Introduction
Mendelssohn as border-dweller

PETER MERCER-TAYLOR

Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize winning 1986 graphic novel *Maus* follows the artist's father, Vladek, through the early years of World War II, tracing the events that culminate in his 1944 arrival at Auschwitz.[1] Though striking in its sense of documentary rigor, the book is animated by a visual conceit that comprises its sole glaring concession to fantasy: Jews are portrayed as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs, Americans as dogs. Though not without its hazards, the image of the Jew as mouse succeeds not only in essentializing the war's governing chain of predatorship, but in encapsulating a broad understanding of the Jews' position among northern Europe's citizenry: mice inhabit walls, having no rooms of their own, consigned to an interstitial realm at once enclosed and excluded by its architectural surroundings. The mouse serves as a shorthand figure for both the Jews' perspective on the world and the anxiety they inspired.

Felix Mendelssohn has proven one of music history's great wall-dwellers. And without wishing to trivialize Spiegelman's subject matter, I suggest that his metaphor might prove a useful point of entry into the essays that follow. Over the last half-century, it has become increasingly customary to see Mendelssohn's life (once thought thoroughly placid) and art (once thought transparently unchallenging) as deeply problematic indeed – the 1974 publication of the provocatively titled essay collection *Das Problem Mendelssohn* was a key moment in this reevaluation. The anxiety Mendelssohn inspires is rooted largely in the peculiar tendency of his life, his career, and his music to make us aware of crucial borders at the same time that he crosses and re-crosses them. Time and again, Mendelssohn succeeds in drawing our attention to the dichotomies through which we make sense of his music and his world, but of which he, himself, inhabits both terms, or neither. Nietzsche's description of Mendelssohn as a "beautiful *episode*" ("schöne *Zwischenfall*"[2]) in German music famously consigned the composer's work to a historical and aesthetic border territory, marking the space between Beethoven and Wagner while fully inhabiting the world of neither. But Nietzsche's term, "*Zwischenfall*" – etymologically something like "that which falls between" – resonates more powerfully across the composer's art, life, and legacy than any English counterpart. Indeed, the notion of "falling between" has emerged as something akin to a master trope of Mendelssohn's

reception, manifested at times as controversy, often as simply a sense that he does not belong in any of the spaces articulated by music history's standard compartmentalizations.

This volume sets off with three essays on biographical topics, each of which can be understood in terms of an over-arching tension. The question of Mendelssohn's own Jewishness – he was born Jewish, baptized into Protestantism at the age of seven – has been a site of hot contestation since his own lifetime. As Michael P. Steinberg shows in the second chapter of this volume, the composer's biographers and critics are still far from making complete sense of the issue. Eric Werner's landmark 1963 biography, *Mendelssohn: A New Image of the Composer and his Age*, told the story as it seemed most urgently in need of telling in Germany's post-war generation; viewing his subject through the lens of a century's worth of anti-Semitic criticism that ultimately sought to strip Mendelssohn outright of his already tenuous place in the history of German music, Werner places strong emphasis on Mendelssohn's sense of his own Jewish identity, and on his personal humiliation at the hands of anti-Semitic persecutors.[3] Werner's image continues to be filled out through recent studies that have brought increasing resourcefulness to the pursuit of a kind of vestigial Jewish subject position in Mendelssohn's work as both composer and conductor, particularly in the realm of choral music – "the residue," as Leon Botstein has judiciously put it, "of commitments to what Mendelssohn knew to be the heritage of his forebears."[4] Yet recent scholarship has suggested that Werner knowingly overstated the extent of both Mendelssohn's Jewish self-identification and his personal victimization, embellishing and fabricating documentation to get the point across.[5] And no one, in the meantime, has seriously questioned the sincerity of Mendelssohn's personal Christian faith (his wife, Cécile Jeanrenaud, was the daughter of a Protestant pastor), closely bound up as it was with his distinctive eagerness to embed the music of the Christian church in contemporary concert life, both in the non-liturgical performance of religious masterpieces and in the infusion of his instrumental music with chorales and chorale-like material (a central concern of R. Larry Todd's Chapter 10). In short, Mendelssohn sustains a reputation as both the nineteenth century's greatest Jewish composer and one of its most meaningfully Christian ones.

