Rethinking Mendelssohn's Historicism: A Lesson from St. Paul

Author(s): Peter Mercer-Taylor

Reviewed work(s):


Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/764044

Accessed: 02/12/2012 17:21

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Rethinking Mendelssohn’s Historicism: A Lesson from St. Paul

PETER MERCER-TAYLOR

Despite the relative obscurity in which Mendelssohn’s St. Paul has languished for most of its existence, few critics would deny the work’s significance as a landmark in the emergence of compositional historicism in the nineteenth century. Premiered only a few years after Mendelssohn’s revival of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, St. Paul seems an almost polemically thoroughgoing effort to carve out a place in contemporary composition for the musical language of Bach’s long-neglected choral works. From the time of the oratorio’s premiere, however, it was one of the cornerstones of this stylistic reclamation—Mendelssohn’s inclusion of chorales—that most troubled the work’s commentators. For many deemed aesthetically untenable the incorporation of this liturgical idiom into a work which was never intended for the church.

In the discussion that follows, I will argue that a critical aspect of this work, one specifically concerning its chorales, has gone unrecognized. For the sequence of chorale settings that unfolds in the course of St. Paul culminates in what would appear a moment of self-reflexivity, of self-critique, in which the inappropriateness of the chorale in this context is effectively raised as an issue within the musical discourse itself. Recognizing the apparent self-consciousness with which Mendelssohn undertook the appropriation of this vital element of Bach’s style not only enriches our understanding of St. Paul itself,

---

but may shed a whole new light on Mendelssohn's conceptualization of the tasks of compositional historicism.

1

If we had to pinpoint the moment at which Felix Mendelssohn became a major force in European music, it would almost certainly be the evening of March 11, 1829, with the Berlin revival, under his direction, of J. S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. While the once popular notion that this performance single-handedly plucked Bach from the jaws of oblivion has long since been laid to rest, the event was undoubtedly a landmark in the reception of Bach's music in the nineteenth century, his choral music in particular. At the same time, Mendelssohn had placed himself, at a stroke, at the forefront of the increasingly widespread campaign to reclaim and consolidate a canon of distinguished works spanning Germany's musical past, a position he would hold for the rest of his life.

Though Handel's choral music had been enjoying revivals for nearly half a century by this time, and had never fallen into the obscurity of Bach's, Mendelssohn soon became one of Germany's key players on this front as well. Handel's works were the focus of the Lower Rhein Music Festivals Mendelssohn conducted in the early 30s, and, during this same period, figured prominently in the concert life of Düsseldorf during Mendelssohn's tenure as the city's musical director. Between 1833 and 1835, Mendelssohn conducted no fewer than five Handel oratorios in his own arrangements.


4 See, in particular Helmuth Christian Wolff, "Mendelssohn and Handel," *The Musical Quarterly* XLV/2 (1959), 175–90. Emblematic of Mendelssohn's role in this connection was the manner in which Elizabeth Sheppard chose to introduce the character of Seraphael—a thinly-fictionalized Felix Mendelssohn—in her novel, *Charles Auckester* (London, 1855). When the conductor intended to direct a chorus of hundreds in Handel's *Messiah* becomes incapacitated the moment the performance is supposed to begin, Seraphael emerges, yet anonymous, from the audience to conduct the work. After a flawless performance, conducted without a score, Seraphael disappears from the theater, too humble to reveal his identity or to acknowledge the frenzied applause of the crowd.
When Mendelssohn set about the composition of his own first oratorio, *St. Paul*, in the mid-30s, he appears to have been driven by the notion of creating a work which would draw on the legacies of Bach and Handel simultaneously. The result was a hybrid that proved troubling to commentators from the moment of its 1836 premiere. *St. Paul* was in many respects a welcome new installment in the Handelian tradition of dramatic oratorios on religious subjects. But there were strong influences of Bach’s religious music as well, and for all of its virtues, *St. Paul* struck many as an effort to bridge a gap whose absolute nature Mendelssohn had simply failed to grasp.\(^5\)

In his book, *Die Musik des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts und ihre Pflege*, A. B. Marx offers a succinct, roughly contemporary account of the gulf that separated Bach’s legacy from Handel’s:

