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Felix Mendelssohn: A Nearly Perfect Life

Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg in 1809 and died in Leipzig in 1847 at the age of 38. During his lifetime he became one of the most famous and best-loved musicians in the Western world. A child prodigy, between the ages of 11 and 14 he produced well over 100 compositions astonishing in variety and quality as well as in quantity. Early creations such as his *Octet* and *Incidental Music for a Midsummer Night's Dream* made him wildly famous as a teenager. His lieder, string quartets, concerti, symphonies, and sacred music were celebrated throughout Europe; his oratorio *Elijah*, composed a few years before his death, rivaled Handel's *Messiah* in popularity.

Beyond the pleasure they brought the listening world, his compositions were always an intellectual event as well as an aesthetic one. His music bridged the classical and romantic eras, blending into the conventions of the past his own structural, harmonic, and conceptual innovations. Many critics and listeners have commented on the three-dimensional, imaginative space his music creates that allows us to explore our own feelings and images. (This quality is also at the heart of the criticism of Mendelssohn's music, which asserts that it is too beautiful, refined, and cultured to achieve true drama or epiphany.) But Schumann's famous judgment of Mendelssohn is telling: "He had risen to such heights that we can say that he is the Mozart of the nineteenth century; the most brilliant among musicians; the one who has most clearly recognized the contradictions of the age, and the first to reconcile them."

Mendelssohn excelled as well in conducting, organ, violin, and viola. His piano playing was legendary. His ability to perform from memory was unparalleled, and his improvisational skills enabled him to sit down at the piano after conducting a concert and pull together themes from

all the pieces played into a startlingly new piece all its own. He was also considered one of the premier conductors in Europe. He developed systematic rehearsal techniques that advanced the fledgling art of conducting to an independent discipline. His leadership style, personal yet forceful and always musically flawless, became the standard for conductors in his time and remains so today. His innovative use of the baton allowed him to more precisely control his orchestra, and he is credited with developing the baton as the conducting instrument it is today.

Mendelssohn's intoxication with music from the past led him to introduce a new form of concert in which historical surveys were part of the program. He would introduce compositions from previous centuries in a way that taught his audiences to appreciate the older works and ask for more. Most famously, he reintroduced the music of Bach. His revival of the *St. Matthew Passion* was one of the great musical events of the century.

Mendelssohn had manifold talents in other areas as well. His intellectual and artistic horizons embraced drawing, painting, poetry, classical studies, theology, and mastery over many written and spoken languages. He was an equestrian, a gifted athlete, and he loved to travel. He was personally dynamic, involved with humanitarian efforts, a master teacher, a generous colleague, and much sought-after socially. As a child and young adult, he was befriended by Goethe and was called "miraculous" by that great man of letters. He was an intimate of England's Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who called him the "second Elijah."

Fortune smiled upon Mendelssohn in his private life as well. The Mendelssohn



family came from great wealth and culture. By all accounts he had a passionate and loving marriage to Cecile Jeanrenaud, and their five children were given ideal parenting. He was devoted to his large and illustrious family, maintaining close relationships with his three siblings and very supportive parents. He had remarkably few conflicts with his peers, although he was a powerful influence on them. Despite his apparent attractiveness to women, there is only scant evidence of a possible affair with Jenny Lind, the great soprano of the age and a devoted friend in any case.

This is not like the usual portraits of great composers. Here is little of the stereotypic interplay between creativity and madness that we have come to expect in our geniuses. Unlike Beethoven, there is no childhood abuse; unlike Mozart, there is no intrusive, narcissistic father; unlike Dvorak and Mahler, there are no tragedies of the deaths of their children; there is no madness, no scandal, no struggle with kings or despots, and hardly a fallow moment in the flow of Mendelssohn's creativity. All that we know about him gives us the portrait of a man who seems to have lived a remarkably lucky, happy, and successful life. He was a musical genius, an intellectual genius, and a genius in using his many gifts to the fullest and in helping others to find their own gifts. He died too early, but the years he lived were as full and creative as most human beings could hope to achieve in the longest lifetime.

What special factors might have supported and influenced Mendelssohn's remarkable gifts? We want to address two: his Jewish identity and his relationship with his older sister Fanny Hensel.

Mendelssohn's grandfather was the great Jewish philosopher Moses Men-

From the
Executive Director



Budget Planning and Mondays Always Get Me Down

Why is it that building budgets and Monday mornings have so much in common? In my life, they both seem to come around every third day or so. It's always either Monday morning or budget time. Plan budget, crunch budget figures, present budget, rework budget, abide by budget, check concert budget — it's incessant. Nothing like spending a fabulous autumn afternoon sitting inside crunching numbers. And why is it that in my nonprofit world, revenue never, ever, exceeds expense?

