

# Mendelssohn's Sonata III: A Composer's View

Margaret Vardell Sandresky

In the summer of 1829, after an extended journey through the British Isles with his friend Klingemann, the twenty-year-old Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy completed his trip with a visit in Wales, where he made sketches, now lost, of the piece he intended to present to his "dear little sister," Fanny, as a special gift for her wedding to William Hensel on October 3.<sup>1</sup>

Back in London, he met with an accident on September 17, seriously injuring his leg when he was hit by a light horse-drawn vehicle he called a "stupid little gig."<sup>2</sup> On September 25, he wrote his mother that he had "thought of a splendid idea" for Fanny's wedding piece, but now he wouldn't be able to present it until after the wedding.<sup>3</sup> By November 6, he wrote his father that he had been laid up in bed for five weeks, was just going out for his first drive, and could almost walk without crutches.<sup>4</sup>

It was during this time that he completed the proposed piece for Fanny's wedding. Since the final working manuscript is either lost or in private hands, the only available music is a sketch, now in the Bodleian Library. It is written on two staves, the bottom staff mostly blank, the top staff outlining the melody and briefly indicating the harmony.<sup>5</sup> This is unmistakably the same material that appears as the opening and closing sections of Mendelssohn's *Sonata III*. Many years later, when he was assembling material for the organ sonatas, he inserted between the sections two fugues with the chorale *Aus tiefer Noth schrei ich zu dir* ("In deep need I cry to thee") as a cantus firmus.

The outer sections form two strong A-major homophonic pillars surrounding the two inner fugues in A minor, which,

by means of their dark chromatics, jagged rhythms and tumbling 16th notes, seem contrastingly very dark and stormy. In each fugue, after the exposition for four voices in the manuals is completed, the chorale melody is introduced in the pedal as a fifth voice.

The second movement that closes the work is a simple song form. The two movements must have been conceived together, since they are dated August 9 and 17, 1844, probably while he was still vacationing in Bad Soden near Frankfurt, where his wife's family lived. The use of this particular chorale, its stark contrast to the A-major sections, and why it is spread over the two fully developed fugues are questions that are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Mendelssohn was only seven years old when his wealthy and cultivated Jewish parents had their children baptized at the Neue Kirche in Berlin. In these early years, the music and worship of the Lutheran Church must have had a profound influence on him, for his use of Lutheran chorales as well as his interest in the organ and his dazzling performances on that instrument testify to an enduring love for this music throughout his life. By the time he was twelve, he was studying Bach fugues and writing one of his own as shown in the following charming note to his teacher, August Wilhelm Bach.

Berlin, the third day of the lovely month of May, 1821.

What does the sexton say, my dear Herr Bach? Can we play this afternoon? Or is there a wedding? or a confirmation . . . Greetings to the Prelude and Fugue in G Minor. I am presently sweating over an organ fugue, which will come forth into the world within the next few days. My heart-

## Example 1



## Example 2



felt greetings to all the principal (sic) pipes, yours faithful (sic),

F. Mendelssohn<sup>6</sup>

## Aus tiefer Noth

Mendelssohn showed an early interest in "Aus tiefer Noth" by composing a cantata on the chorale in 1830, a year after his English journey. Then on his travels in 1831, he must have been particularly interested when he found a copy of the Sebastian Bach organ chorale prelude on the same melody.

He wrote the following to his sister, Fanny, on her birthday, November 14, 1831, from Frankfurt am Main:

Oh my dear little sister and musician . . . I want to give you one of the unbelievably [sic] moving Seb. Bach organ pieces which I just got to know here . . . Now play this chorale with Beckchen [another sister] . . . and think of me. . . NB. The chorale is with double pedal.

Bach composed only one chorale prelude with double pedal, so Mendelssohn must be referring to Bach's setting of "Aus tiefer Noth."<sup>7</sup>

The chorale itself, composed by Martin Luther in 1523–4, was the first one for which Luther wrote both words and music. (Example 1) The previous year he had composed his first melody, to the poem "Ein neues Lied wir heben an," after two young martyrs were immolated in Brussels, Belgium. "Aus tiefer Noth" stems from the same time.<sup>8</sup> Luther's poem is taken from Psalm 130, *De Profundis*, a psalm of redemption. Since metrical translations in English hymnals, by their very nature, cannot be specific, the following is my literal translation and, though awkward, may be helpful in grasping Luther's meaning.