There was one branch of the [oratorio] form which might be strictly classed under the heading of church music. It consisted of the solemn recitation (chanting) of the Gospel on Good Fridays and other great festivals, the choir and congregation alternately taking a part in the performance. Bach’s Passion Music is the perfection of the ecclesiastical oratorio, and pertains to divine worship. The other branch of this form of art was that which Handel brought over to England from Italy, and by the power of his genius raised to the height of importance which it has attained. This oratorio never belonged to the church; it merely employed biblical incidents—as was the tendency of those times—either for purely artistic purposes, or partly with a view to religious edification.\(^6\)

Marx goes on to dismiss *St. Paul* on precisely these grounds, as in this somewhat later passage concerning Graun’s *Der Tod Jesu* (an eighteenth-century “ecclesiastical” Passion oratorio that had become a standard part of Berlin’s Good Friday observances):

---

\(^5\) This was hardly Mendelssohn’s first compositional foray into chorale-based choral forms. In 1832, he had published a set of three chorale motets, op. 23, though as music explicitly intended for the church, these avoided the difficulties of *St. Paul*. More consequential from a compositional standpoint were half a dozen chorale cantatas composed between 1827 and 1832, which, despite their generally high quality, went unpublished during Mendelssohn’s lifetime (↔ B. W. Fritchard, “Mendelssohn’s chorale Cantatas: an Appraisal,” *The Musical Quarterly* LXII (1976), 1–24). Mendelssohn’s extensive use of chorales in festival music—the *Reformation* Symphony, the *Lobgesang*, and the “Gutenberg” Festgesang, for example—raises a rather different set of issues concerning the para-religious character of such occasions. See Georg Feder, “Zu Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdys geistlicher Musik,” in *Religiöse Musik in nicht-liturgischen Werken von Beethoven bis Reger*, Walter Wiora, ed., in the series Studien zur Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts, vol. 51 (Regensburg, 1978), 97–117.

[Graun's] work, like its author, took its rise from the people whose sphere of life was at that time much more closely connected with the church than it is now. . . . But to repeat the form of this church-oratorio outside the church, where all feelings and relations are different, is no progress, as I have already been obliged to assert in respect to Mendelssohn's "Paul". . . .

The most troublesome aspect of St. Paul, for Marx and others, was its incorporation of choraless, that element of Bach's choral music which most flagrantly, most irrefutably "pertained to divine worship." (Marx himself had worked with Mendelssohn on an early version of the St. Paul libretto, and this very issue appears to have played a key role in his decision to quit the project). The value of the chorale within its liturgical context, many argued, simply did not translate into value as entertainment in the concert hall. If the resurrection of

---

7 Ibid., 106.
8 The outlines of their unfruitful collaboration on the project are laid out in Marx's Memoirs, (Susan Gillespie, trans., in Mendelssohn and His World, R. Larry Todd, ed. [Princeton, 1991], 212–14). Marx here reveals one aspect of his objection to the idea of incorporating choraless into the work: "What? Chorales in Paul's time? And in the events that make up his life?" Marx is (probably not unconsciously) failing to distinguish here between "active chorales," those intoned by an actual crowd in the drama, and "meditative" chorales, which offer the audience an opportunity for their own religious reflection outside of the drama. Through this objection, Marx implies what Phillip Spitta makes explicit several decades later in a review of Mendelssohn and Julius Schubring's published correspondence (Vierteljahresschrift für Musikwissenschaft VIII [1892], 419–22), that only active chorales are appropriate to dramatic oratorio. Needless to say, Marx found nothing objectionable in J. S. Bach's use of chorales in Jesus' time. See also Fink's review in the Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung XXXIX (1837), 497, and Glen Stanley's insightful discussion of much of this material in "Bach's Erbe: The Chorale in the German Oratorio of the Early Nineteenth Century," 19th-Century Music XI/2 (1967), 121–49. Two important recent discussions of this work are found in Eric Dolfin's "Historismus in der Musik," (in Die Ausbreitung des Historismus über die Musik, Walter Wiora, ed.,. in the series Studien zur Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts, vol. 14 [Regensburg, 1969], 9–39) and Carl Dahlhaus' "Mendelssohn und die musikalischen Gattungstraditionen," [in Das Problem Mendelssohn, Carl Dahlhaus, ed.,. in the series Studien zur Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts, vol. 17 (Regensburg, 1974), 57–58]. By showing that the proportion of chorales, arias, and other choruses in St. Paul bears a much closer resemblance to the proportions of Mendelssohn's 1829 version of the St. Matthew Passion (heavily truncated) than to the original score (with which Mendelssohn was, of course, well acquainted), Dolfin rather cleverly demonstrates that, insofar as the work can be said to be modeled on Bach's masterpiece, it is modeled not on the Passion as it was composed, but as it was performed. Dahlhaus uses St. Paul to make a similar point, concluding his remarks with the observation, "Der Klassizismus erscheint nicht als Kopie der Klassik, an der er sich anlehnt, sondern er dokumentiert deren Wirkungsgeschichte." (58)

