

## FELIX MENDELSSOHN BARTHOLDY (1809-1847) – GOETHE'S FAVORITE

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**SUMMARY** – Felix Mendelssohn, Goethe's favorite, who revealed the genius of Johann Sebastian Bach after almost a century of oblivion, was of a fragile constitution. Last year of his life he was very depressed because of his sister Fanny's sudden death. The last month he had several attacks of severe headaches with agitation, anxiety, confusion and slow pulse. Last three days these episodes became more frequent and his overall health worsened. After stupor and coma, he died from probable subarachnoid (or cerebral) hemorrhage (with hypertension?), like his sister several months before.

**Key words:** *Famous persons; Music – history; History – 19<sup>th</sup> century; Brain disease – complications; Subarachnoid hemorrhage – diagnosis*

Mendelssohn's destiny and life-path were in a way similar to Mozart's. Already in early childhood, his talent was noticed and was regarded as a 'child prodigy'. Mendelssohn was lucky to have lived among higher class from his earliest age. He became very popular, grew old very quickly and died young, just like Mozart, even from an undefined disease just like him. He was born on February 3, 1809 in a rich Jewish family in Hamburg. His uncle Moses Mendelssohn was a famous historian, scientist and philosopher of the time. The environment in which young Felix grew up was top intellectual. His father and several of his brothers converted to Christianity and therefore came in conflict with the remainder of the family that stayed Jewish. As Christian members of the family died rather young, suddenly and under unclear circumstances, their deaths were regarded as a revenge of fate. That is why Felix too became very apprehensive for his own

life and well being in his adulthood. His father took a second surname (Bartholdy), so Felix's family name was actually Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, although the last part was usually left out. Felix grew up in a well-off environment, being tutored by excellent teachers Borger and Zelter, particularly in music for which he showed a lot of inclination. His parents did not suppress his musical development as they could afford the extra tuition. In that kind of supportive environment, young Mendelssohn considered his musical occupation not as part of his regular school activities, but rather as something he was doing for his enjoyment and leisure. He lived a rather sheltered life among his loved ones that rendered him vulnerable to the difficulties of the real life. Mendelssohn was a very friendly but at the same time rather introverted and sensitive person. In fact, when everything in his life went smoothly, he would show his open and somewhat immature side, but the moment he faced any obstacle he would have become apprehensive and insecure. He was lucky that, as a particularly talented person, he was welcomed in the intellectual high society of the then separated

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and divided Germany. He was a favorite of Goethe's who enjoyed his bright and cunning mind as well as Mendelssohn's remarkable skill to play straight from the notes without any previous practice. Once, he was given an illegible Mozart's note-manuscript, but nevertheless he played it most accurately, in original tempo and immediately getting the essence of the given piece. When he was seventeen, he composed some of his best musical pieces. The extraordinary success of the *Summer Night Dream* was followed by *Hebrides* (inspired by his tours of England) and the basic motif of *Scottish Symphony*. He toured England and other countries with great success and was always accepted with a lot of appreciation and respect. Goethe, in the original manuscript of his *Faust*, wrote the following dedication: "To my dear young friend Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, tender but great connoisseur of piano, in the name of friendship, and to the remembrance of the happy days in May 1830".

#### Forty Tacts Daily

Twenty-year-old Mendelssohn soon received many offers to lead various music ensembles. As he had neither financial interest, nor patience to do continuously one the same thing, he unwillingly accepted some of the offers. He could not settle at one place, always searching for more work and travels. He was feeling great on his tours and festivals; wherever he came he was considered a celebrity. As a true 'citizen of the world', he was flattered by international artistic and intellectual milieu. Therefore the discussions whether he was a great composer or not, were for him irrelevant. He composed at least 40 tacts daily with a clerk-like dedication and punctuality. He worked as a musical director in Düsseldorf, organizer in Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts and conductor of an orchestra. Mendelssohn was also engaged at other institutions, but could not get any significant position in Berlin, although the Prussian king was very inclined to him. He was particularly keen to succeed in Berlin because his family originated from that area and lived there for a long time. Being a celebrity he soon married Cecile Jeanrenaud, a beautiful and intelligent girl from his class. They had four children. Only one of them (also named Felix) died early. He had a rather happy family life; he travelled a lot and was seen with many famous young artists. He supported the famous English

opera-singer Jenny Lind. He also kept cordial relations with most members of his family, particularly with his sister Fanny, who suddenly died, as did his brother Paul.

#### Too Sensitive...

Mendelssohn's health state was the product of his personality, as he was a sensitive and tense person, an insecure artistic soul. He contracted smallpox in 1830 and overcame a relatively light attack of cholera in Paris in 1832. From 1833, he suffered from frequent headaches accompanied by temporary spells of dizziness and black-outs. Once, while swimming in the Rhine River, he probably had a seizure and almost drowned. He often had flu and catarrh resulting in blockage of the eustachian tube with subsequent impaired hearing and ringing in his ears, particularly in the left one. In 1829, after a coach accident while travelling to England, he injured his knee that rendered him immobile for months. These were all temporary difficulties with minor consequences. There was no connection between those diseases and injuries and his sudden death. Generally, he suffered mostly of so-called neurasthenic-conversion difficulties, sometimes with hypochondriac characteristics, so that the majority of his ailments could be considered as psychosomatic. His overreacted sensitivity, frustrations, states of fury, headaches, feelings of heavy tiredness and exhaustion could be included in this psychosomatic profile. He was inclined to take everything personally; thinking that if someone was not praising him he must have been against him. It was not caused only by his sensitive nature. Mendelssohn was also in some way spoiled by his life successes and his ambitions were by far too unrealistic. He was prone to doing several things at the same time, so usually his many ideas could not be realized in a consecutive, orderly fashion, without him ending up overly exhausted. Although he was practically healthy until his sudden death, he complained regarding his health on a number of occasions ten years before. Those difficulties would usually disappear in several hours. At the onset of these symptoms he used to compose hectically. He was constantly in a hurry suspecting that his life would be too short. Mendelssohn was shocked when his sister Fanny passed away suddenly in 1847 after suffering a stroke and actually only a few months before him.