### Verse I

Aus tiefer Noth schrei ich zu dir,  
Herr Gott, erhö'r mein Rufen.  
Dein gnädig' Ohren kehr zu mir,  
und meiner Bitt sie offen;  
denn so du willst das sehen an  
was Sünd und Unrecht ist getan,  
wer kann, Herr, vor dir bleiben?

In deepest need I cry to thee,  
Lord give ear to my cry.  
Thy gracious ear incline to me,  
And to my plea be open;  
Then as you are sure to watch,  
What sin and lawlessness is done,  
Who can, Lord, stand before you?

### Verse V

Ob bei uns ist der Sünden viel,  
bei Gott ist viel mehr Gnade;  
sein Hand zu helfen hat kein Ziel,  
wie gross auch sei der Schade.  
Er ist allein der gute Hirt  
der Israel erlösen wird  
aus seinen Sünden allen.<sup>9</sup>

Though by us there be many sins,  
By God is much more grace.

His hand will help us without fail,  
However great the peril.  
He is alone the shepherd good,  
Who will release Israel  
From all her sins.

Bach's chorale prelude is found in his *Clavier Übung Part III* in the section of Catechism chorales, and represents the sacrament of confession and forgiveness, known in the Lutheran Church as the Office of the Keys. It is the form for the confession and absolution of sin and derives its name from Matthew 16:19 and John 20:21–23.<sup>10</sup>

Mendelssohn's early cantata on "Aus tiefer Noth," op. 23, no. 1, published in 1832, takes its pattern and style from the cantatas of J. S. Bach. It is in five movements, one movement for each verse of the five verses of text. The first and last verses are set in a simple chorale harmonization, the second and fourth are a fugue and a chorale prelude with introduction, and the middle movement is for three solo voices with chorus and organ. Although "Aus tiefer Noth" is in the Phrygian mode, the cantata is firmly in F minor, and the cadences avoid any trace of the Phrygian in their strong tonality. The contrapuntal writing is a perfect model of 18th-century counterpoint.

## The fugues of Sonata III

In the later *Sonata III*, the Phrygian character of the chorale is retained. (Example 2) Here Mendelssohn presents the chorale in the pedal transposed to A minor, inserting a B-flat before the A at the proper cadence points; and at the close of the second phrase (mm. 46–47), he uses a Phrygian cadence harmonizing the B-flat to A pedal as IV/6 to V in D minor. On the other hand, where this phrase is repeated in the second fugue, the B-flat to A is harmonized in the key of G minor as I/6 to VII/6 (mm. 69–70) and is not at a cadential point in the overall work. However, the final cadence (m. 92) is Phrygian, IV/6 to V/9, and introduces a long pedalpoint leading into the pedal cadenza.

The expositions of the two fugues illustrate two different aspects of Mendelssohn's fugal writing. (Example 3) In the first fugue, the exposition (m. 24) follows traditional fugal procedure. Scale steps 5–6 at the beginning of the subject are answered by scale steps 1–3 (m. 28). The order of entry is bass, tenor, alto, soprano. After the exposition, the chorale enters in the pedal, overlapping the last measure of the answer. The chorale is split between the two fugues. Phrase one, phrase two, and the repetition of phrase one are presented in the first fugue, and the fugue closes with a half cadence in A minor, composed of a Neapolitan sixth chord going to a dominant ninth followed by a five-measure pedalpoint.

It is worth noting that because Mendelssohn decided to make his two fugue

OHS SEATTLE 2008 ✦ JULY 14-18  
A YOUNG YET VIBRANT HISTORY  
SEATTLE | TACOMA | OLYMPIA ✦ WASHINGTON STATE



WATJEN CONCERT ORGAN IN BENAROYA HALL: C.B. Fisk, 2000 PHOTO BY SEPH PARSHALL

ORGAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY ◦ 53RD ANNUAL NATIONAL CONVENTION  
WWW.ORGANSOCIETY.ORG/2008

Example 3

Example 4

subjects compatible as invertible counterpoint and to bring them together near the end of the second fugue, he designed them both on the same vertical sonority, the V/vii<sup>7</sup>. (Example 4) Thus it was convenient to divide his cantus firmus between the fugues at a point where the dominant could function in both places, with the result that he did not follow the rhyme scheme of the text or the form of the chorale, which is abab-ccd, but split it after the repetition of the second phrase, ababcd. (See Example 2.)