9 As Glen Stanley has effectively demonstrated ("Bach's Erbe"), the inclusion of chorales in oratorios had hardly died out after the middle of the eighteenth century, nor was it limited in the nineteenth century, to Mendelssohn's work. Chorales were a regular feature of the most popular oratorios from the last third of the eighteenth century (including works by C. P. E. Bach and Johann Heinrich Rolle), works which
Bach’s liturgical music in the secular performance spaces of the nineteenth century was legitimated, in most minds, by the quotation marks of historical performance, this did not authorize nineteenth-century composers to carry out a similar appropriation of still-contemporary liturgical music for modern, non-liturgical composition. Given the urgency with which Mendelssohn pursued the dissemination of Bach’s music in his own professional life, nothing could have been more logical than for him to attempt to create a compositional tradition on the shoulders of a performance tradition in which Bach’s chorale-based works were finally securing a firm position. But in so doing, it seemed, he failed to recognize the aesthetic snares implicit in so literal a reclamation of a historical language.

The discussion that follows will focus on the five chorales of St. Paul in an attempt to show that Mendelssohn’s handling of these numbers may actually testify to his full awareness of the aesthetic difficulty surrounding their inclusion. As we shall see, the presentation of the last chorale melody in the work enacts a celebratory reaffirmation of the chorale’s liturgical status, or rather, a multi-faceted symbolic reintegration of the chorale into the context of worship. In other words, Mendelssohn’s culminating gesture, as far as the chorales are concerned, is to draw our attention to precisely the issue that makes their inclusion in the oratorio problematic. For Mendelssohn, it seems, the process of reclaiming Bach’s musical language in modern composition was hardly as unreflective as has generally been supposed, but hinged on creating a musical arena within which the intrinsic tensions of this reclamation could themselves come under scrutiny.

In the chapter on “Historicism” in his book, Nineteenth-Century Music, Carl Dahlhaus describes the truly “historical” mode of listening—one that is “historical through and through”—as a reflected mode of perception, one ever aware of the distance separating past and present in any attempted reconstruction. In this

established no lasting performance tradition, but “probably remained in the memories of the generations that straddled the turn of the century” (126). Stanley also traces the use of chorales in Carl Loewe’s work of the 1830s and 40s, and of chorale-like material in Spohr’s work. None of this, as Stanley acknowledges, seriously threatens the notion that Bach’s model was paramount in Mendelssohn’s mind.

It is perhaps relevant that Mendelssohn himself excised a large proportion of the chorales from the St. Matthew Passion itself in his 1829 rendition of the work. Though Michael Marissen (1993) persuasively reconstructs the religious motivations that may have underpinned the great majority of Mendelssohn’s excisions in this performance, he admits to being able to find no such motivation behind the decision to cut these chorales. It is not impossible that Mendelssohn was demonstrating his own concerns about their appropriateness to the concert hall.
mode of perception, one's notions of the way things used to be overlap with a realization that the past is alien to the present, thereby creating a sense of ambiguity that can be enjoyed aesthetically in its own right. . . .

Though these remarks are intended to describe a condition in the listener, I suggest that they may form a valid description of the compositional process I will be detailing in the discussion that follows, perhaps pointing to a little-understood dimension of Mendelssohn's whole approach to compositional historicism.