On the upside, it is gratifying to sit back, take a pause, and enjoy the success of our summer concert. For many, this was their first Davies Symphony Hall experience. I truly hope it was a memorable one. For others, Davies was an old friend, but I know how much all of you enjoy singing in that hall. At the risk of being a bit premature, I suspect that we will be back there in 2007 for the Brahms *Requiem*. It depends on the budget. There's that word again.

Some quick numbers from the summer concert: Ticket sales came in around \$58,000. Concert expenses reached about \$75,000. Our art auction brought in another \$4,000. In the budget (that word again), we had expected a \$17,000 loss, to be made up with the dollars from ballgames, art sales, silent auction, and advertising. We got very close, so let's call it a wash. I can't say thank you too many times to those who participated in the Producers' Circle. What a huge difference all of you made in getting us to Davies for a successful event.

This time of year can be somewhat stressful for the organization administratively, as we put on our fall concert in a short window of time, then do the same thing for the holiday show. We'll have to budget (my God, it appears again) our time — and our dollars — appropriately. I'm concerned that producing three concerts in a five-month period taxes our singers and our audiences. *Elijah* is a piece

I've never been involved in, but just listening to the rehearsals, the music strikes me as being majestic and powerful. And I'm very pleased with the quality and the commitment of the chorus.

Speaking of commitment, before long we're going to be getting a read on our singers' interest in participating in the holiday Festival of Carols concert. Again this year, we've budgeted (it's back!) for two performances. Bryan does a wonderful job getting singers ready to perform an interesting program (see his article on page 5). Last year we expanded the event with refreshments and a small gift area.

We are in the midst of planning next year's schedule. The only thing certain is the locations of our four concerts. In the spring we return to St. Ignatius Church on the USF campus. The summer has us performing at the beautiful Mission Dolores Basilica (Durufle *Requiem* and a world premiere). In the fall we're back at Calvary, and then we finish up at the First Unitarian Church for the Festival of Carols.

Next year is a difficult one for us from a rehearsal standpoint, as we won't have access to Cole Hall for two-thirds of the year due to planned renovations by UCSF. I'll need to budget (that word again!) for rehearsal-space rental elsewhere.

One of the great strengths of our organization is our committed board of directors. Right now we could use a few more board members. I urge each and every one of you to consider this opportunity to help the chorus.

Section leaders are often overlooked, but these dedicated individuals have always aided us in becoming a better and more organized chorus. Take the time to get to know these people. Work with them.

Everyone knows how I feel about our staff: rock solid! We are going to be hiring a new development director in the spring, so if you're interested yourself or if you have a lead on someone who could fill the role, let me know. We certainly miss

Tracy Schmidt, but she had a wonderful opportunity that she couldn't pass up.

And last, but certainly not least, our strength comes from you, our singers. All of your various commitments — in singing, donating dollars, volunteering time, and caring about the quality of the Choral Society — give us a solid foundation. This organization's hope and desire is to provide you and our audiences with the best musical experience we possibly can. It is the reason we are here.

I just noticed that the sun has gone down, and next year's budget (it never goes away) is still sitting off to the side of my desk, haunting me. But after thinking about the road recently traveled and the road ahead, those numbers don't seem quite so daunting. I guess it's just a question of perspective. For all the fun we have, the enjoyment we give, and the role we play in the community, crunching a few hundred numbers seems a small price to pay. Budgets come and budgets go, and they're only best guesses anyway, right? Perspective.

Now, if I could just adopt that same attitude for Monday mornings ... ❖

— Alan Kleinschmidt

Why We Have a Development Committee

When the siren song of the Choral Society's board of directors lured me into joining them, I was motivated for two reasons. I thought being involved with the board would more quickly integrate me into the life of the chorus, and I believed that being on the board would enrich my experience. Both have proved true beyond my hopes. I was also curious about all the fundraising activities promoted by Alan and others. I actually had the impression that quarterly dues and ticket sales funded the budget. In this, I was very much mistaken!

In fact, our dues comprise only approximately 20% of our annual budget, and ticket sales another 25%. In a year like 2005, this leaves approximately \$137,000 uncovered. Voilà! We need a development committee. I'm proud to be its chairperson.

This committee promotes the fundraising initiatives of the Choral Society

From the Artistic Director

The Wide Embrace of Choral Music

Our *Carmina Burana* and *Songs for the Earth* concerts were a tremendous success. We sang art, we sold art, we had a wonderful time doing it, and we came out in good shape financially. *Elijah* is well underway and is coming along nicely. We are facing no immediate crisis, and I am under the illusion that I have time to let my mind drift (no, despite outward indications, it does not drift very often).

