

Kwen-Yin Li

JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY IN KRAKÓW

Conflict and Dialectic of Faiths in Felix Mendelssohn's *Responsorium et Hymnus*

Abstract

This essay aims at discussing the problem of Felix Mendelssohn's attitude towards different religions shown in his choral piece *Responsorium et Hymnus* Op. 121 for male choir with cello and double bass. Considering the arguments concerning composer's self-identity provided by Jeffrey Sposato, we could interpret the Lutheran chorale appearing at the end of this Catholic liturgical work as means by which Mendelssohn tried to manifest his Lutheran faith and therefore to criticize Catholicism.

However, if we examine more carefully the very end of this composition, we would find that the musical material, characteristic for each faith, form a dialectical and dynamic relation. It seems that—instead of criticizing Catholicism—Felix showed the possibility and the necessity of different faiths to coexist, which, according to the idea of religious pluralism and tolerance proposed by composer's grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, is the only way to discover religious truth. At the end of this paper, I would like to propose that the reception history of Felix Mendelssohn's work

and life from the post-Wagnerian and anti-semitic criticism to so-called Mendelssohn Renaissance in the second half of 20th century also went through a dialectic course. We cannot fully understand and interpret them without taking a multi-aspect view.

Keywords

Felix Mendelssohn, Enlightenment, religious pluralism, dialectics, reception

Conflict of faiths and related problem of the reception of the work are probably the most popular topics of research on the life and music of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809–1847). The author of *Songs without words* was born in a famous Jewish family, but at the age of seven he was baptized and then raised as a religious Lutheran. During his life Mendelssohn was one of the most important and most popular composers, respected not only in German circles, but also in England. However, after his death his reputation drastically decreased, especially after publishing the controversial *Das Judenthum in der Musik* by Richard Wagner in 1850—not to mention the definitely pejorative reception at the time of Hitler's regime. Only in the last decades of the 20th century people started to draw attention once again on Mendelssohn's music and its value.

Therefore, it seems that the subsequent turns in the reception of the composer's output derive not only from the aesthetic critic of his musical style, but also from acceptance or rejection of the anti-semitic views and stereotypes at the given time. Mendelssohn's Jewish origin and the resulting conflictive and ambiguous attitude of his family towards Christianity have been influencing the way we interpret the compositions (especially the religious ones) written by the composer, who as an adolescent became known for leading the famous performance of *St Matthew Passion* by Johann Sebastian Bach in 1829 in Berlin.

In the following article, I discuss the issue of Mendelssohn's attitude towards religions on the example of my analysis of the musical features and the ideological message in his work *Responsorium et Hymnus*.

I would like to show that in this work the composer wanted to reveal the dialectic relation between faiths and the possibility of their coexistence, and in this way he proposed religious pluralism. I also want to point out that the process of his life and work's reception has a similarly dynamic, dialectic character. The point of reference are mainly books of a known specialist of Mendelssohn, R. Larry Todd (especially his monograph *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music* from 2003)¹, and papers from the 1990s, especially texts of Leon Botstein,² Jeffrey Sposato³ and Michael P. Steinberg,⁴ concerning the problem of Mendelssohn's self-identity and published in the journal "The Musical Quarterly" in 1998–1999.

Responsorium et Hymnus Op. 121

Responsorium et Hymnus, frequently called *Vespergesang* (from German: Vesper song), is a musical work for male choir (TTBB), cello and double bass. It was finished on 5th February 1833 and performed in the following year in Berlin, but published only after Mendelssohn's death in 1873 as—his last—opus 121. This piece belongs to the liturgical Catholic music. According to Larry Todd, *Responsorium et Hymnus* was written probably because of the position of the musical director in Düsseldorf proposed to Felix by Karl Immermann,⁵ which the composer was to hold from October 1833. This job would create an opportunity to have close contact with Catholic liturgy.⁶ However, it seems to me that this explanation is wrong, because when Immermann presented his proposition in May 1833, the discussed work was already finished.

¹ R.L. Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music*, New York 2003.

² L. Botstein, *Mendelssohn and the Jews*, "The Musical Quarterly" 82 (1998), No. 1.

³ J. Sposato, *Creative Writing: The [Self-]Identification of Mendelssohn as Jew*, "The Musical Quarterly" 82 (1998), No. 1; *idem*, *Mendelssohn, "Paulus", and the Jews: A Response to Leon Botstein and Michael Steinberg*, "The Musical Quarterly" 83 (1999), nr 2.

⁴ M.P. Steinberg, *Mendelssohn's Music and German-Jewish Culture: An Intervention*, "The Musical Quarterly" 83 (1999), nr 1.

⁵ The job contained conducting the choral and orchestral association and performing sacred music for the Catholic service. *Vide*: R.L. Todd, *Mendelssohn(-Bartholdy), (Jacob Ludwig) Felix. §4. Düsseldorf, 1833–5*, [in:] *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, S. Sadie (ed.), Vol. 16, London 2001, p. 397.

⁶ R.L. Todd, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

On the other hand, it can be assumed that the work belongs to the Catholic works, which Mendelssohn wrote during and after the travel to Italy from 1830 to 1831. Anyway, the concrete motivation of the composer behind the discussed masterpiece remains unclear. Moreover, it is unknown whether the work was performed in Düsseldorf or what was its reception.

