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The Authenticity of Genius Transcript

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The Authenticity of Genius

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You see that I have arrived with eight accomplices today, all named on the programme sheet. I shall just tell you how we arrived at this and the purpose. As you know, the overriding theme of these six lectures, this year has been the theme of authenticity. We have done various aspects such as whether the piece in question is what it says on the tin and that sort of thing. Last time, there were many fakes. The next lecture was going to be taking the story of music, as it were, from the manuscript, or from the library stage, into the sort of thing you can pick off the shelf and buy – i.e. the work of the musicologist, the librarian and the historian. The final lecture will carry that story on – dealing with the business of picking the printed volume off the shelf and deciding to include it in a recital, in a concert, in a recording, and for that, I will be joined by Dame Emma Kirby. We will talk about what goes on in a performer's life and in a performer's mind when faced with a new piece of repertoire and how you bring it to life respectably from the silent piece of music that you took from the library or bought off the shelf. That does seem to leave one stage missing – the stage before the thing hits the paper, which is what goes on to create this music, and that is why we have "Authenticity of Genius" today.

First of all, the obvious thing would be to talk about inspiration, but if you think about it, there is not much you can say about that. If we could pin it down and give an hour's lecture on inspiration, you would all go home inspired and make a great career. It is similar to the secrets of making a best hit or an Oscar winning movie – nobody can quite pin down what the recipe is, and therefore looking for it tends to lead you feeling less inspired and more depressed than you would otherwise in just admiring it.

However, it is useful to consider what we mean when dealing with inspired prodigy or genius composers or performers. We might ask ourselves whether, to be a genius, you have to be precocious, for instance. You have to be talented. Does a genius have to be novel? They certainly have to be not totally indebted to people who came before. Does a prodigy have to be young? Do they not only have to be innovative, but also early on in their career? Are you looking for breadth in a genius or depth? Can they be terrifically good at one thing and one thing only? Do they even have to be young? Einstein does not stand out in most people's minds as a young face, but a rather older face with wild hair. Do you have to be polite? I would say, with Rameau, Beethoven or Van Gogh that you do not have to be sophisticated and civilised if you have that passport of genius behind you.

You do, I think, have to innovate. You have to surprise people probably more than once in order to get this credit, and you actually have to achieve something. You cannot go around saying "I am a prodigy", without giving some fairly continuous evidence of this. In music, the obvious one with whom I imagine everybody expect me to deal would be Mozart, but this has been done to death! You could ask for a lecture on Saint-Saens who was quite extraordinary, Schubert or even Korngold who was writing symphonies aged three. This output has to be sustained, and I think it has to be somebody that we recognise nowadays from mainstream repertoire. So my candidate for today, as you see, is Mendelssohn. I will give you a few reasons and then we shall look into some features, of the Octet, which was a piece he wrote at age 16.

Mendelssohn was lucky. He came from a famous family. They had money. His father, Abraham Mendelssohn always complained that he was totally overlooked in the world. He said that whenever he was on the street and people stopped him, they asked two questions: either "How is your father?" – Moses Mendelssohn, the famous Jewish philosopher or "How is your son?" – Felix Mendelssohn, who was a wizard at the violin and the piano and was turning his hand to composition. They never asked him how he was! He actually got the money together, gave a wonderful start in life to Felix Mendelssohn, with a home life where he could study practically anything he wanted, and he was very voracious. He could have, for his personal use, a hired professional orchestra, for home concerts on Sundays, and he turned out to be prodigiously gifted. On your programme sheet over you will see, for example, two very professional sketches that he did when he visited England on the way to his Scottish trip, which resulted in the Hebrides Overture and the beginnings of the Scottish Symphony. He had drawing lessons and painting lessons, all his life.

He started composing when he was about nine. When Mozart was nine, he already had some 80 pieces in his catalogue, so in that sense, Mendelssohn was not an early starter. However, of those 80 pieces from Mozart, hardly any are normally listened to, as regular, accepted, standard repertoire. We mostly know Mozart's earliest work starting from age 18, with things such as the A Major Symphony. There was plenty of the earlier stuff – some of it was no good at all, but it was written at a remarkably early age and without any real sense of self-criticism. Before Mendelssohn had written the Octet; he had written the Rondo Capriccioso for piano and orchestra – that is still in the repertoire; he had written five String Symphonies – they were all played at home for these Sunday concerts; a Concerto for Piano and Violin; and lots of short organ pieces, choral pieces, a violin sonata and even a viola sonata.