1

While there can be little question of Mendelssohn's intention to invoke the *St. Matthew Passion* through the chorales of *St. Paul*, his handling of the chorales he *does* use differs from Bach's in at least one important respect: the character of the chorale accompaniments. The straightforward "church style"—a four-part, largely homorhythmic setting—had served for nearly all of the chorales in the *St. Matthew Passion*, with only two of the fifteen chorales in that work featuring anything more involved. In *St. Paul*, by contrast, only the first chorale is accompanied in so simple a fashion. Moreover, the four remaining chorales trace a distinct trajectory, with each successive accompanimental texture more elaborate than the last. As I will show, this carefully wrought design turns out to constitute an important element in a process through which the whole function of the chorale in the oratorio appears to be reconsidered.

Given the meticulous, highly self-conscious organicism of much of Mendelssohn's instrumental music, it is perhaps not surprising that *St. Paul*'s overture should present, in embryonic form, a loose approximation of the pattern that will govern the rest of the piece. There are two related but distinct formal procedures at work in this overture: at the same time that we can discern a traditional two-part structure,

---

11 Nineteenth-Century Music, 329.

12 In a letter of December 22, 1832, Mendelssohn requested that his collaborator, Julius Schubring come up with chorales that are "entirely on the order of the Bach Passion." (Briefwechsel zwischen Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Julius Schubring: zugleich ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Theorie des Oratoriums, ed. Julius Schubring [Leipzig, 1892], 22, quoted in Stanley, 121. Schubring recalls in his memoirs that Mendelssohn "always proved himself a thoughtful artist, and strove to obtain a clear appreciation of each separate point, such, for instance, as the admissability of the chorale, of the narrative recitatives, etc." (Mendelssohn and His World, 290; reprinted from Musical World XXXI [1866]). Interestingly, Mendelssohn here expresses concern over precisely the aspects of the work most clearly associated with Bach's practice.
with a slow introduction leading to a more animated fugue, the overture includes three complete statements of the Stollen of “Wacht auf,” a theme and two variations, we might say, whose increasingly involved accompanimental textures create a propulsive force of their own.

The overture begins with a strict, note-against-note harmonization of the chorale’s first three phrases. These are repeated with the addition of the most basic preludial gesture: an incessant, mostly conjunct line of quarter-notes against the predominant half-note motion of the tune. After a sixteen-measure extension, the final phrase comes to rest, at last, on a half-cadence. Some forty-seven measures into the motoric fugue that follows, the winds take up the chorale once more, depositing its first phrase as a cantus firmus at the top of the fugal texture. After three more statements of this phrase, each at a different pitch level, the Stollen of the chorale return as a whole, fortissimo.

Thus, on its first appearance, the chorale is harmonized note against note; the second places two notes against each of the chorale’s; in the third, the chorale is incorporated into a fugal texture whose rhythmic fabric is animated with continuous sixteenth-notes. As I have indicated, the overture serves, in this respect, as a road map for the rest of the chorales in the oratorio, which also begin with the church style and work their way toward a chorale’s cantus firmus-like appearance in fugue. It is to these numbers that I now turn.

The first vocal chorale, “Allein Gott in der Höh’ sei,” appears as no. 3. This is the only one in the oratorio set in a straightforward, four-part church style. A close approximation of this style is maintained in the second chorale, the somber “Dir, Herr, dir will ich mich ergeben,” which closes no. 9. This setting differs from the first only in being scored for three voices instead of the customary four (alto and soprano sing together). The third chorale appears as no. 16, the vocal reprise of “Wacht auf.” Here the horns and trumpets enliven the texture through the interpolation of two-measure fanfares after each vocal phrase (Example 1).

The first chorale in the oratorio’s second part, “O Jesu Christe, wahres Licht,” appears as the closing section of no. 29 (excerpted in

---

13 There is little point in attempting to determine the number of voices in this harmonization. We need only compare the first three notes of the second bassoon to the first three notes of the second viola to understand the informal character of Mendelssohn’s approach to voice-leading—these two move in unison for the first two notes, but then continue as different voices.

