THE RELIGION OF THE MENDELSSOHNS.

BY THE EDITOR.

FEBRUARY of the current year was a month of centennial birthdays. Naturalists celebrated Darwin, American patriots Lincoln, and lovers of music, Mendelssohn. However the two former, stars of first magnitude in science and politics, almost eclipsed the brilliant representative in the realm of tones, for science and statecraft possess a more absorbing and general interest than music. Nevertheless we do not wish to let the year pass without a tribute to that wonderful genius, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, whose compositions have become household possessions in every civilized home where music is known and cultivated.

Felix Mendelssohn, the great composer, is the scion of a remarkable family. It is said that the education of the child should begin with the grandfather. In the case of Felix Mendelssohn, it actually did begin with Moses Mendelssohn, the grandfather of the composer. We will better understand the success of his life, and the character of his work, if we see it in connection with his ancestral past.

Moses Mendelssohn, the grandfather of Felix, was a philosopher of no common power, who had made his way in the world in spite of many difficulties, and who had gained an unstinted recognition from the best minds of his contemporaries, and that at a time when the prejudice against Jews was still very strong.

Moses Mendelssohn was born September 6, 1729, at Dessau, where his father, Mendel, was a poorly paid instructor in a Jewish congregation. In those days the Jews had not as yet adopted the use of family names, and so Moses, the son of Mendel, was commonly called "Mendelssohn." Even as a child, Moses was possessed of a burning thirst for knowledge. He induced his father to send him to Berlin where at an early age he became thoroughly familiar with the hardships of the struggle for existence. All odds were
against him. In addition to poverty he had to bear the burden of an unattractive exterior. His pronounced Jewish features were certainly not improved by his being hunchbacked from the result of overwork and illness, and his awkward diffidence became more con-

spicuous because he stuttered. Yet with advancing years his face became transfigured by the expression of his thoughtful eye which rendered his personality both interesting and sympathetic.

MOSES MENDELSSOHN.

From an engraving by J. G. Müller, after a painting by Frisch.
The poor Jewish-lad considered himself fortunate when in 1750 he became tutor to the children of Mr. Bernhard, a wealthy Israelitish silk manufacturer who afterwards, on account of the reliability of his talented protegé, kept him in his office as a bookkeeper and in his will made him a partner in the business.

Moses Mendelssohn developed an unusual literary talent in the line of popular philosophy, and it means much that he came into friendly relation with the foremost thinkers of his age, among them Kant and Lessing. It is well known that Moses Mendelssohn furnished the main characteristics for the hero of Lessing's great religious drama, "Nathan the Wise."

Moses was engaged in 1762 to Frommet, the daughter of a

* This famous artist was later married to Mendelssohn's sister Fanny.
Jewish merchant, Abraham Guggenheim of Hamburg. She had become interested in him on account of his writings and was so charmed with his mental accomplishments that she overlooked the bodily shortcomings of the man.

Among the children of Moses Mendelssohn we must mention the second son, Abraham, the father of Felix, the composer, who was born December 11, 1776, and it is interesting to note how the inheritance of genius appears to have skipped one link, for Abraham was distinguished by neither talents nor vices. He lived for some time in Paris where he was cashier in the bank of M. Fould, but
Joseph. He was an ordinary mortal of the average type without originality, and the only thing worth mentioning of him is the independence which he showed mainly in the education of his children. He took the bold step of cutting himself loose from the synagogue, which naturally alienated from him many of his Jewish customers. In honest recognition of his shortcomings Abraham Mendelssohn acknowledged the fact that he lacked the talents both of his father and his son, and the following bon mot is attributed to him in his later years when Felix had become famous. "In my youth I was the son of my father," he used to say, "and now I am the father of my son." In the same mood he spoke of himself as standing between the two great Mendelssohns like a dash—or a blank—as the Germans call it, a Gedankenstrich, which is commonly used whenever thoughts pause.

The change of mind in Abraham which estranged him from Judaism and caused him to have his family join the Protestant Church, was prepared gradually. First we must know that his sister Dorothea had married Friedrich von Schlegel, the great poet of the romantic school. Further Jacob Salomon, his brother-in-law, exercised a great influence on his sister and her husband. He had renounced the faith of his fathers and in 1805 became a Christian assuming in baptism the name Bartholdy.

For a Jew this Jacob Bartholdy had a remarkable career. He served in the Austrian army as a lieutenant during the war of 1809 and afterwards became consul-general of Prussia at Rome. He was a lover of art and had his Italian villa ornamented with frescoes by Overbeck, Cornelius, Veit and Schadow. He died in 1825 and made his sister Leah Mendelssohn his heiress. It was he who induced Abraham Mendelssohn to have his children educated in the Christian religion and baptized. Abraham, himself, adopted Christianity also but not without some reluctance, for he was not baptized until 1822, and we will say here in explanation of this step that he was opposed to any religion which claimed to be of supernatural origin. He left the synagogue, because the rabbis in his days insisted on this feature of their faith, while Christianity under the influence of Schleiermacher and the rationalist movement had, at least in the large cities, broadened into a humanistic religion, and Abraham Mendelssohn stated explicitly that he was attracted by Christianity, not on account of dogmas but through its ethical significance.
The boldness of Abraham Mendelssohn in having his children brought up in the Christian Church will be better understood when we consider that the grandparents were never informed of the
event, because in spite of their broadened views they clung with great tenacity to their Jewish traditions. This was especially true of the parents of Felix Mendelssohn's mother, but Moses Mendelssohn, too, was by no means inclined to renounce the religion of his fathers. We must remember that in 1769 Lavater had made an attempt to convert him to Christianity, and Moses refused to accede to the proposition in a dignified and noble manner. His reply was
published under the title, *Schreiben an den Herrn Lavater in Zürich* (1770). He was not as narrow as most of his co-religionists of that time, but instead of leaving the synagogue he did his best to broaden and develop it to a deeper and also more modern conception. He published not only a German translation of the Pentateuch but he also translated the Psalms and introduced new features into the Jewish service by having some psalms of Schubert’s composition used in the style of hymns.

