

Mendelssohn and Me: Playing the complete organ works

Jay Zoller



Jay Zoller with his display of Mendelssohn art (photo credit: by Rachel Zoller)

This article might also be entitled “What possessed me to try and perform all of Mendelssohn’s organ works?” I can remember well working on the *Prelude and Fugue No. 1 in C Minor* during the beginning of my undergraduate degree. Fortunately, I have forgotten most of the long hours I put in practicing, but I do recall that it was quite a few before the music was ready to be heard by an audience.

Over the years I have added several more of the major Mendelssohn pieces to my repertoire; the Preludes and Fugues Nos. 2 and 3, and three of the Sonatas, Nos. 1, 2, and 6. After a time, I came across music that had been considered lost after World War II; I discovered in my newly purchased Bärenreiter Edition a whole new world of Mendelssohn. I immediately learned and played the *Fantasia and Fugue in G Minor*, a piece that the 14-year-old Felix had composed.

As 2009 approached, I thought about how nice it would be to play all the works in honor of the Mendelssohn 200th birthday. I looked at some of the other pieces, but I was busy with reworking a Wunderlich piece (THE DIAPASON, April 2009 and September 2009) and was scheduled to play it in Germany in the spring.

After the trip was over, I began to look at my two volumes again. How bad could it be, really? I already knew half of the Sonatas. I knew all the Preludes and Fugues; and, the Fantasy and Fugue. I was halfway there!

Wrong! There is a tremendous amount of music, and just because some of it was written by a 14-year-old doesn’t mean that it is easy. The young Felix was a mature composer at age 14, with 100 compositions to his credit. So, I continued to practice, devoting my summer to the Mendelssohn compositions, and have found that my appreciation of this man has increased tenfold.

The organ works require three recitals in order to program them all. I decided to include two of the Sonatas in each program, beginning with No. 5 and No. 6 in the first concert and working backward. One of the three Preludes and Fugues opened each program, beginning with the first. I programmed the remaining works between those according to the year they were written (some early works in each program), the keys, the lengths, and the volume, so there was variety.

As I practiced, I also re-read *Mendelssohn—A Life in Music* by R. Larry Todd, a book that I found to be most helpful for background information about Felix as



Hutchings organ, St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, Newcastle, ME (photo credit: Jay Zoller)



Mendelssohn, Groenmarkt

well as discussions on some of the organ works. The editor’s notes in the Bärenreiter Edition are also most helpful. The book *Fanny Mendelssohn* by Françoise Tillard was also a big help for family information. As I learned more, I discovered that I wanted to share some of my knowledge with the audience. Then too,

some of my audience began asking questions even before the series began. The concerts took place October 4, 18, and November 8.

I began my first recital with an overview of Felix and then went into the children’s schooling and training in keyboard and composition. In later talks I touched on how the Sonatas and Preludes and Fugues came to be written, and at the last concert I talked about the family tree, their history, and how the name Bartholdy came to be added to the Mendelssohn name. In addition, I made occasional comments on particular pieces of music as I went along.

My second interest, which was stimulated by my visit to the Mendelssohn home in Leipzig last spring, was in Felix’s artwork. Many people do not realize that Felix was an accomplished artist as well as musician, and I wanted to have people see some of his work. I managed to put together a very small art show of prints, which I encouraged people to look at during the receptions that followed each concert. The receptions were hosted by my wife and allowed me to listen to some of the excitement that had been generated by the music.

The cycle of Mendelssohn’s organ works is hard work, but has proved to be educational to me in more ways than just learning new music. My appreciation for the accomplishments of this unique man has grown immensely, and now that the series is over I feel a strange sadness as though saying good-bye to a good friend. But then, it is not really good-bye because we will always have his organ music.

The organ

The towns of Damariscotta and Newcastle sit in a beautiful area known as mid-coast Maine. I had decided that I

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Church interior (photo credit: Jay Zoller)



Triptych with some of the stenciling (photo credit: Jay Zoller)

Program One, October 4, 2009

Prelude and Fugue in c minor, op. 37, no. 1 (1834/37)
 Andante in D Major (1823)
 Chorale and Variation "Herzlich tut mich verlangen" (1840)
 Trio in F Major (1844)
 Sonata V in D Major, op. 65, no. 5 (1844)
 Allegro in d minor/D Major (1844)
 Ostinato in c minor (1823)
 Sonata VI in d minor, op. 65, no. 6 (1845)