14 Since the rhythm of the chorale melody has been altered to fit the triple meter, it is impossible to give a simple ratio of accompaniment motion against melodic motion. The melody, in any event, is moving in half-notes and quarter-notes against the flow of sixteenths.
EXAMPLE 1. *St. Paul*, no. 16 (beginning).

Con moto

Soprano

Alto

Tenore

Basso

Sleepers, wake! a voice is call

Sleepers, wake! a voice is call

me der Wächter,

ing. it is the

me der Wächter,

ing. it is the
Example 2). With this number we enter an entirely new accompanimental world. The clarinets, bassoons, and 'cellos begin by trading off a gloomy arpeggio figure in sixteenth-notes (punctuated by chords from the strings) for three measures. The instruments fall silent for the duration of the first line of the chorale, then enter once more for another measure and a half. This alternation continues through the first stanza. In the second, the voices still take pauses between their lines, as before, but the instruments now play continuously offering an unbroken, intricately woven accompaniment to the chorale.

Thus, by the time we arrive at the final chorale of the work, a clear pattern has emerged. Chorale by chorale, finally stanza by stanza, the instruments have piled increasingly lavish accompaniments onto the voices' simple chordal homophony. With the last chorale tune of the piece, appearing in the final section of no. 36, this progression finds its culmination in the texture familiar from the last pages of the overture: “Wir glauben all' an einen Gott” is presented as the fifth voice in a four-part fugue already in full swing (see Example 3, mm. 141f).
The special role of no. 36 within the oratorio goes beyond the fact that it contains the work’s last chorale tune. With an extended opening recitative (36 measures), a brief but complete arioso (54 measures), and a substantial fugal closing section (134 measures), it is the most structurally complex number of the piece. At around eight-and-a-half minutes, it is the oratorio’s longest number, by the clock, by a margin of about two minutes. Further, apart from the massive chorus which opens the second part, the final fugue in no. 36 represents the only appearance of five-part choral music in the oratorio.
But if this number seems an important point of arrival in several respects, it is an enigmatic one, dramatically, musically, and theologically. In the remainder of this discussion, I will attempt to show that in spite of its problematic features, or rather as a consequence of them, this number constitutes one of the oratorio’s crucial epiphanies, a radical reconsideration of the whole function of the chorale within the musical discourse. We must begin with a broader view of the role of this number within the drama as a whole.

In the chorus that precedes no. 36, the heathens have mistaken Barnabas and Paul for Jupiter and Mercury, respectively, and offer the unsuspecting pair a prayer for clemency. In the opening recitative of no. 36, Paul angrily inveighs against their lack of understanding, insisting not only on his own mortality, but on the falseness of their entire pantheon. Paul’s recitative (shown in Figure 1, the text of the entire number) closes with the stern proclamation: “Gott wohnt nicht in Tempeln mit Menschen-Händen gemacht.” With the succeeding arioso, in D major, Paul’s language becomes affirmative for the first time, and he lays out a simple theological answer to the

```
91
Con molto di moto
A - ber un - ser  Gott ist im
But our God a - bid - eth in

96
Him - mel, er  schaf - fet  Al - les was  er
Hea - ven, His  will  di - rect - eth  all  the

101
will!
world!
```
EXAMPLE 3. (continued)

106

a - ber un - ser Gott ist im Him - mel, er

But our God abideth in Heaven, His

111

schaf - fet Al - les was er will, er Schaf - fet

will direct all the world, his will direct

116

Al - les, er schaf - fet Al - les was er

recteth, his will direct all the

122

Soprano 1.

A - ber

Alto

A - ber un - ser

Tenore

Tutti

A - ber un - ser Gott ist im Him -

But our God abideth in Heaven,

Bassp. Tutti

Bassp. Tutti

will. A - ber un - ser Gott ist im him -

world! But our God abideth in Heaven,

sempre forte
EXAMPLE 3. (continued)

127

un - ser Gott ist im Him - mel, ist im Him - mel,
God a - bid - eth in Hea - ven, high in Hea - ven.

Gott ist im Him - mel, im Him - mel,
bid - eth in Hea - ven, in Hea - ven.

mel, im Him - mel, a - ber un - ser
in Hea - ven, but our God a -

im Him - mel, a - ber un - ser Gott ist im
in Hea - ven, but our God a - bid - eth in

221

132

mel, a - ber un - ser Gott ist im Him - mel
ven, but our God a - bid - eth in Hea - ven.