Mendelssohn tried to overcome his sadness and shock by extreme work. He travelled around Switzerland, climbed the mountains and composed at the same time. He was avoiding contact with anyone, looking scared, introverted, tensed and frustrated, and his low mood rarely leaving him. He seemed to have turned old overnight. Ever more frequently he felt dizzy and had black-outs. He felt broken and weak but walked a lot and made plans, hoping to recover soon. Upon returning to Leipzig everything displeased him, from very bad air to narrow and filthy streets. Schumann commented on his changed appearance. When asked how he was feeling he used to answer: "Grey in grey". He suddenly fell ill on October 9, 1847. He went to bed complaining that his hands were cold and numb. He went for a walk, felt better, but the same attack recurred that evening. His hands were stiff and he had terrible headache. The next day his doctor prescribed leeches. He remained in bed for nine days as relapses repeated several times. The doctor found that his pulse was weakening, he rambled for many hours. He refused any medicines.

#### Beginning of the End

Nevertheless, on October 25, he managed to write his brother Paul a long and conscious letter, full of warmth and brotherly love, where he talked about general danger from above (a power of some kind?), yet believing he would recover again for he felt much better. Mendelssohn urged his brother to visit him as soon as possible because that would be better incentive for recovering than any medicine. On October 28, he walked with his wife, felt well and ate well. The very same day he had two more seizures of the same type with unconsciousness and strong headaches, but he was able to recognize people around him and managed to talk with them. His brother Paul arrived from Berlin on October 30. He found him pale, weak and grown old. The same day Mendelssohn's condition worsened. He became increasingly restless with headaches and temporary states of unconsciousness. An abrupt deterioration took place on November 3, 1847. Although he temporarily felt better, talked with his family and his brother Paul, in the afternoon on the same day he suddenly screamed and felt terrible pain in his head. Immediately he dropped on his pillow and fainted. He was letting strange sounds. Agony lasted

through the night and finally ended in the morning of November 4, leaving him looking closer to death than ever in the last several days of his illness. Again he complained of splitting headache. He was singing, murmuring, imitating some melodies, instruments, even showed a certain smile when suggested to rest. He was even able to answer some simple questions, but concisely, affirmative or negative. When he was asked how he was feeling, he said: "Tired, very tired". He recognized some members of his family, smiling slightly. Any hopes of recovery were slipping away, it was obvious that his calming down was leading towards the final end. In late afternoon he finally lost consciousness. Mendelssohn started breathing loudly and finally departed before ten in the evening on November 4, 1847. Ceremonies were held in Leipzig on November 7 and funeral in Berlin on November 8, with state honors and in the presence of not only German public and its cultural elite but also multitudes from other countries, particularly Great Britain.

#### Conscious till the End

His wife Cecile did not live much longer. She was devoted to the education of their children, suffered from tuberculosis and died when she was only 36. Although the majority of Mendelssohn's family members lived long enough (brothers, children and others), it is indicative, however, that his parents as well as his sister Fanny died relatively suddenly and early in their lives. There were no indications of poisoning. Probably, it was a case of hereditary familial inclination towards high blood pressure or some other cardiovascular or blood disease with pre-existing symptoms. It is also significant that the affected members of the Mendelssohn-Bartholdy family stayed conscious till the very end. The course of Mendelssohn's final, fatal illness points to cerebral or probably subarachnoid hemorrhage, followed by rupture of a brain aneurysm. The question of Mendelssohn's final diagnosis remains shrouded in mystery to this day. His early death abruptly stopped this extremely fruitful and extraordinarily creative life, whose 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of birth is celebrated this year.

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## Sažetak

### FELIX MENDELSSOHN BARTHOLDY (1809.-1847.) – GOETHEOV MILJENIK

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Felix Mendelssohn, koji je genij Johanna Sebastiana Bacha ponovno otkrio nakog gotovo stoljeća zaborava, bio je nježne konstitucije. Zbog iznenadne smrti sestre Fanny posljednje godine svog života provodi vrlo depresivno. Zadnjih mjeseci je imao nekoliko napada teške glavobolje s uznemirenošću, tjeskobom, zbunjenošću i usporenim pulsom. Zadnja tri dana života epizode su se intenzivirale. Nastupa koma te umire zbog vjerojatnog subarahnoidnog (ili cerebralnog) krvarenja (s hipertenzijom?), baš kao i njegova sestra nekoliko mjeseci ranije.

Ključne riječi: *Poznate osobe; Glazba – povijest; Povijest – 19. stoljeće; Bolest mozga – komplikacije; Subarahnoidno krvarenje – dijagnostika*