At the same time, the recent explosion in scholarly attention to Felix's older sister, Fanny, has brought an unanticipated twist to his fortunes in the realm of the politics of oppression. Trained alongside Felix in childhood and comparably promising in composition and piano technique alike (perhaps surpassing him in the latter), Fanny might indeed have amounted to one of her generation's major composers had gender politics not stalled her ascent. As it happened, though, she performed almost exclusively in private and

semi-private venues, composed a great deal less than Felix, tended toward the composition of smaller forms generally considered more suited to her sex, and undertook the publication of her work only in the last years of her life. Though her father's heart-breaking injunction to the adolescent that the station of housewife was the only one befitting her constituted discouragement enough,[6] the document trail is scarcely more kind to Felix, who also appears to have played a role in holding in check her aspirations to publish.[7] Though some have recently questioned the degree of Felix's culpability in the matter – Marian Wilson Kimber continues this process in Chapter 3 – Felix now plays simultaneously the parts of one of music history's most savagely oppressed figures and one of its more notorious oppressors.

As central a role as the composer/virtuoso played in early nineteenth-century concert life, the relationship between Mendelssohn's activities as a composer and a performer proved extraordinarily complex. Early biographer Julius Benedict clearly meant no disparagement in his laudatory assessment of Mendelssohn's impact: "It would be a matter of difficulty to decide in which quality Mendelssohn excelled the most – , whether as composer, pianist, organist, or conductor of an orchestra."[8] But there is tension even here. As a pianist, an organist, and a conductor of several major choral and instrumental ensembles – a career I survey in Chapter 1 – Mendelssohn played a critical role in solidifying the notion of a "canon" whose maintenance was fast becoming a central priority in German concert life. Though he championed new music as ardently as old in his own lifetime, Mendelssohn's leadership in the formation of the very idea of a stable core repertoire, and the robust condition in which he left the institutions through which it could be sustained, laid the groundwork for a musical world in which a vital concert life could, in principle, be divorced from public interest in contemporary composition. That this principle did not come fully to fruition until the twentieth century does not exculpate Mendelssohn from his role as one of its greatest architects.

In shifting from issues of biography to creative matters – as the present volume does in its fourth chapter – it is clear that no serious stock-taking of Mendelssohn's work is possible without reference to a similarly troublesome cluster of straddled dichotomies and apparent paradoxes. The most striking is the radical discrepancy between Mendelssohn's reputation in his own lifetime and his posthumous reception (explored in this volume's closing section, in John Michael Cooper's and Leon Botstein's chapters – 13 and 14 – on reception and performance, respectively). Henry F. Chorley dedicates much of the closing chapter of his 1854 *Modern German Music* to an argument (if a guardedly circumspect one) for Mendelssohn's "place among the noblest worthies of German music," pointing at the same time to an even more enthusiastic "section of musicians . . . already professing to take leave

of Mendelssohn, as one who has closed a great period; and after whom, no more great works shall be produced, save by an utter rearrangement of every known form, principle, and material of Music."[9] Yet Chorley pitches this assessment against the abrupt shift already underway in Mendelssohn's fortunes in Germany, Leipzig in particular: "no sooner was he cold in his grave, than his shallow and fickle townsmen began to question among themselves how far they had been administering to a real greatness, and whether there were not left behind among them some new prophets better than their departed oracle."[10] (One of the most conspicuous of these prophets – Richard Wagner – had issued his landmark anti-Semitic dismissal of Mendelssohn in the pages of Leipzig's *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* four years earlier).[11] By 1889, George Bernard Shaw – faced with program notes describing Mendelssohn as "a master yielding to none in the highest qualifications that warrant the name" – was prepared to offer his now-famous rejoinder: "compare him with Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, or Wagner; and then settle, if you can, what ought to be done to the fanatic who proclaims him 'a master yielding to,' etc., etc., etc."[12] Shaw doubtless seeks to provoke, but the groundwork for such a denunciation was clearly in place in England and Germany alike.[13] Mendelssohn's star would not ascend again until after the Second World War.