We are adults with a passion for music. We are complex people living in a complex society, and we reach out to one another and form an organization where we can explore great art and create beautiful and rich events for the larger community. We are making it a priority to give three hours a week to sing and work together. This very act continually renews me, and I am grateful to be able to work with all of you.

You may know that in addition to the Choral Society, I round out my professional music life by serving as the artistic director for the Piedmont Boys and Girls Choirs, for the small, professional chorus Volti, and for the Golden Gate International Children's Choral Festival. This creates a workload that can be absurd at times, but it also puts me in the middle of a multigenerational and musically diverse environment. When I am at least half rested, I feel very lucky!

At this moment, everything is in full swing. I spend six-and-a-half hours a week in the company of 66 children, ages 11 to 17. Their energy and resilience seem boundless, and they are talented and musically engaged to the highest degree. Despite being very overbooked, their lives are simpler than adult lives, and their innocence and joy are a constant reminder of the promise of the future.

Then there is Volti for three to six hours per week. Volti is a group of 20 professional singers, most of whom have advanced degrees in music performance and lots of experience. They undertake repertoire that is extremely challenging to the ears and the mind. Volti reminds me that the bar is set very high in pursuit of art, and that it is a disservice to music to limit it to the status of entertainment. Music demands everything. It is an exploration of the larger themes as well as the nooks and crannies of imagination. It is not always pretty or soothing. It serves to provoke the full range of intellectual and emotional human potential.

And finally there is the Golden Gate International Children's Choral Festival, which comes around every two to three years. It will next be held in Oakland from June 26 to July 1, 2006. This is an astonishing event that brings children's

choirs together from around the world and the United States for five days of concerts, competitions, and special events. Residents of the East Bay adopt the children for the six nights, giving their guests a chance to feel the love and learn how we live and who we are. A core of tireless volunteers meets regularly on a monthly basis to plan and coordinate the festival. I can safely say that one of the greatest rewards in my life is to see and hear 500 children from around the world singing together at the Grand Finale Concert (save the date! July 1, 2006). The festival reminds me that we can make a difference in the world and that there is every reason to hope. If you would like to house children or volunteer for the festival, just let me know.

Each of these organizations is led by staff, volunteers, and volunteer boards of directors. With the Choral Society, we are fortunate to have the benefit of the immense talent, good humor, and intelligence of Bryan, Alan, Gale, and the staff and board, making all our activities possible.

It is my great good fortune to live in the embrace of all this singing. Though there are many times when I am on the edge of being overwhelmed with the workload, there are also times when I experience such perfect moments that it all seems to stay in balance. ❖

— Bob Geary

in two essential ways. First, it develops and cultivates new sources of revenue, such as corporate sponsorship, sustaining gifts, individual contributions, and private charitable foundation grants. Second, it develops fundraising initiatives for implementation by the Special Events Committee. Examples include the silent auction, white elephant sale, showtune singalong, and more recently, the Davies art auction, which netted \$4,000 this year. These activities have been organized with great success by Annette Dawson.

Another very important revenue source is tapped annually by Alan Kleinschmidt with the invaluable and crucial assistance of our beloved administrative assistant, Marilyn McDonald. This year the dynamic duo reaped \$24,900 from Grants for the Arts, made possible by the San

Francisco Hotel Tax Fund.

The Development Committee is supported in its efforts by an on-staff development director. This spot was filled until quite recently by our own Tracy Schmidt, who left her post for a real job with a future and benefits — go figure. You will remember Tracy's promotion of ESCRIP and the Inertia Beverage Group. Both of these companies have partnered with us so that a portion of certain purchases we singers make is routed back to the chorus. If you haven't signed up, shame on you! It's easy. It's safe. It helps the chorus.

Now, this may seem a rambling wreck of a column; however, take pity on its author, who pens this missive from the comfort of a chemotherapy chair, and consider how you might participate on the Development Committee. It may well be the most creative, stimulating, and chal-

lenging area of the Choral Society board. Do you have an idea about sources of funding, no matter how outlandish? Do you have an "in" at your company, your best friend's company, your spouse's/partner's/significant other's company? Maybe you know a fearless person with love for the chorus who would enjoy making solicitation calls (stop that! — I'm talking about calls asking for money for the chorus!). Or are you a behind-the-scenes person who could prepare mailings, refine our promotional materials, do research, or pursue some unique money-making initiatives that only you can think of?

No matter your preferred area of endeavor, we would love to have you hitch your passion for the chorus to ours and help move us to the next level of financial stability. ❖

— Sydni Roberson

Music in the Berkshires

Several Choral Society singers spent different weeks this past summer at the Berkshire Choral Festival in Sheffield, Massachusetts. Altos Joan Smith and Charlotte Herzfeld, and bass Albert Wald, who participated in "Bach week," describe their experiences:

Joan Smith: Where else can one attend a choral camp for a week with about 250 other choristers, sing five hours a day, live in student dorms (sharing the one-per-floor bathroom!), and work with a renowned choral director?