Gott ist im Him - mel, a - ber un - ser Gott ist im high in Hea - ven, but our God a - bid - eth in

Gott ist im Him - mel, a - ber
bid - eth in Hea - ven.

Him - mel,
Hea - ven.
EXAMPLE 3. (continued)

Wir
Him

Him
Heaven!

un - ser Gott ist im Him - mel!
God abideth in Heaven!

aber un - ser Gott ist im Him -
but our God abideth in Heaven -

Er schaf - fet Al - les
His will direct all

Er schaf - fet Al - les
His will direct all

Er schaf - fet Al - les
His will direct all

Er schaf - fet Al - les
His will direct all

All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions
EXAMPLE 3. (continued)

146

All the world, all the world.

150

All the world, His will direct.
Recitative:
Tenor: Da das die Apostel hörten, zerrissen sie ihre Kleider und sprangen unter das Volk, schrien und sprachen:


[Paul, then Chorus]
Aber unser Gott ist im Himmel, er schaffet Alles was er will.

(Soprano II):
Wir glauben all' an einen Gott, Schöpfer Himmels und der Erden, der sich zum Vater geben hat, dass wir seine Kinder werden.

But when the apostles heard this, they tore their clothes and rushed into the crowd shouting:

Men, what are you doing? We are only human beings, no less mortal than you. The good news we bring tells you to turn from these follies to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea. As the prophet says, your idols are a sham, they are worth nothing, mere mockeries, which perish when the day of reckoning comes. God does not live in temples made by human hands.

Do you not know that you are God's temple? and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? And whoever destroys the temple of God, God will destroy. For the temple of God is holy, it is you!

But our God is in heaven, he does whatever pleases him.

We all believe in one God, Creator of Heaven and the Earth, Who has made himself our father So that we may become his children.
implicit quandary he has posed, revealing the location of God’s temple: “Wisset ihr nicht, daß ihr Gottes Tempel seid? / und daß der Geist Gottes in euch wohnet? . . .”

As far as the text is concerned, this arioso might as well be the end of the number, for the theological crisis has been tidily resolved. The choral section that somewhat unexpectedly follows is stately enough, but is made up of bland declarations of faith which add nothing of substance to the exchange that has just taken place. Four of the five voices of the chorus spend the rest of the number on a single sentence, drawn from the familiar Psalm 115: “Aber unser Gott ist im Himmel, er schaffet Alles was er will.” As we have seen, the second sopranos, when they enter, intone the first verse of the familiar chorale: “Wir glauben all’ an einen Gott/Schöpfer Himmels und der Erden. . . .”

No less a figure than Julius Schubring, the co-author of St. Paul’s libretto, would express reservations about this number. In his “Reminiscences of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy,” Schubring spends several sentences in general observations about their work together on the piece, but makes only one reference to a specific moment in the oratorio. It concerns this last chorale:

That he [Mendelssohn] would not accept my suggestions for the Paulinian doctrine of the justification by faith, but, at the appropriate place, substituted merely the general assertion: “Wir glauben all an einen Gott” was something that did not satisfy my theological conscience, though, perhaps, any extension of the work in this direction would have made it too long.15

Schubring is probably right in his final statement (except insofar as many modern listeners may feel that the work is already too long). But one is inclined to agree as well with his reservations about the relative theological anemia of Mendelssohn’s libretto in its final form. We witness a conversion taking place; we are told that Paul performs acts and preaches the Word; Paul himself even talks a good deal about the divine nature of his mission. But it is in this single episode, in no. 36, that he is actually seen confronting the unconverted masses with real theological news. Schubring’s concern is that simply trotting out a Credo at this point effectively deflates Paul’s theological significance per se—Paul’s Word, when we finally hear it, comes not as a spark of insight, but as a generic call to Christian worship, appropriate enough, but certainly anti-climactic.