Just as troublesome is the sense, worried over even by some contemporaries, that a fall from greatness occurred in the course of Mendelssohn's own creative life. In the popular rendition of this narrative, he attained, as a teenager, a level of sophistication and originality unrivaled by any other child prodigy in music history, but succumbed, from his mid-twenties onward, to a flagging of energy, creativity, and quality in general. Thus the thoroughgoing engagement with Beethoven's late style in the early string quartets opp. 12 and 13 mellows to the self-assured, unconfrontational language of the three quartets of op. 44, a trajectory traced in Thomas Schmidt-Beste's chapter on Mendelssohn's chamber works (Chapter 8); after several early essays in full-scale piano sonata, Mendelssohn's keyboard output – examined by Glenn Stanley in Chapter 9 – shifts toward smaller forms, many geared toward amateurs in domestic settings; at the same time, the monumentality of Mendelssohn's early concertos is answered, in his mature piano concertos and brilliant single-movement concert pieces, by a forward-looking but persistently lighter-weight engagement with the legacy of Weber's *Konzertstück* (a progression explored in Steve Lindeman's Chapter 7). A most extreme case, of course, is Mendelssohn's operatic output, examined by Monika Hennemann in Chapter 12; after a series of very promising early efforts, and a single rather disappointing performance of his 1825 *Die Hochzeit des Camacho*, Mendelssohn never completed a mature work for the operatic stage.[14]

This narrative of decline has always admitted a rich and diverse body of exceptions, including the D minor Piano Trio op. 49, the *Variations sérieuses* op. 54, the incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* op. 61, the "Scottish" Symphony op. 56, the Violin Concerto op. 64, and the F minor String Quartet op. 80. These works sit with no special pleading whatever alongside the masterpieces of his early years, and had Mendelssohn composed nothing *but* these later works he would still cut a towering figure among the composers of his generation. Indeed, the idea of a flagging of genius has never seemed to describe as successfully the absence of brilliant works as the increasing proliferation, in Mendelssohn's adulthood, of works whose effectiveness inhered largely in their usefulness, and whose usefulness quickly passed. The *Lieder ohne Worte* and great swaths of Mendelssohn's choral music represent those segments of his oeuvre which flew the highest and fell the farthest. The former offer the fullest embodiment of a creative ideal whose initial triumph and subsequent downfall Charles Rosen's *The Romantic Generation* formulates (in fairly conventional terms) thus:

> If we could be satisfied today with a simple beauty that raises no questions and does not attempt to puzzle us, the short pieces would resume their old place in the concert repertoire. They charm, but they neither provoke nor astonish. It is not true that they are insipid, but they might as well be.[15]

Similar charges have been leveled against Mendelssohn's sizeable output of Lieder, though Susan Youens, in Chapter 11, joins a number of recent scholars who have ascribed a good deal more subtlety to these works than tradition has.[16]

Mendelssohn's large choral works – "formidable and problematic representatives of Victorian profundity," as one recent scholar puts it[17] – pose an even more difficult case. While they too refuse, as a rule, to "provoke [or] astonish," they also offer the clearest locus of the kind of historicizing eclecticism that unnerved many even among Mendelssohn's contemporaries. Franz Brendel, who assumed the editorship of Leipzig's *Neue Zeitschrif für Musik* after Schumann's 1844 retirement from the post, cut straight to this issue in the third instalment of his serial 1845 article "Robert Schumann with Reference to Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and the Development of Modern Music Generally":

> He [Mendelssohn] is in no way a student of Mozart's in the narrow sense, having equally taken up Beethoven and his drive toward the future; but he did not so much fasten decisively on [Beethoven's] last period, the point from which forward development was to begin for a composer of the new ideal, nor, in general, on any single master alone. He took more the entire past, Seb. Bach and Mozart, as his premise . . . and not really to accomplish at once an entirely modern direction.[18]

In his forward to *Das Problem Mendelssohn*, Carl Dahlhaus anchors the conversation firmly around the "problem" of what it means to speak of "classicism" in Mendelssohn's music.[19] This issue continues to lurk behind the two essays comprising the second part of this volume, "Situating the compositions," which examine, in turn, the notions of the "historicistic" (in James Garratt's Chapter 4) and of the "progressive" (in Greg Vitercik's Chapter 5). Yet what has become increasingly clear in the scholarship of the last thirty years is the peculiarly slippery position of Mendelssohn's music along not one but many axes, which either overlap or intertwine so thoroughly as to be distinguishable more in principle than in practice: the conservative and the progressive; the Biedermeier and the Romantic; the comprehensible and the palpably inward; the music of the past and the music of the future; the popular and the elevated; the feminine and the masculine; the superficial and the profound.