Responsorium et Hymnus is based on the Latin text for the twenty-first Sunday after the Holy Trinity, which consists of verses from the Book of Psalms (Ps 119,132), the Book of Daniel (Dn 9,18), again the Book of Psalms (Ps 119,132), small doxology and the hymn attributed to St Ambrose *O lux beata Trinitas*. The lyrics are requests to the God to see and hear (e.g. words *adspice, cogita, inclina, intende*) people's suffering and to infuse the brightness of the Holy Trinity into believers' hearts.

The whole composition consists of five parts. The first part, *Allegro moderato* in A minor, shows Mendelssohn's familiarity with Johann Sebastian Bach's music. It is represented by the strict contrapuntal technique used in choir's part (example 1) and melody of the cello and double bass, which seems to imitate the Baroque basso continuo. It is worth adding that in some recordings⁷ beside the strings organ was added by the performers as the instrument realizing this "basso continuo". These elements suggest the attempt to archaize the style and to refer to the old liturgical music. This impression is also strengthened by the melismatic singing and Latin text.

Imitation of the style of old sacred music from the previous epochs appears also in the part II, *Adagio*, which—in spite of the fact that it has only five bars—plays a significant role in the work. The text of the melody sung by tenor solo came from the Book of Daniel (9,18): "Aperi oculos tuos et vide tribulationem nostram" ("Open your

⁷ Among eight recordings of *Responsorium et Hymnus* available on the website Naxos Music Library, three are performed with organ: *Mendelssohn Church Music*, St. John's College Choir, Cambridge, dir. Ch. Robinson, Nimbus 1997 (NI5529); F. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, *Motetten*, Munich Hofkantorei, dir. W. Antesberber, Solo Musica 2010 (SM128); *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy*, Norddeutscher Figuralchor, R. Morooka and J. Straube, Thorofon 2011 (CTH2567, performance without cello and double bass).

Ex. 1: F. Mendelssohn, *Responsorium et Hymnus*, part I, bb. 8–16.

eyes and see our desolations”).⁸ The tune is based mainly on the tone *a* with a small change of the pitch at the end of the verse (example 2). Such a contour of melody resembles recitations characteristic for the Gregorian chant, which:

are generally chanted isosyllabically on a monotone, their total length and phrase structure being determined by the text. More elaborate varieties of these liturgical recitatives [...] are also sung to a monotone but with the beginning, middle and end of each

⁸ This sentence is a continuation of the given verse from the Book of Daniel. The beginning of a verse—“*Inclina Deus meus aurem tuam, et audi*” (“Oh my God, incline your ear and hear”)—appeared in the second theme of the first part of *Responsorium et Hymnus*. The English translations from the Bible are from English Standard Version.

verse punctuated by brief intonation [...] and cadential formulae in the manner of simple psalmody.⁹

As the first part of *Responsorium et Hymnus* finished with the tone A as tonic, the listener would have the impression that the melody of the part II is maintained in Phrygian scale. It is because here appears the interval of minor second over *finalis* characteristic for this scale, despite the fact that this fragment is actually composed in D minor (similarly to part IV of this work). The connection with Gregorian chant is therefore strengthened by modal-like character of this fragment of Mendelssohn's work.

II. Adagio

Tenore Solo

A - pe - ri o - cu - los tu - os et vi - de tri - bu - la - ti - o - nem no - stram.

Violoncello e Basso

Ex. 2: F. Mendelssohn, *Responsorium et Hymnus*, part II.

The next part, *Con moto*, is maintained in the key of F major and has an ABA form. In the outermost sections, there is responsorial singing between soloists and choir, and in the middle episode (bb. 33-64) in D minor the choir again performs very long melismas, which are based on the fragment of the first sentence of small doxology: “Gloria Patri et Filio”. On the one hand, this section refers to the earlier, archaic musical style, on the other—its text foreshadows the content of the next part, *Adagio*. It is a four-voice motet for solo voices. Chant from the part II, “Aperi oculos tuos et vide tribulationem nostram”, returns and is constantly repeated in the part of bass I. Simultaneously, the remaining three voices sing the first sentence of small doxology, this time as a whole: “Gloria Patri et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto”, creating varieties of harmonies. This part is in fact composed in the key of D minor, but it lacks the tonal stability—during one and a half minute it changes from D minor, through F major and G minor to A major, dominant of the

⁹ J.A. Emerson, J. Bellingham, D. Hiley, *Plainchant*.§5. *Style*, [in:] *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, S. Sadie (ed.), Vol. 19, London 2001, p. 835.

tonic. The constant change of the key seems to suggest hesitation and uncertainty, symbolizing being lost in the darkness and the wish for light. At the end of part IV, the word “Gloria”, sung in *forte*, makes an impression of shouting and heralds the last part of the work.

The whole composition finishes with choir *tutti* singing first two strophes of the hymn assigned to St Ambrose about the Holy Trinity as sunlight, which lightens the believers’ hearts:

O lux beata, trinitas
et principalis unitas,
iam sol recedit igneus,
infunde lumen cordibus.

Te mane laudem carmine,
te deprecemur vespere,
te nostra duplex gloria
per cuncta laudet saecula.