Program Two, October 18, 2009

Prelude and Fugue in G Major, op. 37, no. 2 (1836/1837)
 Theme with Variations (1844)
 Prelude in d minor (1820)
 Allegro moderato maestoso in C Major (1845)
 Sonata III in A Major, op. 65, no. 3 (1844)
 Allegro in B-flat Major (1844)
 Chorale with Variations "Wie gross ist des Allmächt'gen Güte" (1823)
 Andante alla Marcia (1845)
 Sonata IV in B-flat Major, op. 65, no. 4 (1845)

Program Three, November 8, 2009

Prelude and Fugue in d minor, op. 37, no. 3 (1833/37)
 Three fugues: B-flat Major (1845), f minor (1839), e minor (1839)
 Sonata II in c minor, op. 65, no. 2 (1831/39/44)
 Fantasia and Fugue in g minor (1823)
 Two Chorales: A-flat Major (1844), D Major (1844)
 Nachspiel D-Dur (1831)
 Prelude in c minor (1841)
 Sonata I in f minor, op. 65, no. 1 (1844)

wanted to play these recitals near home, and the two towns boast four beautiful little tracker organs: Simmons in the Baptist church, Cole and Woodberry in the Catholic church, and Hutchings in both the Congregational and Episcopal churches. After some consideration, I decided to play the series in the church to which I belong, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, primarily because the organ has a reed on both manuals. St. Andrew's is nestled next to the tidal Damariscotta River and is surrounded by woods and large old homes.

The church and the organ case were designed by Henry Vaughn (1845–1917), who also designed three buildings at Bowdoin College and the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Vaughn designed St. Andrew's in the "half-timber" style, which was popular in England in the 15th century. The exterior of the church gives little hint of the richness of the interior. The church, according to Vaughn's own description:

... is divided into seven bays by arches which form the principals of the roof. The chancel consists of two bays and has an arched roof (barrel-vaulted) divided by

ribs into square panels and decorated with emblems and monograms. The nave has an open timber roof.

The dominant colors are olive green and maroon. The overall scheme of elaborately painted stencil work is Vaughn's design. When the vestry of the church was unwilling to fund it, Vaughn did it himself, taking an entire summer and working principally on his back, recalling the tradition of Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel.

The gilded triptych is a London recreation of a 14th-century Florentine triptych. The central panel is probably a copy of a Perugino "Madonna and Child, Enthroned." The figures on the side panels are said to have been taken from the "Baptism of Christ" by Andrea del Verocchio, now in the Uffizi in Florence, Italy. This is a most beautiful setting for listening to the music of Felix Mendelssohn.

The organ was built by George Hutchings of Boston in 1888. The casework was designed by Vaughn and shows his exquisite handling of 15th-century flamboyant woodwork. Although not large, and despite speaking from the side of the chancel, the organ sound carries nicely throughout the sanctuary. The stoplist is as follows:

GREAT

- 8' Open Diapason
- 8' Melodia
- 8' Dolcissimo
- 4' Octave
- 4' Flute D'Amour
- 2 7/8' Twelfth
- 2' Fifteenth
- 8' Trumpet

SWELL

- 16' Bourdon
- 8' Open Diapason
- 8' Salicional
- 8' Stopped Diapason
- 4' Flute Harmonique
- 4' Violina
- 2' Flautino
- 8' Oboe

PEDAL

- 16' Bourdon
- Swell to Pedal
- Great to Pedal
- Swell to Great
- Swell to Great 4' (hitch-down)
- Great to Pedal reversible
- Tremolo

The organ also has four mechanical pistons operated by foot pedals: Forte Great, Piano Great, Forte Swell, Piano Swell. ■

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Jay Zoller is organist at South Parish Congregational Church in Augusta, Maine, where he plays the church's historic 1866 E. & G.G. Hook organ. He holds degrees from the University of New Hampshire and the School of



Sketch of Mendelssohn at age eleven, by an unknown artist

Theology at Boston University. He is a retired designer for the Andover Organ Company and currently designs for the Organ Clearing House. He resides in Newcastle, Maine, with his wife Rachel.

In addition to writing several articles about Heinz Wunderlich for *The American Organist*, Choir and Organ, and *THE DIAPASON*, he has played in all-Wunderlich recitals in Hamburg, Germany in 1999, 2004, and 2009. His article, "Heinz Wunderlich at 90," appeared in the April 2009 issue of *THE DIAPASON*.

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