The years since the publication of *Das Problem Mendelssohn* have brought forth a particularly rich array of revisionist work on Mendelssohn, in which authors approaching his work from a number of methodological standpoints appear to be pressing toward the common goal of understanding Mendelssohn on his own terms. Leon Botstein's landmark 1991 essay "The Aesthetics of Assimilation and Affirmation" develops a persuasive vocabulary for legitimizing at once the "sentimental" and the retrogressive dimensions of Mendelssohn's art. In Botstein's formulation, the large choral works, for instance, must be judged according to their aim of "engender[ing] two related results: mass participation in music and a heightened ethical sensibility supportive of normative canons of beauty; receptivity to tradition; faith in God; tolerance; and a sense of community."[20] In his 1995 book *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, Lawrence Kramer has offered a provocative uncoupling of classicism from conservatism in Mendelssohn's work, discerning in Goethe's classicism the roots of the "dynamism" that infuses some of Mendelssohn's most original works: the *Calm Sea, Prosperous Voyage* Overture and *Die Erste Walpurgisnacht* in particular.[21] In a 1999 article in *Music & Letters*, James Garratt laid promising groundwork for reading Mendelssohn's reclamation of older styles against contemporary aesthetics of translation.[22] Thomas Christian Schmidt's 1996 book, *Die ästhetischen Grundlagen der Instrumentalmusik Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdys* – a major achievement still awaiting full digestion by the scholarly community – provides the most systematic account to date of Mendelssohn's compositional aesthetic, particularly of the *Reformwille* at the heart of Mendelssohn's creative world. Schmidt explores the foundations of a compositional impulse that embraced "reform" over "revolution," which "sought not to dethrone the classic or render it superfluous,"[23] but to enter into dialogue with it, appropriating its

standards, its greatness of spirit, and – at moments – elements of its styles and forms.

Finally, a site of particular ambiguity in Mendelssohn's work – as his contemporaries well understood – was his approach to what many considered the single most important question facing his generation's composers of instrumental music: the divide between absolute music and program music (a central issue in Douglass Seaton's handling of the symphonies and overtures in Chapter 6). Devotees of both camps can plausibly claim Mendelssohn as an ally. His early concert overtures clearly played a critical role in drawing from the operatic overture (long prone to concert performance in itself) a free-standing instrumental form: if its dramatic frame of reference tended to link the *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture op. 21 to its operatic forebears, the two that followed (*Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* op. 27 and *The Hebrides* op. 26) pressed the genre in new directions, opening paths at the end of which lay the late Romantic tone poem.[24] Mendelssohn's mature symphonies have all passed through history with titles – the "Reformation," the "Italian," and the "Scottish" (though only the last of these three was published in Mendelssohn's own lifetime, then without a title). And the extensive literature that has grown up on the subject attests to the obvious centrality of the question of programmaticism to our understanding of these works. Yet conclusions reached tend to be provisional at best, as often simply speculative, and prone to almost constant revision.[25] And through it all, even Mendelssohn's most robustly programmatic works testify to an unshakable confidence in the continued vitality of Classical motivic and formal procedures that render him a more important positive force in Brahms' nineteenth century than in Liszt's or Wagner's.[26]

These brief introductory remarks do no more, of course, than skim across the surface of Mendelssohn's life, work and reception. It is obvious, too, that this discussion's pervasive focus on "tensions" may mean presenting as straw what more charitable commentators – and doubtless Mendelssohn himself, on certain points – might more profitably seek to spin into the gold of Hegelian dialectical language. This is certainly the promise Schumann holds forth in his often-quoted, if persistently obscure, remark that Mendelssohn was "the most brilliant among musicians; the one who has most clearly recognized the contradictions of the age, and the first to reconcile them."[27] But it is hardly surprising that Schumann's remark should have become such a favorite among Mendelssohn's commentators (and it is not appearing here for the last time in these pages). For the broad trajectory of Mendelssohn studies from then to now might be read, in large measure, as a struggle to establish, on the one hand, the meaning of this statement, and, on the other, its validity.

