

Robert Wexelblatt

## The Mendelssohn Statue in Leipzig

*Let the language of music tell only of noble things*  
is incised on its backside, as if Leipzig  
almost felt ashamed of a sentiment  
too impersonal for an epitaph,  
too pompous for an apology.  
Most people miss it or aren't sure what it means.

Procrastination is the vector of pride and disgrace;  
inaction the stand-off of admiration's  
tug-of-war with inbred hate. Forget the  
father's canny baptisms, the Christian  
upbringing, the hopefully appended  
*Bartholdy*. Grandfather Moshe frowned on  
conversions, scorned the opportunism,  
perhaps foreseeing their futility.  
Abraham, son of a famous father,  
father of a famous son, implored Felix

to drop the Mendelssohn from his programs.

*A Christian Mendelssohn is an impossibility.*

*A Christian Mendelssohn the world will never recognize.*

On the pedestal the ersatz surname

Felix didn't like crawls underneath the  
one he kept, a dropped wig of Magyar hair.

*I should have discarded the name Mendelssohn,  
immediately,* wrote father bitterly to son.

The bronze effigy stands seven meters high  
across from Bach's own Thomaskirche.

A lyre-bearing muse, looking like a  
foot-sore tourist, rests on the steps below  
the Master. On one side a pair of angels  
scrape a violin, blow a flute; on the other,  
a brace of cherubs work through a vocal score.

Felix was the Queen of England's favorite  
composer; he and Albert could chitchat in  
homely German. This thing looks *echt* Victorian  
though it's not yet a decade old. Here the  
the musical city's champion, renowned,  
romantically dead before forty,  
takes his stand; still, it took the Leipzigers  
twenty-one years to appoint a committee,  
twenty-four more before they accomplished  
their work, thirty-eight more for the city to  
cleanse itself of the result, bearing out the  
father's prophecy: *There can no more*

*be a Christian Mendelssohn than a Jewish Confucius.* Easy to dismiss the *Fifth*, to proclaim the mighty fortress someone else's God.

On November 9, 1936, Mayor Rudolf Haake publicly declared the Jew Mendelssohn *cannot be displayed as an exponent of a German city of music.* Nobody knows what became of Werner Stein's original sculpture—melted down, perhaps, and sent to Essen, to Krupp. Then nothing for sixty-seven years, a vacant rest, Mendelssohn still stubbornly world-famous yet statueless, neither Christian nor Confucian, until, with private funds and at a conductor's urging, they erected this. Now he stands on the Dittrichring under trees in greatcoat *cum toga*, with his receding Yiddish curls, right forearm resting on a music stand, left hand grasping a score, leaning slightly to the left, head held high. His gaze is fixed. He could be looking back to the beloved Bach or forward to a quasi-Jewish Mahler. *Only the noble proclaim the language of music.*

## A Comedian

Imagine, he said, a horseradish layer cake.  
It took some time to conjure that up, then  
a little more to get the point, nearly.  
We guessed he meant you can make something  
sweet out of what's bitter, or that looks sweet,  
that the best jokes are going to bite back.

We thought he was an alchemist who  
could transmute leaden pain to something bright,  
yellow. We forgot alchemy's a cheat.  
Bitter battles against bitterness he  
fought, always victorious. We never  
once suspected that he could lose the war.