He was a prodigious performer on the violin and on the piano. He was also quite a good poet. He was a multi-linguist – he spoke English, French, Italian, Spanish, German, Latin and Greek. He translated easily from Greek directly into Latin, without bothering to put it into German. They said that, as a philosopher, he was so well-taught that he could discuss with any of the Berlin University philosophers on almost any subject and almost any

language. Curiously, he did not seem to have a grip of Hebrew - I have always wondered why that was missed. In case you thought he was a geek, he was also famous as a very strong swimmer! He had a lucky upbringing, all these talents, and, at age 16, came the Octet and at age 17, came the Overture to *Midsummer Night's Dream* - both are absolutely standard pieces nowadays. As I say, there is nothing in Mozart's repertoire against which that could be matched.

In the case of the Octet, we need to ask what makes it stand out and show that this boy is particularly gifted and different.

The first thing to note is that we must call it an octet and not a work for double quartet. It is important that you get the grouping clear in your mind. There are, contained here, two string quartets, so you have four violins, two violas and two cellos. There were models that Mendelssohn could have looked at which did use quartet versus quartet. Spohr, for example, wrote four of these, and his style was definitely that quartet one speaks, quartet two answers it, they all shout together, then quartet two does something, quartet one does something, and they all shout together. It is a little bit of obvious antiphony. Spohr came across Mendelssohn's Octet and he said that his own double quartets were the only ones of their kind - "An Octet for stringed instruments by Mendelssohn Bartholdy belongs to quite another kind of art, in which the two quartets do not concert and interchange in double choir with each other, but all eight instruments work together." It is genuinely a piece for eight equal individuals, and you will notice that nowhere in the piece do they actually play as quartet versus quartet. You will always find different combinations and different ways of revealing the players.

We can demonstrate one or two combinations, for example. The last movement is winding up the whole piece with a fugue and it does the obvious thing. A fugue consists of subject entries - this is a rather 'stampede-of-buffalos' type of fugue subject that begins at the bottom with the cello and goes round the group introducing itself. You can very easily count, without any need to concentrate on texture, any form of analysis or on thematic things. You can take it entirely by numbers and the fugal texture that is being built up. Notice how it ends when all the fugue is in; what they next play.

[Music plays]

There is an echo of Handel's 'and he shall reign forever' and the end. I think that is deliberate. Mendelssohn and everybody knew that oratorio well. You cannot quote it in the top line of a piece going at that rate without people saying that they know that melody. I think it was a deliberate, hardly private, joke. The reason for it being there was that this was written as a birthday piece offered to a great friend of his, Eduard Rietz - violin teacher, violinist and later leader of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. The piece was finished two days before the birthday so they did not have long to learn it and to perform it. If you turn to the beginning of the work rather than the finale which introduces all eight players you get a completely different texture showing that this is clearly a birthday present for one violinist.

[Music plays]

Mendelssohn put a strange instruction at the front of this piece which you would not expect to see on chamber music. He particularly marks on the first page of everybody's part that this piece is to be played in a symphonic manner, not in a chamber manner; he says particularly look out for the pianos and the fortes. As you can imagine, one of the big problems with eight players in this disposition is managing balance - one against seven is not always a very fair pairing off, and so you have to be very careful when considering who is speaking, who is saying something important, who should be subsidiary. On the other hand, he does not want it treated with the individuality of chamber music, but with the brio of an orchestral performance. In the slow movement, he shows you his orchestra, not by instruments, but by tessitura. We will hear some of the beginning of the slow movement because you will see how he is playing with what two cellos, accompanied by others, can do, and then he moves up the scale to what other violas and other violins can do and then he moves to the top. He moves through the tessitura of the group, without ever suggesting that there is actually a quartet in it.