V. Andante

Tenore I
p Tutti
O lux be - a - ta, tri - ni - tas et prin - ci - pa - lis u - ni - tas, jam

Tenore II
p Tutti
O lux be - a - ta, tri - ni - tas et prin - ci - pa - lis u - ni - tas, jam

Basso I
p Tutti
O lux be - a - ta, tri - ni - tas et prin - ci - pa - lis u - ni - tas, jam

Basso II
p Tutti
O lux be - a - ta, tri - ni - tas et prin - ci - pa - lis u - ni - tas, jam

Violoncello e Basso
p

Ex. 3: F. Mendelssohn, *Responsorium et Hymnus*, part V (beginning). The homophonic texture resembling Bach’s harmonisations of the Lutheran chant.

It is also worth attention that in the previous two parts of this Mendelssohn’s work, the Holy Trinity (in the text of the small doxology) was always connected with the key of D minor. However, in part V it is connected with the key of A major, which somehow dissipates

earlier darkness. In spite of the Latin text, the homophonic texture of this part is associated with Lutheran chorale, especially the way it was harmonised by Johann Sebastian Bach, which Mendelssohn knew very well (example 3). The last part of *Responsorium et Hymnus* can therefore be regarded, according to the term given by Larry Todd and Angela Mace, as a “free chorale”. It refers to “newly crafted melodies and homophonic textures intended to simulate or recall the experience of singing a chorale, without, however, reusing intact a pre-existent chorale”.¹⁰

The question, however, arises: why did Mendelssohn put a Lutheran style chorale at the end of the work devoted to the Catholic liturgy? The composer of such a rank, fully aware of his artistic pursuit and knowing the historical context, without doubt did it on purpose. The reason for his decision can be found by analyzing the relations of his family with Lutheranism and the change of attitude towards religions in Prussia since the middle of the 18th century to the time of Felix Mendelssohn.

Lutheranism: the enlightened faith

The complicated relationship with religions in the Mendelssohn family started with Moses (1729–1786), a famous philosopher and Felix’s grandfather. Moses was born in a Jewish community in Dessau near Berlin. At the very beginning his name was Moses ben Mendel Dessau. In 1743 following his teacher and the main rabbi of Dessau, David Hirsch Fränkel, young Moses moved to Berlin, where he studied philosophy and German literature, and after years became a philosopher and businessman. His growing reputation made it easier for him to assimilate into German culture and finally led to the change of his surname into Mendelssohn, which once and for all separated Moses from the whole Jewish community.¹¹ Moreover, in 1763 Felix’s grandfather got the privileged status,¹² which his wife and children could enjoy after his death. However, Moses Mendelssohn

¹⁰ R.L. Todd, A. Mace, *Mendelssohn & the Free Chorale*, “The Choral Journal” 49 (2009), No. 9.

¹¹ R.L. Todd, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹² In Prussia in the 18th century Jews were divided into six classes. On the top of the hierarchy there were families with the “general privilege”, which referred to the ownership, change of place of residence and right to trade. *Vide: ibid.*, p. 3.

never converted to Lutheranism, although it would give him the possibility to further improve life quality after achieving total assimilation to German society. Nonetheless, among his six children only two (Joseph and Recha) remained Jews, the other two (Abraham and Nathan) converted to Lutheranism, and the remaining two converted to Catholicism (Brendel¹³ and Henriette).

Daniel Itzig (1723–1799), Felix’s grand grandfather on mother’s side, and his family also got the “general privilege” in Berlin in 1761, and thirty years later were granted with Christian citizen right and allowed to remain as Jews in faith. Albeit Daniel Itzig wrote in his will that the ones from him family who converts to Christianity cannot be his heirs, many of his grandchildren left Judaism. Two of them are Lea Salomon and Jacob Salomon—Felix’s mother and uncle. Jacob even added “Bartholdy” to his surname (Jacob Salomon-Bartholdy) and tried to convince Abraham Mendelssohn, Felix’s father, to convert, too. According to Jacob, it was pointless that Abraham pretended to be faithful to Judaism—the outmoded religion—but in fact he did not believe in it. For the good of his family and children he should change the surname to distinguish himself from other Mendelssohns.¹⁴ Probably because of it, in 1822 in Frankfurt Abraham and Lea secretly converted and officially changed the name into Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. However, their children, including Felix, were already baptized as Lutherans six years before. In the letter from 1820 to his daughter Fanny, Abraham explained the choice of Lutheranism for his children in the following way:

All this I do not know, [does God exist and what is God—K.Y.L.] and therefore I have never taught you anything about it. But I know that there exists in me and in you and in all human beings an everlasting inclination towards all that is good, true, and right, and a conscience which warns and guides us when we go astray. I know it, I believe it, I live in this faith, and this is my religion...

¹³ Dorothea Schlegel (1764–1839). In 1804, as a Lutheran, she married the philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, and 8 years later they together converted to Catholicism.