15 Mendelssohn and His World, 230.
Unfortunately, the dramatic flacidity of this moment at first appears to be reflected in the musical process as well. Having completed a recitative and arioso pair fully as substantial as many such complete numbers in the oratorio, Paul simply sets out—now in D minor—on a completely new tune, Con molto di moto (Example 3). This new melody, we notice at once, seems to have little idea what to do with itself; the first phrase creeps up to a cadence on the fifth degree, to which the orchestra adds four measures of commentary with no new harmonic goal. After this phrase’s final A-major chord, motion comes to a complete stop. There follows a repetition of the tune, abruptly transposed to F major, with a slightly different ending. The eight measures of routine cadential material that follow seem a bit contrived, and fail to counteract the sense of shapelessness which the whole passage has taken on.

No sooner has Paul completed this cadence, however, than the basses come in with the same melody, then the tenors, altos, and sopranos, in a closely-knit fugal exposition. At least part of the mystery is solved at this point: the reason Paul’s exposition of this tune seemed so aimless is that it was not intended to exist as a fully-formed melody in the first place. Paul’s sole purpose in presenting it was to hand it over to the chorus—to teach it to them—as a fugal subject. Twenty measures later, the second sopranos (and a complement of winds) enter with their stately intonation of the chorale.

Though this final chorus thus emerges as troublesome in dramatic, musical, and theological terms alike, I suggest that these apparent failings conceal an entirely unique sort of significance. At the beginning of the number, Paul made his first real theological point of the entire oratorio, warning the heathens away from the belief that God could live in “Tempeln mit Menschen-Händen gemacht.” In the arioso that followed, he explained that they, the Menschen themselves, are God’s true temple. Though the fugue, with its interpolated chorale, that is tacked on at this point appears motivated by neither dramatic nor musical concerns, it gains an entirely new relevance if we recognize its role as neither meditative nor dramatic in any conventional sense, but purely symbolic, as a musical illustration of the point Paul has just made. With the entrance of the familiar congregational hymn, it becomes possible to recognize the fugal web surrounding the hymn as a contrapuntal housing, so to speak, surrounding a musical utterance we have no trouble identifying with the act of Protestant worship. In none of the work’s earlier chorales had the voices themselves attempted anything but a straight, chordal texture; the evolving stages of accompanimental complexity were the domain of instruments alone. But here, as the contrapuntal edifice surrounding the
chorale achieves its final, most glorious form, the voices have reclaimed the accompanimental fabric as their own, and the instruments are left to do nothing but double them. In other words, where the previous chorales had been housed in increasingly intricate contrapuntal structures created by human hands—that is, by instruments—this is a structure constituted of humanity itself, of the human voice. With the confessional chorale standing, in a kind of liturgical synecdoche, for the act of worship, and the choral fugue representing the human temple in which it occurs, this number serves as a metaphor for the religious truth Paul has just put forth.

The enabling force at the heart of this process, of course, is the ease with which the chorale can be interpreted—apart from its own aesthetic value—as a symbol for the act of worship. In this sense, the chorale’s intrinsic musical or textual interest is superfluous. Or, rather, the generic confession of faith, to return to Schurin’s caveat, may have been a perfect choice: an aesthetically blank lowest common denominator of the Christian community in the act of worship.

This interpretation considerably alters the traditional view of the chorales in this work. For it seems difficult, in this light, to maintain that Mendelssohn included these chorales in a direct, unreflective imitation of Bach’s Passion, oblivious to the aesthetic troubles they would raise. It is precisely because of the chorale’s troublesome tendency to sound like an uprooted artifact of Protestant worship that “Wir glauben” is able to take on the symbolic function that makes the whole number work. Thus, the success of the number hinges on embracing precisely the liturgical association which made the chorale’s inclusion problematic in the first place. To put the matter another way, by ascribing this symbolic relevance to the chorale, Mendelssohn effectively evacuates it of artistic relevance, thus confronting head-on the aesthetic enigma underlying the chorales’ inclusion. The distance that separates the chorale from the drama, indeed, from the whole concert experience, is precisely what makes the drama work. It is on just this distance that the work calls us to reflect.

