

Wagner and Mendelssohn

The arch-racist and proto-Nazi composer Richard Wagner dared not attack the Jewish-born Felix Mendelssohn as long as he lived. But shortly after the composer's death in 1847, Wagner published his notorious *Der Jude in der Musik* (The Jew in Music).

Since he could not credibly claim that Mendelssohn lacked skill, Wagner invented a more insidious slander. Wagner said that "the Jew" could make a clever imitation of western Classical music, but that, since the Jew lacked a real soul, he could never really feel it. Thus, the image of Mendelssohn as a brilliant but superficial composer was made "official."

This "official line" was perpetrated

in England by Wagner's chief propagandist there, the Fabian socialist George Bernard Shaw. It was carried to the extreme by the Nazis, who banned Mendelssohn's music and tore down his statue that stood in front of the Leipzig Gewandhaus, where he had reintroduced Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" to the world.

No musician would endorse Wagner's anti-Semitism today, but prejudice is a subtle thing. The image of Mendelssohn as a "dandy" and emotional lightweight has never been completely rectified. The celebrations of the sesquicentennial of Mendelssohn's death in 1997, will offer a chance for setting matters straight.



Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

a certain edge of tension coming out of the first movement and leading into the third. The concept of the work as a whole is developed, and a respect for its seriousness maintained.

Farrakhan's ability to make his instrument sing deserves attention. All good instrumental music is based on the human voice and Minister Farrakhan has the mastery of bowing technique necessary to organize phrasing as he desires. But, there is also something more.

When Minister Farrakhan addresses the audience at the conclusion of his triumphant performance, he speaks of the fact that in music, every note has a different vibration, just as every human being "vibrates" differently. He jokes that the warm-up of any orchestra sounds like pure chaos—until the oboist plays the "A" to which the orchestra tunes. But, he emphasizes, it is the composer who organizes all the tones into a beautiful harmony. What the world needs now, he says, is a divine composer "to put us together on the staff of life, so we can combine to produce beauty, harmony, and peace."

In music, this quality is developed through polyphony (many voices). A single instrument, like the violin, can capture the qualities of different species of human voice, such as soprano and mezzo-soprano. This polyphony is further differentiated by the different registers that exist within each species of voice. We do not know the extent of the Minister's knowledge of vocal registration, but in the above-mentioned comments (which clearly moved the members of the orchestra), he brings in a most valuable quality from outside formal musical study per se. The tendency in today's media-run culture is toward a homogenization, or flattening-out, of the differences

both between unique individuals in society, and between different voices and vocal registers in music. This habit undermines the idea that man is made in the image of God, because it flattens the quality that can only be manifested in the sovereign individual's creative mind. A leader who works to develop creative individuals would tend to also orient toward such differentiation in music.

Let's examine one example here. Mrs. Fohrman, in an early section of the video, mentions the talent Farrakhan demonstrates in playing the very difficult cadenza in the first movement. It most be noted that this cadenza is unique. Mendelssohn places it in the middle of the movement rather than the end, and it is clearly a tribute to the "Chaconne" for solo violin by J.S. Bach, a piece where Bach developed the principle of polyphony in a single instrument to undreamt-of heights. The Mendelssohn cadenza emphasizes a low voice, something most unusual. The violin most often plays in the soprano or mezzo-soprano range, but here we find the quality of a human tenor voice in its middle and lower registers! Farrakhan, though clearly capable of playing this passage with great speed, makes a point of slowing certain portions of it down, in order to make that very unique tenor voice sing, while playing the higher notes much more lightly.

The videotape is highly recommended. We also think it would be a most valuable addition to the curriculum of any educational institution, from elementary school on up. And, we can only hope that Minister Farrakhan will continue to develop in this direction—something very sorely needed in music, and in society today.