¹⁴ *Vide*: the letter from Jacob Salomon to Abraham Mendelssohn (without date), [in:] *The Mendelssohn Family (1729–1847) from Letters and Journals*, S. Hensel (ed.), trans. into English by C. Klingemann, Vol. 1, New York 1882, p. 75. The letter was cited also in: R.L. Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life...*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

The outward form of religion your teacher has given you is historical, and changeable like all human ordinances. Some thousands of years ago the Jewish form was the reigning one, then the heathen form, and now it is the Christian... We have educated you and your brothers and sister in the Christian faith, because it is the creed of most civilized people, and contains nothing that can lead you away from what is good, and much that guides you to love, obedience, tolerance, and resignation...¹⁵

The musicologist Jeffrey Sposato interpreted the letter mentioned above as an evidence of abandoning Judaism for Lutheranism by Felix's father. He noticed that "Abraham Mendelssohn's declaration of adherence to a «religion» based on virtuous conduct resonates strongly with Kant's rationalist ideal of a «universal religion» in which the church consists of community of people united through their devotion to a common morality".¹⁶ Therefore—as Sposato explains—for Abraham and Kant, religions were treated as transient institutions; each of them exists as an external form of a dominant common morality of the time.¹⁷ At the beginning of the 19th century the Lutheran form displayed such an idea, so "Judaism was outmoded".¹⁸

When it comes to Felix Mendelssohn, numerous biographies describe him as a devout Lutheran, who also valued his Jewish origin. However, according to Sposato, it is in fact a false claim. He argues that Mendelssohn, contrary to our impression, rather tried to get rid of Jewish identity and saw himself as "enlightened, rationalist, and, in short, a typical German *Neuchrist*".¹⁹ What is more, Sposato thinks that the wrong idea about Mendelssohn mentioned above was created under the influence of the biography written by Eric Werner, *Mendelssohn: A New Image of the Composer and His Age* published in 1963. Werner was inclined to read and interpret the sources mistakenly, what led to the exaggerated and wrong notion that the composer respected his Jewish identity.

¹⁵ Vide: *The Mendelssohn Family...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 79–80; as cited in: J. Sposato, *Creative Writing...*, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

¹⁶ J. Sposato, *Creative Writing...*, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

¹⁷ J. Sposato, *Mendelssohn, "Paulus", and the Jews...*, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ J. Sposato, *Creative Writing...*, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

One of the examples for Werner's misinterpretations given by Sposato is Felix's letter to his family from 23rd July 1833, written in London. The author of *Violin Concerto in E minor* mentioned *Jewish Civil Disabilities Act* voted in England, namely removing the limitation of civil rights for Jews. In the version published by Werner in the book *Mendelssohn: Leben und Werk in neuer Sicht* from 1980 we can read that Mendelssohn was proud of the new English law ("das macht mich stolz") and grateful to heaven ("erfüllt mich mit Dankbarkeit gegen den Himmel"); he also wrote that due to accepting this act the situation in England will be better "for us" ("sei es doch besser für uns"), namely for Jews.²⁰ Therefore, Werner—and Wulf Konold, who also included this letter in his book *Felix Mendelssohn und seine Zeit* from the same year—treated the mentioned letter as a proof for recognizing family tradition and his Jewish identity by Felix. However, after verifying the text of the original, Sposato discovered that the content of the document is totally different. Sentence mentioned above "erfüllt mich mit Dankbarkeit gegen den Himmel" does not appear at all, words "für uns" were added by Werner to the sentence "sei es doch besser", and the original phrase "das amüsirt mich prächtig" ("that amuses me greatly") was replaced by the sentence "das macht mich stolz".²¹ According to Sposato, in the original text the composer therefore was not proud of his Jewish origin, but rather amused by the irony of fate that Jews were emancipated in England five days after publishing the bill on the restrictions of Jewish rights in Prussia. Consequently, he did not identify himself as a Jew.²²

Felix's estrangement from the Jewish heritage could have resulted from his father's influence. When the composer used the surname Mendelssohn, and not Bartholdy or M. Bartholdy, in the concert programme in 1829, Abraham sent a letter to him with a warning: "a Christian Mendelssohn is as impossible as a Jewish Confucius. If your name is Mendelssohn, you are *eo ipso* a Jew, and that is of no benefit to you, because it is not even true".²³ According to Sposato, the

²⁰ Compare: *ibid.*, p. 197.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²³ Orig. "[E]inen christlichen Mendelssohn giebt es so wenig als einen jüdischen Confucius. Heißt du Mendelssohn so bist du *eo ipso* ein Jude, und das taugt dir nichts, schon weil es nicht wahr ist". Vide: M.F. Schneider, *Mendelssohn oder Bartholdy? Zur Geschichte eines Familiennamens*, Basel 1962, p. 20; as cited in: J. Sposato, *Creative Writing...*, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

influence of Abraham's beliefs on Felix's attitude is seen most clearly in the oratorio *Paulus* Op. 36 from 1836. Due to the Abraham's interest in this work, here Felix showed Judaism in the way that his father would agree with him. In other words, the composer described Judaism as a religion, which obeys the laws and ceremonies, but lacks the ability to think independently about morality, contrary to gentiles, who were described as heroic roles.²⁴ Despite alleviation of anti-Jewish elements in the last version of the score of the oratorio and the gradual change of Felix's attitude towards Jewish culture in the later years of his life, the composer did not think that there is a close relation between Judaism and Christianity.²⁵

