategic points—at the end of the development and before the coda. The faint resemblance of the recitative melody to that of the fugue subject of the second movement is made more manifest towards the end, by which time the two movements have been connected by the use of the same theme for development. Finally the first movement is brought into the circle of relationships, as its slow introduction is

A minor Quartet, iv (cf. Op. 132, iv, bars 25 foll., and Op. 31 no. 2, i, bars 144 foll.)

used to conclude the work in the tonic major. After so much strife and tension this comes as a benison after the manner of the codas of Op. 95, iv and 132, v—effects which Mendelssohn had evidently taken to heart. Beethoven is once more recalled, almost literally, in the final bars:

A minor Quartet, ending (cf. Op. 130, v, ending)

Thus ends the A minor Quartet. Eric Werner says of it:

This is one of the most ingenious of Mendelssohn's compositions. Characterized by a breath-taking poignancy and mastery of integration, it shows him in the unwonted role of a 'problematic artist'. Indeed, had Mendelssohn been able to maintain the level of this quartet, his name would stand in close proximity to that of a Mozart or a Beethoven.<sup>7</sup>

We may wonder why he did not. I think the reason lies in the fact that Mendelssohn stopped learning too soon. As long as he was stimulated by his discoveries in Beethoven and Bach, he was exciting and original in his re-interpretations of them: witness even such a comparatively late work as the magnificent A major organ sonata of Op. 65. But often, when his mind was not set on some at least

<sup>7</sup> Werner, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

partially intellectual problem, such as the incorporation of the Baroque style, the assimilation of Beethoven's 'difficult' works, or the achievement of unity by connected movements and thematic reminiscences, writing music became too easy for him—with the result that made him so beloved of Queen Victoria and so unfashionable today. The works with which I have dealt, on the other hand, could be regarded as valid interpretations of their models for the Biedermeier age, such as might have led their audiences gently to an appreciation of the originals.<sup>8</sup> If Mendelssohn's studies had led him further, say to an understanding of Beethoven's fugues, or of why Beethoven could so often dispense with song-like themes, his music as a whole might interest us more. But just as he played Beethoven too fast, so he grew up, and lived, too fast to take stock of his assets and liabilities. Perhaps we may hear in the late F minor quartet, Op. 80, a sense of this loss of opportunity, and a longing to regain some of the profundity of his early master.

<sup>8</sup> The *AmZ*'s reviews of the E major sonata (xxix, 1827, col. 122-3) and the A minor quartet (xxxiii, 1831, col. 524-7) are wholeheartedly approving, and say nothing either about what seem to us the strange qualities of these works, nor about their kinship with Beethoven.