Mendelssohn – a model for young composers*

Gesine Schröder

It was only in 1972 that the Leipzig school of music took on the composer’s name in its title. At the 125th anniversary of his death it was renamed as an act of reconciliation, since the name was omitted from 1933 on in prospects of what was still known as a conservatory. To a certain extent, one could say that the spirit of Mendelssohn lived on in the institution until the end of the long nineteenth century, especially in the teachings of Jadassohn. Of his many pupils, for example Riemann, Karg-Elert and Johannes Schreyer, some developed an oppositional, even a contemptuous view of him. Riemann went on to call the Mendelssohn followers the “Leipzig school”. What this means (often believed about Mendelssohn himself) is an orientation on Mozart, Beethoven and Weber. One did not want to go beyond Mendelssohn. It also meant a dismissal of innovations such as those brought about by Liszt and Wagner. Critics claimed that the conservatory was a breeding place for weak Mendelssohn imitations. Typical of the style seemed to be regularity, clarity and elegance. However, even if the staff of the conservatory truly was bound to tradition, one must be careful in stating that only cheap imitations of Mendelssohn were produced there. In fact, chromatic harmony was far more widespread than in Mendelssohn’s work. It had become the every day language of the time. As we all know, music does not only consist of harmony, even though it may seem so in the theory of the late nineteenth century. Harmony was classed as the most important of the compositional disciplines of the time. In effect, it was other disciplines that remained more true to the style of Mendelssohn such as formal design as well as instrumentation and orchestration.

I would like to demonstrate the closeness of the teachings around 1880/1890 to Mendelssohn, particularly in the work of Salomon Jadassohn. One year after Mendelssohn’s death, Jadassohn enrolled at the conservatory to study with Moritz Hauptmann. He himself taught there from 1871 until his death in 1902. In the 1880s he published five volumes on compositional technique. Three of these were based on “pure setting” and two on free composition. As stated in the preface¹, they document the experiences in class with his many pupils.

* Revised version of a lecture, the author held at the Trinity College Dublin during the congress Mendelssohn and the long Nineteenth Century in July 2005. An enlarged German version can be found with the link of this footnote.

¹ Salomon Jadassohn, Lehrbuch der Instrumentation, third edition (Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel, 1924), VI.
students in the long years at the conservatory. I will concentrate on the fifth volume, a treatise on orchestration.

It is very clearly and openly stated which line of tradition Jadassohn intends to follow in his teachings. At the same time, he mentioned those model composers to whom the student should pay special attention when orchestrating; namely, Beethoven, Weber, Schubert and Mendelssohn (interestingly enough, Mozart is not mentioned here). To quote from a passage on the French horn: “Beethoven, Schubert, Weber and Mendelssohn, the four great masters of orchestration, achieved the greatest effects with this simple instrument”.2

In what way was Mendelssohn an example to young composers in this context? There are three questions to consider in this connection:
– In which genres is Mendelssohn presented as a model composer?
– Which of his peculiarities are particularly to be praised or imitated?
– How high does Mendelssohn rate in comparison with other model composers?

I will begin with the question about the genres. Two chapters in Jadassohn’s orchestration course make use of examples exclusively of Mendelssohn’s work, and of no other composers. Examples of this are a chapter in the section on mixed choir and the chapter on military orchestras.

It is perhaps surprising that Mendelssohn is quoted as the only model composer, especially in the latter genre. The chapter is only three and a half pages long, one of which is a page in the score of the so-called Cornelius March. It is a transcription (and transposition) of the March for Orchestra in D major, op. 108 (1941, MWV P 16), composed for the festivities surrounding the presence in Dresden of the painter, Peter Cornelius (see examples 1 and 2).

It is very unlikely that this version was written by Mendelssohn himself, since the fourth horn and trumpets one to three are given (too many) notes that cannot be played by natural instruments, something which Mendelssohn never (or seldomly) demanded. There are even instruments that Mendelssohn probably did not use: a clarinet in E flat, cornets, tenor horns, a Baryton and tubas. Melodic and harmonic invention seems to be most important to the author of the handbook (and the mentioning of Mendelssohn’s name), and not the instrumental treatment, which should really be the core of the subject.

2 See footnote 1, 244.
3 See footnote 1, 383. Reproduction from Jadassohn’s treatise with the friendly permission by Breitkopf & Härtel Wiesbaden.
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Alta marcia.

Kleine Flöte.

Grosse Flöte.

Hoboom.

Klarinetten in Es.

1. Klarinette in B.

2. Klarinette in B.

3. Klarinette in B.

Fagotte.

Kontrafagott.

Sopran-Kornett in B.

Alth-Kornett in Es.

Tenorbörscher in B.

Baryton.

1. u. 2.

Waldhörner in Es.

3. u. 4.

1. u. 2.

Trompeten in Es.

3. u. 4.

Kleine Trommel,
Gr.Trommel u. Becken.

2 Tenorposaunen.

2 Bassposaunen.

Tuben.
Example 1 and 2: “Cornelius”-March op. 108; transcription (as quoted by Jadassohn) and original (after the old edition of the complete works)

The other piece that Jadassohn recommends to his students is no less perplexing: the *Ouverture für Harmoniemusik*, op. 24 (for wind instruments, MWV P 1; an early version – “Nocturno” – for less instruments was composed in 1824, the rearrangement for 23 players dates from 1838; see example 3). It involves instruments, which were rarely ever used in
military orchestras around 1890, namely clarinets in F (high), clarinets in C, basset horns, and a bass horn.  