Abraham Mendelssohn assumed for himself and his children in baptism the name of his brother-in-law, Bartholdy, and when his son Felix, the composer, throughout his life clung to the double name, Mendelssohn Bartholdy, he thereby endorsed the step taken by his father. The additional name, Bartholdy, has since then remained a mark of distinction between the Christian and the Jewish Mendelssohns.*

Felix received his first instruction in music from his mother and later on was a disciple of Berger in piano, and of Zelter, the well-known composer and friend of Goethe, in counterpoint and composition. His first laurels he gained with his opera “The Marriage of Gammacho” (1827), and his overture to “Midsummer Night’s Dream.” Besides his overture to “The Hebrides,” his “Night of Walpurgis,” and his fairy tale, “The Beautiful Melusine,” he wrote the “Songs Without Words” and a great deal of church music. After three visits to England he was appointed director of the city orchestra at Düsseldorf in 1833. In 1835 we find him in Leipsic as a leader of the Gewandhaus Concerts. Here he completed his oratorio “Paulus” which was first performed at Düsseldorf in 1836. The next year he married Cecilie Jeanrenaud, the daughter of a clergyman of the Reformed Church at Frankfort on the Main. In 1841 he went to Berlin on a special invitation of King Frederick William IV, and here he completed his music for Sophocles’s Antigone.

After a sojourn in Leipsic, 1842-43, he returned to Berlin as leader of the church music at the Cathedral and director of the Royal orchestra on the special appointment of the King. In spite of the royal favor he left Berlin in 1845 and stayed successively in Frankfort on the Main, in Leipsic, and in Birmingham, where his “Elijah” was performed for the first time.

In 1847 he returned to Leipsic and in the same year to Baden Baden and Switzerland. Having returned again to Leipsic in Sep-

* Following the usage of Felix, the double name “Mendelssohn Bartholdy” should not be hyphenated.
tember, he fell sick and after a short illness died on November 4, 1847.

We barely enumerate these items of his life, for it is not our intention to enter into details, partly because they are well known and partly because they have a special interest only for students of the history of music. At present we intend only to characterize in large outlines his religious attitude, and we will say that in spite of his reverence for the faith of his fathers, his music as well as the
world-conception which his art expressed, was imbued with the spirit of Protestant Christianity which showed itself not only in his own composition but also in his reform of church music, especially in the revival of Bach—a movement which Mendelssohn started and which continues in force to the present day.

To-day we are all aware of the significance of Bach in the do-

![Johann Sebastian Bach](image)

main of music, but that Bach is now well known is one of the merits of Mendelssohn, and he accomplished this through a revival of Bach's great masterpiece "The Passion According to Matthew." This powerful composition had been written and performed about a century before, on April 15, 1729, and soon after its master's death had fallen into oblivion. Mendelssohn discovered by accident one
of the few manuscripts which had been preserved by some good fortune, and he was overcome with a desire to bring back to life this one of the grandest musical conceptions that ever existed. He was supported in his endeavor by the opera singer Devrient who pos-

sessed a clear and well-trained voice especially suited to take the part of Jesus. There was one difficulty which the young musician had to encounter in the person of his own master, Zelter, a man who
in spite of his many good qualities, was small enough to envy his own pupil the glory of performing a masterpiece which he himself felt incapable of undertaking, and our diffident young Felix by himself would not have been able to turn the scales. But here his friend Devrient came to the rescue. He visited Zelter and personally pleaded with him. At first Zelter refused, and used the strongest terms in depreciation of young Mendelssohn who was present. Devrient was not to be refused and Zelter yielded at last in consideration of the fact that the man who undertook this great work was his disciple. Young Mendelssohn used to wonder at the strange fate of Christian music represented by Bach, which had to be rescued from perpetual oblivion by an actor and a Jew.*

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy was of Jewish extraction but of Christian education and a cosmopolitan in art. Among his fellow composers he was distinguished by the breadth of his education. His artistic skill was not limited to music. He was talented also with brush and pencil, and we here reproduce one of his paintings which he sketched from nature. He had more general knowledge in the history of art and the sciences, and especially in philosophy and religion, than any other musician of his time, and this is noticeable in his compositions.

All his compositions are permeated by a devout and deeply religious spirit. It is true he has not scaled the lofty heights of Beethoven’s sonatas; he is no Titan, no prophet of a new dispensation, nor a hero of gigantic stature; but he is all through filled with harmony, and his melody is sweet, elevating and pure. There is a classical beauty in his tones which proves him to be a composer by God’s grace. Whoever listens to his “Songs Without Words” will feel that the composer’s soul is at peace with God and the world. His melodies breathe an unquestioning and pious belief in the goodness of God and are calculated to fill the hearer’s soul with a sentiment of restful joy.

*Here Mendelssohn used the contemptuous expression Judenjunge, almost equivalent in implication to the English slang “Sheeny.”