Probably, Felix's attitude towards Catholicism was not better. According to Botstein, Mendelssohn family was distrustful towards Catholicism and definitely opposite to Sebastian Hensel's (Felix's nephew, Fanny's son) preference for this religion. For the same reason Dorothea Schlegel—Felix's aunt—suffered, being especially ostracized by the society.²⁶ Catholicism, similarly to Judaism, was a religion full of rituals and dogmas. Thinkers of Enlightenment created the term “obscurantism”, calling the Catholic doctrine and the Catholic Church's attitude towards culture in this way.²⁷ Moreover, both faiths—Catholicism and the ancient Judaism—were abandoned and marginalized by the historical process and the philosophy of Enlightenment.²⁸ In the case of Felix, although “the visit to The Eternal City thus facilitated an immersion into sacred Catholic music, yet confirmed his identity as a Protestant German composer”.²⁹

Coming back to *Responsorium et Hymnus*, in the light of attitude of the Mendelssohn family towards religions mentioned above, it could be assumed that Felix, as a German *Neuchrist*, placed a Lutheran chorale at the end of the work as a negative comment to Catholicism. Firstly, the

²⁴ J. Sposato, *Mendelssohn, “Paulus”, and the Jews...*, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 288–289.

²⁶ L. Botstein, *Songs without Words: Thoughts on Music, Theology, and the Role of the Jewish Question in the Work of Felix Mendelssohn*, “The Musical Quarterly” 77 (1993), No. 4, p. 566.

²⁷ Z. Poniatowski, *Mały słownik religioznawczy*, Warszawa 1969, p. 306.

²⁸ L. Botstein, *Notes from the Editor: Mendelssohn as Jew: Revisiting Controversy on the Occasion of the Composer's 200th Birthday*, “The Musical Quarterly” 92 (1993), No. 1/2, p. 6.

²⁹ R.L. Todd, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

key of D minor of the part IV, in which the pseudo-Gregorian singing appears, is unstable and “dark”, and the need for its solution satisfies the “bright” key of A major of the last part in the style of Lutheran chorale, which somehow lightens the whole work. Secondly, in 1830s the Latin text, basso continuo, the dense contrapuntal texture, melismas, responsorial singing and Gregorian chant belonged to the old musical style, recalling the far past, and also the spirit of Catholicism—because “the 19th-century reformers idealized Gregorian chant and 16th-century polyphony as the twin paragons of true Catholic church music”.³⁰ Listening to this Mendelssohn’s composition as a whole, 19th-century listeners could have been surprised by the sudden change of the work’s style at the moment of introducing homophonic Lutheran chorale. Such a course of music can be interpreted as a course of time from what is old to what is contemporary. In this sense, contrary to the archaic Catholicism, the Lutheran chorale (and the Lutheranism itself) in the Mendelssohn’s work symbolizes modernity and enlightenment, and the word *lux* at the beginning of the part V refers not only to Holy Trinity, but also to the light of reason.

However, if we look closely at the very ending of the last part of *Responsorium et Hymnus*, it appears that interpreting the ideological connotation of this work is not that simple. The chant in archaic style and vocal quartet, which appeared in the part IV, in part V appear once again in the bar 17—this time, however, maintained in “bright”, unambiguous key of A major, the key of the previous Lutheran chorale. After four bars, the whole choir joins, and together with the instruments present the text of the quartet in *fortissimo*, so hitherto the biggest dynamics, finishing the whole work (example 4). Elements of two styles somehow compete or dialogue with each other, so it is unknown, which of them is going to “win” and finishes the piece. What is the wrong interpretation is considering the Lutheran chorale as a negative comment about Catholicism, because the work does not end in a clear way. On the contrary, in my opinion, the coexistence of two musical styles refers to the idea of the pluralism of faiths.

³⁰ J. Dyer, *Roman Catholic Church Music*, [in:] *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, S. Sadie (ed.), Vol. 21, London 2001, p. 558.

Ex. 4: F. Mendelssohn, *Responsorium et Hymnus*, part V, bb. 17–24. The end of the work.

Religious pluralism, tolerance and dialectic

In the discussion about the conflict of faiths in Mendelssohn family, Moses Mendelssohn and his idea of religious tolerance cannot be omitted. The image of Moses as a representative of the religious tolerance was so iconic that it became the prototype of the title character of the drama *Nathan the Wiser* (1779) written by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), a famous writer and at the same time a friend of the Jewish philosopher. In this work, sultan Saladin asks Nathan, which one of three faiths—Judaism, Christianity or Islam—is real. Nathan responds through parable about the fight of three brothers for their father’s ring:

And (the judge continued)
 If you will take advice in lieu of sentence,
 This is my counsel to you, to take up
 The matter where it stands. If each of you
 Has had a ring presented by his father,
 Let each believe his own the real ring.
 ’Tis possible the father chose no longer

To tolerate the one ring's tyranny;
And certainly, as he much loved you all,
And loved you all alike, it could not please him
By favouring one to be of two the oppressor.
Let each feel honoured by this free affection.
Unwarped of prejudice; let each endeavour
To vie with both his brothers in displaying
The virtue of his ring; assist its might
With gentleness, benevolence, forbearance,
With inward resignation to the godhead.³¹

The fragment quoted above suggests that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are incarnations of the greater truth, which can be discovered only when we respect other faiths. Therefore, Nathan's parable refers to the idea of religious pluralism and religious tolerance.

