

With Mendelssohn at the Piano

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Q. Mendelssohn's name is hardly obscure, yet all are agreed that in many important respects he is a neglected and underrated composer.

KUERTI. I think perhaps part of the problem is that his music is so eminently natural and thus understandable, that snobs undervalue it because you don't have to struggle to enjoy it and write long treatises to explain and justify it.

I've had the same experience. I was allowed to include the *Andante and Rondo Capriccioso* on a program for the festival in Husum, Germany, of 'Rarities' for piano! But like Daniel (Adni) I don't think one can really say Mendelssohn is neglected, though some of his great masterworks certainly are, such as the Oratorio *Paulus* or the grief-filled last String Quartet in F minor, written in 48 hours immediately after the death of his beloved sister.

Q. Is he widely misunderstood, even by some who can't plead ignorance of his music?

KUERTI. And he also wrote that 'the emotions in music are not too vague, but far too precise to be expressed in words,' so it's hard to pinpoint what touches us so deeply in his music, but I think the purity of his character and the wholesomeness of his music shine through, enhanced by a miraculous inventiveness and a quite inimitable feeling of exhilaration.

Q. Are there pianistic challenges which are typically Mendelssohnian?

KUERTI. Getting back to the fingers, there are figurations and pianistic devices which are unmistakably Mendelssohnian and definitely challenging. For instance, when the melody is shared by the two hands in the middle register, while the right hand is tearing up and down with arpeggios, and the left is dipping down to provide the bass line. Think of the wonderful *Étude* in B flat minor, or parts of the D minor Concerto!

Q. In which of course, polyphony plays a central role.

KUERTI. And there's plenty of polyphony, even aside from the wonderful fugues. The development of the finale of the Op. 28 Fantasy, for example, has a wonderful countersubject, picked up, à la Beethoven, from the (otherwise unimportant) last four notes of the exposition, which continues to dance, and eventually *shout*, under the torrent of semi-quavers! This sort of thing happens quite regularly in Mendelssohn.

Q. What do you think are his most unjustly neglected piano works?

KUERTI. To all these I'd definitely add the *Scherzo à Capriccio* in F sharp minor – and let's not forget the delightful *Serenade and Allegro Giocoso*, Op. 43, which is a particular favourite of mine.

Q. Are there lessons for the pianist in Mendelssohn's chamber and orchestral works?

KUERTI. Not in the Sextet there isn't! I agree it's quite charming but it really resembles a mini concerto. The violas, cello and bass have almost nothing of interest, and the virtuosity is a bit over the top. And I disagree about the D Major Cello Sonata, which I far prefer to the B-flat. It has a majestic, joyful élan, splendid ideas, a very original slow movement, and a delightful scherzo. I also particularly like the Violin Sonata in F minor, Op. 4 (there are two in F minor), which is hardly ever played.

Q. Are you familiar with his most recently discovered piano works?

KUERTI. Please tell us about them!

Q. And finally, Desert Island Picks. If you were each allowed only four of his piano works, which would they be?

KUERTI. ...but to tell the truth I'd rather have String Quartets, Quintets, *Paulus*, and *Lobgesang* (the Second Symphony). Much though I love Mendelssohn, I really don't think we get the greatest of him in the piano works.