Example 3: Overture for wind instruments op. 24

The fact that the piece was originally written for natural instruments results in restrictions in its use for instruments of the 1890s. Jadassohn writes the following about clarinets in C, E

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flat, F (high) and A flat (high): “Other than the clarinet in B flat, usually only the clarinet in E flat is used”. And – as he says – basset horns did not exist in Leipzig. Why does Jadassohn only mention these pieces in the chapter on military orchestra, pieces that are not original in their orchestration or that surely were not played in their original instrumentation? Mendelssohn’s name had obviously become more important than what he had written.

I will briefly comment on the other chapter in which only he is mentioned as the model composer – Mendelssohn, the model composer of the through-composed song for mixed choir.

Example 4: Contrasting section of “Herbstlied” in Jadassohn’s quotation

5 See footnote 1, 233.
This brings us to the second question of what Jadassohn thought should be particularly praised or imitated. Jadassohn (like many theorists on orchestration of the time) combines specific techniques of writing for a particular instrumentation (in this case vocal music) with the teachings of musical form.

This resulted in an implicit aesthetic of genres from which it was evidently difficult to emancipate oneself. Certain genres and forms were naturally bound to certain instrumentations. In this case mixed choir is brought into connection with the extended Lied forms and the motet. A hierarchy within the genres coincides with a hierarchy in instrumentation. Jadassohn explains to the students that when a change of mood occurs in the text, the music must change with it. Thus the Lied should in some cases not be structured in similar stanzas. Jadassohn accentuates the joyousness and positiveness in Mendelssohn, which makes the Autumn Song (*Herbstlied*, op. 48.6, MWV F 17, written in 1839) a typical choice for an example. Mendelssohn changes the dark and depressive mood of Lenau’s poem to a brighter and more positive one. And therefore the treatment of the poem is significant: In this case Mendelssohn even changed the words. Jadassohn goes into considerable detail about the unconventional harmonic progressions of the piece (see example 4). How precisely Mendelssohn follows the expression in the text is further evidenced by rhythmical, dynamic and textural changes that are treated in detail by Jadassohn.

Finally, concerning my third question about Mendelssohn’s rating in comparison with other model composers, I would like to present an example from the section that deals with orchestration in a more usual manner. In the chapter about the clarinet there are several examples of combinations with other instruments and the effects of these; 1) Clarinet and oboe. Jadassohn stresses the varied possibilities of this particular sound (he draws an example from Schubert’s Great Symphony in C major); 2) in combination with horns (“mixes well” in the middle registers of the clarinets; an example from Weber’s *Konzertstück* op. 79 follows); 3) the combination of clarinet, flutes and bassoons. (The sound ought to be “very mild and soft”; the example is from Weber’s *Euryanthe*); 4) Clarinets + flutes + bassoon + horns. Then oboe. The oboe adds sharpness within the context of a softer timbre played in a tender manner.

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6 See footnote 1, 16f.
7 Salomon Jadassohn (see footnote 2), 17-21.
8 See footnote 1, 228.
9 See footnote 1, 229.
10 See footnote 1, 230.
(Jadassohn quotes the beginning of Mendelssohn’s famous overture to Shakespeare’s *A midsummer night’s dream* op. 21, MWV P 3, see example 5).11

**Example 5: Midsummer night’s dream overture in Jadassohn’s quotation, initial chords**

The famous progression of the initial chords is almost serial, as far as that can be applied in a tonal harmonic context. The centre is lightly orchestrated, concise and relatively high in register, from which the highest line moves in a broken pattern within the chord. The bass develops in increasingly larger intervals – a fourth, a second plus an octave and a second plus a tenth –, which opens up a wide range of pitch. The transformation of sound evokes the entrance into a strange world. There are two peculiarities here: The third g sharp in the fourth chord appears at a distance of three octaves between the flutes and the bassoons, and this makes the sound somewhat strange: a hyperrealistic dream imagination. Between the third and fourth chords the bassoons and horns switch places in the function of bass or tenor. It is as if Jadassohn did choose “the right examples”, but did not realise what is truly fascinating

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11 Salomon Jadassohn (see footnote 2), 232.
about the pieces. This corresponds with the fact that he does not comment upon the inverted harmony of the passage.

Perhaps Jadassohn did not fully grasp the underlying significance of those very aspects of Mendelsohn’s music to which he had referred, such as the archaic quality of his sound, such as the occasional appearance of a neutral or dispassionate minor (something that he had inaugurated) or the structural aspect inherent in his use of timbre. It is these characteristics, which are interesting to us today, especially in those works revised by Mendelssohn himself. Through the process of revision these compositions were subjected to by their author, they often gained structural complexity. In this case, however, it appears Mendelssohn changed neither the setting nor the orchestration of the initial ideas for the opening bars; from the outset everything was contained within these germinal ideas.\(^2\) Mendelssohn’s future fate in theory books and composition treatises is roughly known.\(^3\) Until the beginning of the First World War, there is perceivable and rapid decline in the use of examples from his compositions for textbook purposes. Later Mendelssohn’s works were rarely cited – a fate shared by other Jewish and French composers such as Meyerbeer and Halévy.

**Scores:**


Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Ouverture für Harmoniemusik op. 24 (Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel, o. J.) [Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s Werke. Kritisch durchgesehene Ausgabe von Julius Rietz, Serie 7 für Blasinstrumente, no. 29]

**Bibliography:**


\(^3\) See Gesine Schröder, „Timbre – ein Fremdwort der deutschsprachigen Instrumentationslehre“, in: *Zwischen Komposition und Hermeneutik*, (see footnote 12), 111.
Christian Martin Schmidt, „Gewollte und ungewollte Fassungen. Überraschungen beim Studium der Quellen zu Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdys Konzert-Ouverture zu Shakespeares Sommernachtstraum op. 21“, in: Zwischen Komposition und Hermeneutik. Festschrift für Hartmut Fladt, ed. by Ariane Jeßulat, Andreas Ickstadt, Martin Ullrich (Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), 201–10