It cannot be denied that Abraham, Felix's father, was a religious Lutheran and recognized Lutheranism, according to the words from the letter to Fanny, as "the creed of most civilized people".³² But Sposato seems to over-interpret what Abraham says—after all acceptance of Lutheranism does not have to be connected with contempt for Judaism. According to Leon Botstein "the embrace of modern Protestantism by Jews in German Protestant lands [...] represented not a denial of Judaism but a vehicle of reconciliation and the vindication of its immanent historical function".³³

The other reason for which Abraham probably wouldn't disdain Judaism is that the idea of tolerance plays an important role in the Enlightenment movement. Immanuel Kant claims that both faith and knowledge are justified by reason, accessible for every human being. And on this basis he developed the moral argument: people desire to achieve the highest good and seek for moral perfection, because they believe in the highest existence, who justifies and perfects their efforts. However, according to Allen Wood it does not mean that Kant proved the existence of God: his argument rather shows only the possibility of the existence of the Creator, which is minimum of theology. The

³¹ G.E. Lessing, *Nathan the Wiser*, trans. into English by William Taylor, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3820/3820-h/3820-h.htm> [accessed: 03.08.2018].

³² *Vide*: annotation 15.

³³ L. Botstein, *Notes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

American philosopher indicates that “part of Kant’s motivation here is plainly to encourage a tolerant attitude toward people with heterodox beliefs. Kant is emphatic that we cannot have a duty to hold any belief”.³⁴ Moreover, Kant was enthusiastic about the laws of tolerance towards different religions in Prussia introduced by Frederic II. What Kant was opposed to were—as Wood claims—the inflexible doctrines, inadequate duties and authoritarian institutions. In the past the system and ceremonies of Church helped people recognize God’s revelation, but in the 18th century they did not encourage moral behaviours, but confined the ability of independent thinking, causing the state of *Unmündigkeit* (immaturity). Therefore, the task of people in the Enlightenment period was to set free from the Church’s tutelage, and to cultivate independent-thinking ability and seek for the universal religion of the reason.

The influence of Enlightenment on religion contributes to its reform. The influence of religious Enlightenment on German Protestantism can be observed in the works of advocates of the philosopher Christian Wolff’s (1679–1757) ideas. For example, Johann Gustav Reinbeck (1683–1741) claimed that philosophy helps not only in “achieving correct belief”, but also “to fathom that the truths of nature and the truths of scripture are in absolute agreement”.³⁵ So, the ultimate theological issue were not *contra rationem*, but *supra rationem*.³⁶ It should be highlighted after David Sorkin that not only Protestantism but also Judaism and Catholicism benefited from religious Enlightenment, and Moses Mendelssohn was one of the representatives of Haskalah—Jewish Enlightenment. By connecting Wolff’s theory with rabbins’ speeches and commenting the works of Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135–1204), Moses revived the philosophical tradition of Judaism and indicated that “Enlightenment philosophy and Judaism supplemented and explained each other”.³⁷ Similarly to Reinbeck, Moses Mendelssohn considered philosophy requisite to gain adequate knowledge of religion. Moreover,

³⁴ A.W. Wood, *Rational theology, moral faith, and religion*, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, P. Guyer (ed.), Cambridge 1992, p. 405.

³⁵ J.G. Reinbeck, *Betrachtungen über die in der Augspurgischen Confession enthaltene und damit verknüpfte Göttliche Wahrheiten*, Vol. 2, Berlin 1742, p. viii–ix, xxxii, 6; as cited in: D. Sorkin, *The Case for Comparison: Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment*, “Modern Judaism” 14 (1994), No. 2, p. 132.

³⁶ D. Sorkin, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

he postulated in his book *Jerusalem*, published in 1783, that Judaism as a rational faith based on universal truths, was not incompatible with the interests of the modern Prussia.³⁸ In the case of Catholicism in the Central Europe and Italy, as Sorkin claimed, religious Enlightenment created “middle ground between Baroque piety, scholasticism and Jesuitism on the one side and a highly charged reform movement like Jansenism on the other, that enabled them to recover neglected aspects of their textual heritage as well as absorbing modern science and philosophy”.³⁹

Even if Abraham Mendelssohn really rejected Judaism, it does not mean that so did Felix. Another fragment from Abraham’s letter to his son from 1829 is recognized as the evidence of his rejection of Judaism:

“Mendelssohn” does and always will stand for a Judaism in transition, when Judaism, just because it is seeking to transmute itself spiritually, clings to its ancient form all the more stubbornly and tenaciously, by way of protest against the novel form that so arrogantly and tyrannically declared itself to be the one and only path to the good.⁴⁰

According to Michael P. Steinberg, Abraham adapted Hegel’s idea about history, according to which “assimilation [to German society] represents historical development and the maturation of spiritual life”, and at the same time he “did not see his conversion and name change as a rejection of his father’s, who changed the surname into Mendelssohn, path, but precisely as a continuation of it”.⁴¹ Borrowing the terminology from the aesthetic rules proposed by Lessing in the treatise *Laokoon*, the American musicologist indicates further that such a way of understanding the history is associated with the term *Nacheinander* (the succession). However, Felix chose another path than his father, namely *Nebeneinander* (the synchronism).⁴²

³⁸ R.L. Todd, *Mendelssohn Essays*, New York 2008, p. 94.