[Music plays]

You will notice that no player is ignored in this setup, and particularly, the violas are not ignored. They get special treatment. When this piece was performed in public Mendelssohn, although he played violin and was apparently an exceptional player, chose to play second viola in the Octet so you might look out and see if you sense anything very particular in that part that caught his fancy. It is nice that he wanted to be inside this semi-orchestral texture and one that plays with all the groupings.

The remaining movement, the Scherzo, is my candidate for Mendelssohn's sheer genius in terms of originality. Most of what you have heard so far, at least in musical terms, could have been found in his string symphonies. It could have been found in other ensemble music. However, for a texture and a style and a message, the style he invented for the Scherzo of this piece, and he repeated himself more or less in the Scherzo of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, was something unique to Mendelssohn. There are hints of it in Schumann and there are also hints of it in Mendelssohn's earlier pieces. There is an experimental piano trio where you get a little bit of this fairy music.

He did not often admit, nor did his family admit, to there being any extra musical explanation for things. When

they asked him for an explanation of the Hebrides Overture, Ruy Blas, the Scottish Symphony or the Italian Symphony, he resolutely refused to give any programme notes, and he said the music stood for itself. In the case of this Scherzo, the first of quite a line of similar things, he did say that it had been based on ideas he acquired from the writing of Goethe. In Faust, you have the scene of Walpurgisnacht, the Halloween scene, with witches and fairies. Mendelssohn had just met Goethe, and they got on extremely well - talking poetry and philosophy for hours, if not days. Mendelssohn's sister, Fanny Mendelssohn, says that it was actually based on a little fragment of the Goethe Faust, describing Halloween, the Walpurgisnacht. She says it was "...with witches, fairies, and everything moving with the swiftness of lightning, everything new and strange, and, at the same time, most insinuating and pleasing. One feels so near to the world of spirits, carried away in the air, half inclined to snatch up a broomstick and follow the aerial procession. At the end, the first violin takes flight, with a featherlike lightness and everything has vanished." He says the whole piece has to be played lightly, staccato and pianissimo.

Here is a sample of this style because this, I think, is true Mendelssohn invention. He can copyright this effect.

[Music plays]

That comes again in an orchestrated form. Mendelssohn obviously liked it so much, when his first big full symphony was written he had doubts about its minuet and trio, so he scrapped it. He was always scrapping things. He was a great one for revising. He slipped in, instead, the Scherzo from the Octet, with added wind parts, so you have a complete orchestral additional layer available to you, and the Scherzo itself played by the Tutti orchestra. However, he knew it was going to become a trademark style of his, and one that other people have tried since to imitate, never quite so successfully.

Mendelssohn says he himself suffered from a disease he called 'revisien's krankheit', which is a sickness for revising. He said he could not see any piece of music of his lying on the table. He had to open it up, take his pen out, and improve it, so you get umpteen versions of most of his pieces. This accepted picture of the gilded youth sitting down gently and writing a symphony and handing it to the publisher is not accurate. He anguished over everything that was going on, and kept taking things back, saying they were not fit for publication. He refused the Italian Symphony, for example, publication. He did allow the Octet to be published, but only after he had tinkered with it quite a lot.

I will pass round, if you want to look at a beautiful example of calligraphy, the pretty fair score of the Octet as Mendelssohn wrote it, as a birthday present. However, if you try to follow this performance from that score, you will immediately get lost because every movement has many cuts, adaptations. Sometimes, he felt the point had been made at too great a length and he squashed it; sometimes, he had not made the transition sufficiently natural, he expanded it; sometimes he thought he had caught the viola on the bottom string too much, and so he moved it to a cello. He did quite a lot of adapting, obviously from his own experience playing and hearing the piece. He was not lacking in self-criticism, and I think that is another part of my campaign for Mendelssohn as the greatest musical prodigy. He had originality, perfect execution, he did it all when he was young - he died when he was 38, so he started early and never stopped. That additional thing, the continuous self-criticism meant that he would never let anything go that was sub-standard. I am open for suggestions after the performance of the Octet for anybody else who might vie for this top spot, but for the moment, this is my candidate.

Thank you very much.

[Music plays]

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