Needless to say, St. Paul’s two interpolations of chorale melodies into fugal textures might well find their inspiration in countless similar settings by Bach; one might point, in particular, to the much-acclaimed opening chorus of the St. Matthew Passion itself, in which a section of sopranos deposits a slow sounding of “0 Lamm Gottes, unschuldig” over a contrapuntal web for two choirs and full orchestra. But Mendelssohn’s dramatically purposeful pattern of chorale harmonizations has no discernible analogue in the Passion.
On assuming the editorship of Leipzig's *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1845, Franz Brendel wasted no time in making over the journal as a promotional vehicle for the aesthetic ideals of Wagner and Liszt. Within months of taking the post, Brendel had published a substantial article entitled "Robert Schumann mit Rück­sicht auf Mendelssohn-Bartholdy und die Entwicklung der modernen Tonkunst überhaupt," in which he undertook the vital preliminary matter of sweeping two of Germany's most important musical figures out of the way before the rising tide of *Zunkunstmusik*. His observations on Mendelssohn's music isolate some of the central premises underlying a whole tradition of music historiography which, in tracing the main stream of German music from Beethoven to Wagner, has been hard pressed to find anything more than an inconsequential eddy in Mendelssohn's compositional practice, his historicizing inclinations in particular:

[Mendelssohn] did not take Beethoven's last period—where a composer dedicated to the new ideal would have found the point of departure for further development—as his starting point, nor, in general, did he follow any one specific master; rather, he tended to take the entire past, Sebastian Bach and Mozart, as his prerequisite, and not so much in order to seize upon a specific task or to set out straight-away in an entirely modern direction. Even the place where Mendelssohn received his earliest artistic training does not seem particularly favorable to the development of an ambitious artistic, musical talent; true, significant perceptions are to be found there, and the intellectual life is generally lively, but all this is suited more for reflection and less for the artistic—especially the youthful—imagination, and Mendelssohn was still very young when he began to compose.

*St. Paul* would appear a *locus classicus* for the tendencies to which Brendel draws attention, unapologetically appropriating stylistic components of Handel and Bach alike, apparently oblivious to the trouble these appropriations might raise when set against each other, or against the backdrop of modern concert life.

As I have attempted to show, however, the story may not be so simple. For Mendelssohn's mission in this work seems to lie not in the act of appropriation itself, at least not in this act alone, but in the

---

ultimate achievement of a new subject position, we might say, from which the act of appropriation can itself be scrutinized. To borrow the terminology of another discipline, the “lowest common denominator” of metafiction, as Patricia Waugh describes it,

is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinction between “creation” and “criticism” and merges them into the concepts of “interpretation” and “deconstruction.”19

This oratorio seems to hold out the possibility that the essence of compositional historicism, for Mendelssohn, might lie not in unambitious dependence on an established language, nor simply in polemical re-engagement with an older style (and Mendelssohn has been accused of both), but in a thoughtful, wholly original metalinguistic impulse through which the work sets out to critique its own compositional premises.20

Mendelssohn’s was an age in which musical “progress” was measured as often in terms of languages reclaimed as of languages pioneered, as his own experiences as a promoter of Bach and Handel demonstrates. The most distinctive feature of the north German musical experience through these years was the very plurality of styles—historical and modern alike—which could claim currency with the musical public. Mendelssohn’s St. Paul seems to offer a glimpse of a musical language, or metalanguage, which sets out to reflect on this condition itself, that is, to establish an authorial vantage-point from which the tensions and paradoxes implicit in this new pluralism might themselves become the subject matter of the musical discourse. St. Paul might best be taken, in this sense, as a challenge to the very dichotomy that forms the foundation of Brendel’s final dismissal in the passage quoted above, the dichotomy between “reflection” and “artistic imagination.” And it is surely a mistake to recognize such an impulse as anything less than “an entirely modern direction.”

Lilly Fellows Program
Valparaiso University


20 In my article “Mendelssohn’s ‘Scottish’ Symphony and the Music of German Memory” (19th-Century Music 19/1 [1995], 68–82), I suggest that the coda of this work’s finale may contain a similar component of self-consciousness, though articulated through markedly different devices. This impulse in Mendelssohn’s work is explored more fully in my dissertation, “Mendelssohn and the Musical Discourse of the German Restoration” (University of California, Berkeley, 1995).