³⁹ D. Sorkin, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

⁴⁰ *Vide*: E. Werner, *Mendelssohn: A New Image*, New York–London–Toronto 1963, p. 37; as cited in: M.P. Steinberg, *Mendelssohn’s Music...*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁴¹ M.P. Steinberg, *Mendelssohn’s Music...*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁴² The example of *Nacheinander* can be the narrative, in which the events are happen in sequence. On the other hand, the symbol of *Nebeneinander* is the picture, which the whole content is shown at once.

In Steinberg's approach the dialogue between the son and the father, and between two different ways of thinking, takes place in the oratorio *Paulus*. This composition was finished after Abraham's death and recognised as Felix's tribute to his father, whose belief about the linear realisation of history through synthesis and converting was somehow explained in the oratorio. Analysing *Paulus*, Steinberg interpreted the bass' (Paul) and tenor's duet as the sign of harmony between Abraham and Felix, and the tenor's cavatina (the sixth fragment from the end) as son's affection to the deceased father. The implied meaning of this work, according to Steinberg, is based on the dialectic of different pairs: succession and synchronism, historical development and historical dialectic and Abraham's idea about converting from the Judaism to Christianity and Felix's idea about the simultaneous existence of Judaism and Christianity.⁴³ As a result, Felix's answer for the dispute between Judaism and Christianity is not replacing the first with the last, but rather, as Nathan proposed in *Nathan the Wiser*, their coexistence and dialogue.

Analogically, distrust of Mendelssohn family towards Catholicism does not mean that Felix shared this opinion. For example, the composer especially liked his Catholic aunt Dorothea Schlegel,⁴⁴ who was the only member of Mendelssohn family participating in Felix's wedding with Cécile Jeanrenaud, the daughter of the French Huguenot Minister.⁴⁵ Despite the fact that the composer was raised as a devout Lutheran, he was open to different faith. The proof for it, as Judith Cherniak underlines, is, among others, the fact that "he composed for Catholic as well as Lutheran services, and he was prepared to compose settings of psalms for the Hamburg synagogue".⁴⁶ He also wrote pieces for Anglican church and one *Cantique* "Venez chanter" for Huguenots.

Felix realised the idea of religious pluralism also in his musical work. Analysing the text and music, Larry Todd considers the choir *Es wird ein Stern aus Jacob aufgeh'n* from the unfinished oratorio *Christus* Op. 97 as an example of the connection of Judaism with Christianity. The text of this part comes from the Book of Numbers (24,17) and "is

⁴³ M.P. Steinberg, *Mendelssohn's Music...*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁴⁴ L. Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life...*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 348; the absence of other Mendelssohns is caused by the fact that Lea was ill, the brother Paul worked in Hamburg and sisters—Rebeca and Fanny—were pregnant.

⁴⁶ J. Cherniak, *Mendelssohn Reconsidered*, "The Musical Times" 154 (2013), p. 53.

traditionally interpreted to predict the ascendancy of King David”.⁴⁷ Close to the ending of the choir part, Felix replaced this melody based on the text of the Book of Numbers with a Lutheran chorale *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*, and thus linked “the Star of David to the Star of Bethlehem”.⁴⁸ What is more, the contours of both melodies are connected with each other: both melodies start with a broken chord of E flat major ($es^1-g^1-b^1$), but in *Es wird ein Stern aus Jacob aufgeh'n* it goes upwards, and in chorale *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* downwards. After the broken chord, both of them goes upwards to c^2 and then major seconds downwards on b^1 (example 5). It can thus be interpreted that two faiths are connected not only by text, but also by music. In this case, the Lutheran chorale is the medium of “intra-faith connection”.⁴⁹

Es wird ein Stern aus Ja - cob auf-geh'n und ein

Wie schön leuch - tet der Mor - gen - stern!

Ex. 5: F. Mendelssohn, *Christus* Op. 97, part III. The comparison between melody *Es wird ein Stern aus Jacob aufgeh'n* (the Book of Numbers, 24,17) and *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* (Lutheran chorale) in the part of soprano.

Lutheran chorale plays an important role in Mendelssohn's works. The composer had a tendency to introduce this element into different musical pieces not only religious and vocal, but also secular and instrumental as a manifestation of his devoutness and tribute to Johann Sebastian Bach, the great composer of Protestant music. In this way, Mendelssohn blurred the borderline not only between faiths (as in the discussed example from the oratorio *Christus*), but also “broke down traditional lines separating music for the church from music for the concert”⁵⁰ (e.g. *Fugue in E minor*, Op. 35 No. 1).

⁴⁷ R.L. Todd, *Mendelssohn Essays*, op. cit., p. 102.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵⁰ R.L. Todd, A. Mace, op. cit., p. 50. However, for this reason Charles Rosen called Mendelssohn the inventor of the religious kitsch in music. *Vide*: Ch. Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, Boston 1988, p. 590.

From the point of view of the idea *Nebeneinander* in Steinberg's interpretation and the function of Lutheran chorale in the Mendelssohn's work, I think that the last part of *Responsorium et Hymnus* in fact doesn't play the role to criticize Catholicism. It rather shows the possibility to cross the borderline and, what is the most important, the possibility of co-existence and dialectic between two faiths—Catholicism and Lutheranism.