In contrast to the scholarly correctness of the first fugue, Mendelssohn seems to have designed the second one with Romantic fervor, avoiding scholarly constraints and directing the performer to play with gradually more and more animation. The A-minor subject beginning on scale steps 5-6-5 (m. 58) and outlining a dominant/diminished area, tumbles down in 16th notes to C-sharp, throwing it into the subdominant key of D minor by means of this chromaticism. One remembers here that in the old modal system, D really would have been the dominant of the Phrygian on A. These events present two problems for the tonal system, solved traditionally by answering scale steps 5-6-5 with 1-3-2 and by returning the modulating subject to the proper key in the answer. Mendelssohn does neither.

Since the modulating pitch, C-sharp, is the very last note of the tenor subject, whose proper tonal answer, 1-3-2 in the alto, would force a cross relation between the C-sharp and a C-natural, the situation requires deft and imaginative treatment. (See Example 3.) Mendelssohn gives the alto a real answer (m. 60). However, in order to halt the continuous modulation of subject and answer and not stray too far from the main key, he ends his real answer by writing an F-natural instead of F-sharp, thus preparing for the third entry of the subject in the soprano and remaining in D minor. Here, one may be surprised to hear a tonal subject, scale steps 1-3-2 in D minor (m. 62); but the subject, placed now in the highest voice, sounds exciting, overarching, overreaching, and

not like a misplaced answer. The fourth entry in the bass (m. 64) is then a real answer to a tonal subject; and this upside down arrangement ending in D minor effectively prepares the two measures of chromatic secondary dominant-seventh chords leading from the exposition to the entrance in the pedal of the fourth phrase of the chorale, where he is heading temporarily for F minor.

### The outer sections of Sonata III

Under analysis, the principal thematic material in the opening and closing sections of the sonata seems drawn from the opening phrase of the chorale, whose first interval of a descending perfect fifth from E to A appears, now in the key of A major and filled in stepwise, as the opening gesture of the main theme. (Example 5) This "filled in" fifth dominates Mendelssohn's thinking here, for it occurs some twenty times during the course of this section. The same pitches also appear in measure two of the second movement. Again, in the first phrase of the chorale, the ascending leap of a fifth moving up a half step to the sixth degree of the scale may be interpreted as the interval of a sixth appearing in several places throughout the sonata. First, it occurs between measures one and two of the opening theme; second, it appears twice at the recapitulation in the pedal from low C-sharp to A and then up to F-sharp. Finally, it appears as the first two pitches of the second movement. The chorale provides one other motive. Compare the scale steps 5-6-5 in the first two measures of the chorale to the subjects of each fugue.

Such an analysis, then, shows that the entire movement, and in a broader sense the entire work, can be viewed as evolving from one theme, that of the chorale, and not from separate ideas. This coincidence presents a conundrum: did Mendelssohn either consciously or unconsciously have the "Aus tiefer Noth" chorale in his head during the closing weeks of his English journey, and turn it into a joyful bridal piece by filling in the melodic skeleton and changing the mode? Then years later, did he decide to expand Fanny's piece into the *Sonata III*? This would explain the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate parts, the wedding piece, the chorale, and the fugues. But why put them together?

### Why "Aus tiefer Noth"?

One answer may lie in the important significance the music of Mendelssohn's faith had in his life. For example, in the top right-hand corner of many pieces he wrote "Hilf du mir" or "H.d.m." ("Help thou me") before he began work. According to my *Evangelisches Gesangbuch*, "Aus tiefer Noth" is the chorale for the week of the eleventh Sunday after Trinity.<sup>11</sup> Mendelssohn, in his letter of April 14, 1829 from Hamburg, where he made a visit before embarking on his first trip to England, wrote that he couldn't comment on theatre and music in that city since everything was closed during Holy Week there.<sup>12</sup> That would place the eleventh Sunday after Trinity near August 25, just the time when he was in Wales, where he wrote a long letter to his father that day from Llangollen, in which said he had "done a little composing."<sup>13</sup> These documents show how he could have de-

Example 5

cid to use the chorale for that week as the basis for a triumphant expression of joy celebrating Fanny's marriage. Years later, as he assembled the sonatas, remembering the relation of the chorale to Fanny's piece, he added two fugues over the same chorale.

