

Helene Whitson, San Francisco Lyric Chorus, Program Notes

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Hear My Prayer

Completed on January 25, 1844, Mendelssohn's *Hear My Prayer* originally was written in German. *Hear My Prayer* originally was written in German. *Hear My Prayer* and dedicated to Wilhelm Taubert, one of Mendelssohn's composer friends. The work, based on texts from Psalm 55, has had periods of great popularity and is known especially for the solo, *O for the wings of a dove*, an aria which shows Mendelssohn's extensive lyrical and melodic gifts.

Mendelssohn sets the first three sections of this Psalm, creating a mini-drama. The narrator, King David, entreats God for protection against his enemies, expressing his fear and their anger. He worries, but trusts God to save him. Part 1 introduces us to the narrator, beseeching the Almighty to come and save him from his enemies, for he feels very alone. Mendelssohn programmatically sets Part 2 as King David describes dramatically the forces arrayed against him, and the chorus reiterates the dangers and the narrator's pleas. Part 3 returns to introspection and contemplation as the narrator comments that if only he could fly away from turmoil, he would seek a quiet, peaceful place in which to spend the rest of his days. The chorus concurs with these thoughts.

One of the most brilliant of the early Romantic composers, Felix Mendelssohn was born in 1809 in Hamburg, Germany. He came from a wealthy, distinguished, Jewish, intellectual, artistic and banking family, which converted to Christianity in 1816, and at this time his father added the name Bartholdy to the Mendelssohn surname. His grandfather was the famous philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn.

When Felix Mendelssohn was a child, the family moved to Berlin, and he spent his childhood in contact with famous writers, artists and others influential in the cultural life of the city. An extraordinarily gifted child, young Felix was matched by his equally talented older sister, Fanny, also a musician and composer. Felix and Fanny were very close as children, and often performed together. He began studying piano with his mother at an early age, later studying piano with Ludwig Berger in Berlin and composition with Carl Zelter. He began composing at the age of nine, as well as giving public performances on the piano.

In addition to the piano, Mendelssohn studied violin, organ, composition and music theory, as well as the general subjects of history, classics, Greek, Latin, geography, arithmetic and drawing, creating over 50 watercolor landscapes. In 1820, at the age of 11, he composed his first work, a Singspiel, or ballad opera. He began to explore other forms of composition, including sonatas, concertos, symphonies for string orchestras and various works for piano. At the age of 17, he composed one of his most well known works, the Overture to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In 1823 he received an important gift from his grandmother—a score of Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*. He became fascinated by the work of Bach and was responsible for the 19th century rediscovery of this great master, beginning with a celebrated 1829 performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*, the first performance of this work since Bach's death 80 years before. Between 1829 and 1832, Mendelssohn began a series of

travels in Europe, visiting England, Scotland, Wales, Switzerland, Italy and France. During these travels, he composed, as well as performed and conducted his own music and the music of others. His travels inspired various compositions, such as the Fingal's Cave Overture, the Scottish and Italian Symphonies. This characteristic of Romantic composition—influence by nature, by one's surroundings—is evident in these and others of Mendelssohn's programmatic works, works which express the moods and emotions inspired by what he saw and experienced.

Mendelssohn was not only a gifted composer and performer, but an outstanding conductor. In 1833, he became Music Director for the musical activities of the town of Düsseldorf, responsible for conducting the choral and orchestral societies, as well as sacred music for the Catholic services. For church services, he often brought back the works of the old masters, performing masses by Mozart, Haydn, Cherubini and Beethoven, cantatas by Bach, and earlier sacred music by Palestrina, Lotti and Durante. As the city's choral conductor, he revived the oratorio, presenting such works as Haydn's *Seasons and Creation*, Handel's *Alexander's Feast*, *Alexander's Feast*, *Alexander's Feast Messiah*, *Judas Maccabeus*, and his own works, including his oratorio, *St. Paul*. For the orchestra, he directed many of his own works, including the *Italian Symphony* and *Italian Symphony* and *Italian Symphony Calm Seas and Prosperous Voyage Overture*. In 1835, Mendelssohn became the Music Director of Leipzig's famous Gewandhaus Orchestra, a position he held until his death. He also founded the Leipzig Conservatory of Music. During his years in Leipzig, he performed many of his own works, as well as works by contemporaries, such as Schumann, Berlioz, Weber and the "old masters"—Mozart, Bach, Handel, Haydn. He also rediscovered the work of Schubert, including his *Ninth Symphony*. In addition to his work in Leipzig, he conducted in Berlin and abroad, always returning to Leipzig after a sabbatical elsewhere. He often conducted in England, where he was a favorite of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. In addition to his conducting skills, he was in demand as a music festival organizer, especially in Germany and Birmingham, England. His sister died in Spring, 1847, and Mendelssohn, grief-stricken at her death, exhausted from touring and from the hectic pace of his life, died in Fall, 1847.

Mendelssohn was a composer of lyricism, melody and passion. He contributed much to that which we consider "Romantic." He composed in many different genres, and in each one, there are works considered as standard. His concert overtures include such familiar titles as the *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Fingal's Cave Overture*, and the overture to Victor Hugo's play *Ruy Blas*. His *Violin Concerto in E minor* is one of the jewels of the Romantic repertoire, as are his two piano concertos. His wonderful symphonies are full of melody and expression. He was a gifted composer of chamber music, including his delightful *Octet for double string quartet*, and his piano *Octet for double string quartet*, and his piano *Octet for double string quartet trios*. His works for solo piano, including the *Songs without Words*, are standard works in the piano repertoire. His music for the stage includes the music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with its familiar *Wedding March*. His oratorios, *St. Paul* and especially *St. Paul* and especially *St. Paul Elijah*, are popular choral favorites. He was a prolific composer of smaller choral works, both secular and sacred, as well as solo songs. The Christmas carol, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, was adapted by W. H. Cummings from a chorus in one of Mendelssohn's secular cantatas.