For Moses Mendelssohn religious pluralism doesn't conflict with recognition of metaphysical truth, but it was compatible with it. As Michah Gottlieb writes, such a belief "is based on conviction that metaphysical truths can be known but cannot be adequately signified in language".⁵¹ As language is conventional and arbitrary, in the process of decoding the metaphysical truth could be distorted. Moreover, it's a improper statement that we can enjoy the salvation and recognize God's power and goodness only by obeying the doctrines of the specific faith, because it suggests that God is not good and omnipotent enough for people of other faiths to know his truth. On the contrary, Moses Mendelssohn proposed that "to recognize the truths of natural religion, discursive reason is not needed—simple common sense is sufficient".⁵² For the Jewish philosopher "religious diversity is the «plan and purpose of providence»"⁵³ because it prevents idolatry and helps the truth exist only in the adequate form, thanks to which its arbitral interpretation can be avoided. In Moses Mendelssohn's approach idolatry does not refer to all the cults besides the faith in only one God. For example, believers can worship a lion when they treat it as a symbol of God's power. However, it is idolatry when they recognize the lion as deity, that is, they treat the sign or the religious doctrine itself as divinity. Gottlieb sums up that "religious diversity helps impress on people that any signs used to represent God are arbitrary and inadequate".⁵⁴

Therefore, it can be claimed that the Lutheran chorale at the end of *Responsorium and Hymnus* not only symbolically connected two faiths, but showed their dialectic relation and coexistence. At the end of the part V of the work, plainchant (the symbol of Catholicism) and the

⁵¹ M. Gottlieb, *Mendelssohn's Metaphysical Defense of Religious Pluralism*, "The Journal of Religion" 86 (2006), No. 2, p. 207.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

vocal quartet from the previous part reappear and changed the earlier key of D minor, as under the influence of the choir, into A major—the key of the Lutheran chorale (the symbol of Lutheranism). But the influence is in fact mutual, because the Lutheran chorale in the same work was also modified—at the end of the whole composition, the choir *tutti* sings the text of the chant *Et vide tribulationem nostram*, somehow answering the quartet. This new musical quality, created jointly by two different styles is the product of dialectic. Through this fragment of the work, Felix affirmed the idea of religious pluralism of his grandfather and suggested that the truth appears in the process of dialectic of different faiths. As the result, he indirectly postulated the religious tolerance.

Conclusion

The reception of the persona and music of Felix Mendelssohn was changing dramatically during the 19th and 20th centuries. Even today, musicologists are arguing about the ways to understand and interpret the composer's life and his worldview. As Donald Mintz rightly notices, because the vast majority of Mendelssohn's work are genres, which popularity dramatically decreased in the middle of the 19th century, the reception of his work after his death mirrors the question of the decline of the musical genres he preferred and also the nature and the role of religion in his life.⁵⁵ It is why the debate on the issue of faiths and Mendelssohn's identity never stops.

According to Jeffrey Sposato, Felix was an absolute *Neuchrist* and had doubts about his identity as a Jew. The picture of Mendelssohn as an admirer of the Jewish culture existing in musicological literature was created after World War II in the exaggerated way, probably as a counteraction to the Nazi anti-semitic propaganda, which defamed the composer and devalued the quality of his work.⁵⁶ However, according to Botstein, despite the fact that Felix was a religious Lutheran, he still cared for his Jewish heritage and the legacy of Moses Mendelssohn. Although the Jewish musicologist agrees that “Sposato is right in cautioning us

⁵⁵ D. Mintz, *1848, Anti-Semitism, and the Mendelssohn Reception*, [in:] *Mendelssohn Studies*, R.L. Todd (ed.), Cambridge 1992, p. 148.

⁵⁶ J. Sposato, *Creative Writing...*, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

not to overemphasize Mendelssohn's adult self-identification as a Jew just because such a view meets our own contemporary sensibilities", he reminds that we should "not lurch too far in the other direction only on the basis of Sposato's evidence".⁵⁷ Botstein also indicated that Werner's "creative writing" in general did not change the fact that the composer saw himself as a Jew (e.g. in the above-mentioned letter from 1833 about *Jewish Civil Disabilities Act*).⁵⁸

At the end, it has be reminded that according to Steinberg we should not simplify Mendelssohn's life and interpret his music from only one point of view—it is not important if this is an interpretation of Sposato or Botstein. He also proposed that we will understand the composer's worldview better only if we pay attention to "subtle negotiation between Jewish and Christian spheres of culture and memory during the formation of the modern German world [...] when the boundaries of all three of these were evolving and unpredictable".⁵⁹ Mendelssohn's life—as everybody's—is difficult to conclude in the one simple formula, so it is always interpreted in different ways, from the perspective of different cultural and historical contexts. Therefore the reception of the persona and the work of Mendelssohn from the Wagner's anti-Semitism to contemporary Mendelssohn Renaissance is (and should be) multifaceted, dynamic and dialectic—like the complicated relation of different faiths in his life, which was reflected in the last part of *Responsorium et Hymnus*.

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⁵⁷ L. Botstein, *Mendelssohn and the Jews*, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

⁵⁸ Botstein also explained that falsifying sources results from the need to save the Mendelssohn's reception and German Jews not only from the aftermaths of over hundred years of anti-Semitism, but also in the Jewish community after the II World War.

⁵⁹ M.P. Steinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

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