PART ONE

Issues in biography

1 Mendelssohn and the institution(s) of German art music

PETER MERCER-TAYLOR

By his twenty-first year, Felix Mendelssohn had completed a handful of orchestral and chamber works that placed him among the front ranks of contemporary composers. Yet, as rapidly as a reputation was building around these pieces,[1] it was not as a composer but as a conductor that he made his grand entrance onto the stage of Germany's musical history. On 11 March 1829, he directed the Berlin Singakademie in a revival of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, unheard since its composer's death and thought, in Mendelssohn's time, to have been premiered exactly a century before.[2] Upon receiving word of the event, Goethe famously observed to his friend – Mendelssohn's teacher – Karl Friedrich Zelter, "To me, it is as though I have heard the roar of the sea from a distance."[3]

The "Bach revival" that feverishly ensued had hardly been conjured *ex nihilo* by the young conductor: the Singakademie had offered occasional motets and cantatas of Bach's since its 1791 founding, first under the direction of Christian Friedrich Carl Fasch, then, after 1800, under Carl Friedrich Zelter; and by 1829, Bach's generally neglected choral music (his keyboard music had never passed wholly out of currency) had found an important outlet, too, in Frankfurt's Caecilienverein. But there was no question that the 1829 *St. Matthew Passion* revival – abbreviated though the work was through the excision of six of the chorales, some recitative, and all but two of the arias – constituted an event of epoch-making significance in the revitalization of Bach's reputation.[4] And the event serves, for Mendelssohn, as a fitting structural down-beat to a musical career animated as fully by the recovery and consolidation of a musical heritage as by its furtherance through musical composition. Recent scholarship has cast doubt on the historical veracity of Eduard Devrient's oft-repeated account of the dramatic exchange in which he and Mendelssohn persuaded the recalcitrant Zelter to authorize the performance of the passion.[5] But Devrient's rhetoric – his pitting of youthful vision against a calcified status quo – points to a more fundamental truth that cannot be gainsaid: his generation's readiness to embrace the reclamation of the past as a bold new frontier.

The architectural surroundings of the Passion revival were themselves emblematic of the project at hand. The Singakademie's hall, four years old

at the time, was based on an 1818 design by Prussia's leading architect, Karl Friedrich Schinkel, conceived as one of a series of neo-classical structures through which Schinkel was systematically implanting the Prussian people's cultural ambitions upon their capital city's increasingly imposing skyline.[6] His Schauspielhaus had opened in 1821 (Mendelssohn himself had attended the first performance there: the epoch-making premiere of Weber's *Der Freischütz*), and his massive Altes Museum was, by 1829, nearing completion at the northern end of the Lustgarten. The lesson of such projects was clear: its music, its drama, and its art mattered to this German audience – for whom the humiliations of Napoleon's onslaught were none too distant a memory, who raced to match economic stride with the more robustly industrialized capitals of France and England – not so much as cycles of commodities created, consumed, and shortly exchanged for newer ones, but as public institutions, victoriously embedded in the cartographies of their city and of their emerging cultural identity.

Where the musical culture of the 1830s and 1840s was concerned, no one played a greater role in this process of embedment than Mendelssohn. Outside the operatic industry, none of his consequential contemporaries – Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Berlioz, Liszt, or Chopin – led a life so effortlessly and universally mapped out by biographers in terms of the institutions he served. At the same time, the course of Mendelssohn's career provides a nearly comprehensive catalogue of the venues through which his generation undertook serious music-making, dispersed as his activities were across the realms of choral society, public music festival, professional orchestra, opera house (at least briefly), church, royal court, and beyond. Lurking beneath all is the apparent conviction that what mattered was not only – not even principally – what individuals could create, but what the public could be taught to value. What mattered in the end was what could be institutionalized, woven securely into the cultural, intellectual, economic, spiritual, even architectural fabric that comprised Germany's nascent nationhood. Mendelssohn's professional life was a sustained demonstration that the weaving of this fabric constituted as creative, disciplined a venture as composition itself.

This creative outlook came naturally to the scion of the Mendelssohn family, whose remarkable, generations-long journey seemed impelled by the conviction that there was no greater good than full intellectual, economic, and cultural enfranchisement, and no higher calling than the call to citizenship. Mendelssohn's mother, Lea, was the granddaughter of Daniel Itzig, financial adviser to Friedrich II and one of Prussia's richest inhabitants; Itzig would become the first Jew in Prussia to be granted a patent of naturalization. Felix's father, Abraham – who had made a sizeable fortune of his own