

Mezzina Marina

Gruppo Analisi e Teoria Musicale, Italia
,Conservatorio di Musica di Avellino, Italia
 mezzina2014@gmail.com

On Footprints of “Galant Style” in Mendelssohn’s Music Learning

ABSTRACT

Background

During the early XIX century Berlin is often depicted as a “bastion of conservatism”, the city where dwells the legacy of Old Bach as a teacher and composer and where takes place a theoretical battle between traditional theorists and Rameau’s new theories supporters. (Todd, 1983) It seems to me that most of the studies focused on Music teaching in Berlin during these years were going towards this direction, namely in considering a tradition that, so to speak, was capable of appreciating and understanding only an old German language and style. Thanks to the story of young Mendelssohn and his studies with his revered teacher Zelter, I hope to enlighten how much of European musical taste, a taste that spoke Italian language, arrived in the city, albeit it could be possible that its far roots were not recognized as such even by the very musicians that used it. At the same time this attempt can show how far both the Italian tradition of *partimento* and the so called ‘Galant Style’, not only like compositional devices, but also with the evidences of great possibilities as teaching tools, spread beyond their early boundaries and their cultural and social environment.

As we know, the Italian tradition of music learning and teaching during the years we examine, and in the years before, was scarcely committed into treaties. In the early days of these musical traditions, music theory books had no explanations and mentioned only musical examples. However, in this case ‘unwritten’ didn’t mean unnecessary and, most of all, ‘unspoken’. To this *unwritten* relies all the importance of the teacher and there it hides the secret of the relationship between teacher and pupil, namely the way of teaching that we can infer only by proper research. Furthermore, we know that Italian style conquered the favour of courts far beyond the Alps and that many cities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries enrolled Italian musicians. Among them we count a lot of South German courts.

Aims and repertoire studied

Through my research I will try to enlighten how those traditions and repertoires eventually met the musical education of young Mendelssohn. I will try to sketch a genealogical line of composers and their musical styles, and the traditions crossing in the Berlin musical area from the early eighteenth-century, until they eventually arrived in Zelter’s hands, ready to teach to his gifted young pupil.

It is worth remembering that Mendelssohn has had a great reevaluation as a composer and, most of all, as a prominent figure of music history thanks to the studies of, among others, Larry Todd. Todd’s *Mendelssohn’s Musical Education: A Study and Edition of his Exercises in Composition* is paramount in the comprehension of Mendelssohn’s music learning: in fact we can see the papers containing the exercises, the musical homework, so to speak, that young Mendelssohn wrote under the guidance of Zelter from 1819 to 1821.

Methods

Although it is impossible to deny the importance, we can say, the extraordinary influence that the figure and the works of J. S. Bach had in the apprenticeship of Mendelssohn and in the development of his future career, an influence that Todd put under its proper light, it is at

least possible to think that those exercises didn’t exhaust the task to which Zelter could gently compel his pupil.

So, in order to understand what passed between teacher and pupil, we can try to find other aspects, other papers or witnesses of something ‘unwritten’ that can help us justify the astonishing features of a musical education that in less than five or six years, allowed a boy of eleven to write down an uncountable number of valuable, if not often beautiful, compositions, not to speak of his piano and violin skills, or his ability of improvising interpreter.

Zelter never wrote a treatise, nor a music theory book, but we can infer his thoughts about music composition, composers, teaching, understanding, and listening through his hundreds letters during the correspondence with Goethe. We can consider this letters as a true expression of Zelter’s mind, understanding the unique relation that the composer was capable to have with the greatest German poet and that allowed him to express himself without reverential manner or in the aim to win the poet’s regard and affection, both already presented from Goethe to Zelter in a brotherly friendship.

We can find the same easiness in the correspondence between Zelter and Mendelssohn, only with a special sensibility towards the seniority by the younger, an exchange of thoughts and mutual affection that lasted till the old teacher’s death.

In these letters we often find a recollection of some hint of a lesson, or some hours spent together in analysing a piece of music and this is very interesting in the light of rebuilding the history of a possible practical training in Mendelssohn’s music learning.

With a particular regard of the “schemata” told by R. Gjerdingen (Gjerdingen 2007), obviously we can’t imagine to recognize a path systematically arranged like in Mozart’s music training, a *step-by-step* guidance in order to learn, to recognize, and replicate in the proper manner and position the phrases that will be his first musical vocabulary. Probably, in Mendelssohn’s training to recognize and to apply in the proper manner some musical phrases was a part of a most intricate path.

Implications

So, if we can study through Mendelssohn’s exercises book the way in which Zelter taught counterpoint and chorale (and we can compare this exercises book with another one, an exercises book belonged to a less gifted Zelter’s pupil, Gustav Wilhelm Teschner, and find out the differences or the similarities in the two schoolings) we might be allowed, because of the particular regard and obedience the boy showed to his teacher, to consider almost all the compositions of the years under Zelter guidance, the direct or indirect request of the teacher and we must expect a further and deeper inquire of the latter on boy’s work.

I think, in fact, that a very important witness of this training could be Mendelssohn’s early works and the models to which they are clearly inspired: in all his life Mendelssohn did never deny his debt with the past and those first attempts are the evidences of that debt.

However, it is a pity that Mendelssohn had often to pay his link to the past with a misunderstanding of his works and a criticism *ex post* that judged them with its own artistic point of view. Instead of this, I will try to reinterpret the early compositional attempts of Mendelssohn through tradition in the aim of putting them in the right place in music history.

I will hunt for footprints of “schemata” in some Zelter’s compositions and in C. P. E. Bach and I will try to find the same “schemata” in Mendelssohn’s early works. Thanks to the most recent researches of, among others, G. Sanguinetti and R. Gjerdingen, we may consider the compositional practice of the Eighteenth century under the light of a courtly taste, to which the idea of an individual and original expression was totally alien. If we consider young Mendelssohn like a perfect heir of that tradition, ready in adulthood to merge the experience of the past with its own musical thought and style, and not an imperfect romantic composer, it will be possible to read in a very different manner the criticism on his compositions.

Keywords

Analytical theory, Schemata, Partimenti, Galant Style.

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