Why two fugues rather than just one? Could it be that Mendelssohn was thinking of the two fugues as a memory of the two young martyrs who influenced Martin Luther's first complete chorale, "Aus tiefer Noth"? ■

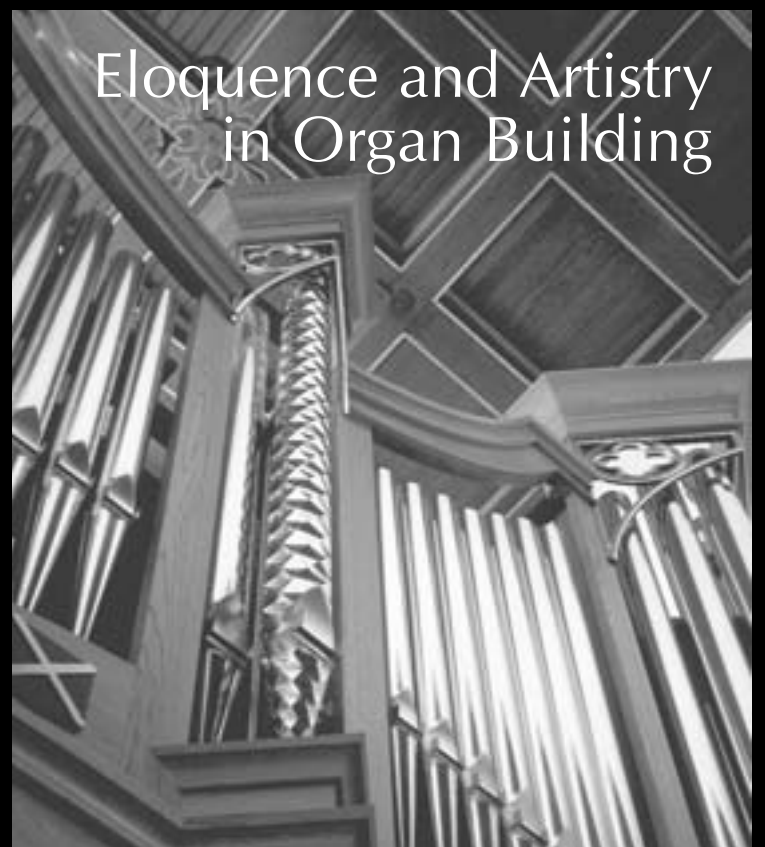
Margaret Sandresky is a graduate of Salem Academy and College with a major in organ performance. She earned a master's degree in composition with a minor in organ at the Eastman School of Music, and later received a Fulbright Grant for the study of organ with Helmut Walcha at the Hochschule für Musik in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. She has held positions at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, the University of Texas at Austin, the North Carolina School of the Arts, and at Salem College where she is Emeritus Professor of Music.

Her articles have been published in the Journal of Music Theory, Music Theory Spectrum, The American Liszt Society Journal, Ars Organi, and The American Organist. Her seven volumes of organ music are published by Wayne Leupold Editions, and her anthems

are published by Paraclete Press. In 2004, she received the Distinguished Composer award given at the AGO convention in Los Angeles, and in 2006 was honored by St. Andrews College with the Sam Ragan Award for distinguished service to the Arts in North Carolina.

### Notes

1. Craig Tomlinson, trans., *Mendelssohn, a Life in Letters*, ed. Rudolf Elvers (Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1984, New York, NY), p. 290.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-09.
5. William A. Little, ed., *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy Complete Organ Works*, Vol. II, The Berlin-Krakow Manuscripts (Novello, London, England, 1989).
6. Tomlinson, p. 4.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 169-170. *Wir glauben all' an einen Gott, Vater* (BWV 740) also has a double pedal, but is of doubtful attribution.
8. *Evangelisches Gesangbuch: Ausgabe für die Evangelische Kirche in Hessen und Nassau* (Verlag der Evangelische Kirche in Hessen und Nassau, Darmstadt, Germany, 1950), p. 616.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 195-196.
10. *The Holy Bible*, King James Version.
11. *Evangelisches Gesangbuch*, p. 195.
12. Tomlinson, p. 57.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 90.



## Eloquence and Artistry in Organ Building

Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church, Denver, CO  
Timothy Krueger, Music Director, Frank Nowell, Organist



Member, Associated Pipe Organ Builders of America

112 West Hill Street

Champaign, Illinois 61820

800.397.3103 • www.Buzardorgans.com