On the eve of its 25th year, the Berkshire Choral Festival offers just such an opportunity. You can select any one of seven weeks at three locations: four weeks in Massachusetts, or one week in either Salzburg, Austria, or Canterbury, England. Seven conductors are invited to conduct their choice of choral music, and each week culminates in a Saturday night performance for the community.

Performing the Bach *B-minor Mass* in Sheffield under our gifted and humble director, Gary Wedow (who had a unique sense of humor), was a beautiful and even spiritual experience. When you add to the mix a lovely campus, warm summer nights, and the joy of sharing the week and the performance with old friends and new — it just doesn't get any better.

Charlotte Herzfeld: The Berkshire Choral Festival has had many different meanings for me, and it has given me the opportunity to "travel with a specific purpose." My first Berkshire experience was in England. I had never sung with an experienced amateur group, or with an accomplished orchestra, and to sing in Canterbury Cathedral was awe-inspiring. An unexpected bonus was that I met several San Francisco Choral Society singers there, who encouraged me to join their group when I got home!

In fact, at the Berkshire Choral Festival I have made friends from all over the country. The concentrated rehearsals are both demanding and rewarding, with a thrilling result in just a week's time. And the opportunity to sing under different conductors has given me a real appreciation for the complexity of their job.

The Bach *B-minor Mass* this past summer was certainly one of the best sessions in the eight years that I have attended.

Albert Wald: Dear Diary, I survived summer music camp! We just performed the *B-minor Mass* to a sold-out house of 1,000 people who gave us a standing ovation. We had great soloists, including baritone Christopher Nomura, a solid orchestra from Springfield, Massachusetts, and best of all, our conductor for the week, Gary Wedow. We prepared all week for this event, and quite a bunch of us retired afterward to the bar to celebrate our success. Tomorrow we'll get to hear the recording of the concert at breakfast, and then we'll hug and handshake our way through farewells to the new friends made.

A week at the Berkshire Choral Festival is quite an experience. Singers from all over the country gather to live in the dorms of a prep school in rural western Massachusetts. During "Bach week" only 38 of the singers were first-timers. Some had attended for more than 20 years. Well over half of the folks in my group had never before sung the *B-minor*, yet they had managed to learn virtually every note in advance, on their own. The singers were well prepared, hard working, sociable, and friendly. ("Where ya from? How big a chorus do you have way out there? Oh, you've sung here five times before? Isn't Gary the best? I've never seen people work so hard for a conductor! You've got how many grandchildren?") Our average age was mid-sixties.

Gary Wedow is choral director at the New York City Opera and is on the Juilliard faculty. Nearly his first words to us were that no two consecutive notes were to have the same dynamic: he wanted shaping and more shaping. Hairpins galore. Lots of "stingers": an explosive start to a note, then tailing off. This was going to be an emotional, heartfelt, even operatic version of Bach's masterpiece. No fussing with diction unless it impacted pitch or rhythm. No dry analyses or pedantry. Of course, Gary was after the basses for singing flat and late (we basses are the same nationwide), but his strategy and natural personal style were to encourage. And it got great results.

We rehearsed for a couple of hours after breakfast and another couple after dinner. We also attended morning sectionals taught by accomplished faculty section leaders, who supplied some excellent vocal instruction. (This was great practice, but much of this good technique disappeared at concert time when, of course, we oversang.) Each day we could choose from among a variety of one-hour classes on topics such as vocal technique, or Bach and his Mass. Before dinner there was a one-hour presentation: a musicologist on the Mass, Gary on interpreting the Mass, a recital by the faculty, a recital by the apprentices.

Afternoons were free to take trips to Great Barrington, to the Norman Rockwell Museum, to Edith Wharton's house, to kayak, to canoe, to work out, or just to loaf. The one night when we had no rehearsal, quite a few of us went to a concert at the Tanglewood Music Festival.

Tenor Ken Tipton chose a different week, and here is his account:

Over the years I have created a number of personal traditions, and a yearly week with the Berkshire Choral Festival is now one of them. This year included some pieces new to me, and some I had previously performed. I had never sung Verdi's *Four Sacred Pieces*, but had done Boito's *Prologue to Mefistofele* — in elementary school! The Verdi was fun because it combined rarely done choruses typical of Verdi with two atypical, a cappella chromatic pieces of his. And the Boito was heavenly, literally, since we were playing angels. Our director was Joseph Colaneri, from the Metropolitan Opera, and wonderful to work with, as have been all the Berkshire conductors. This year besides singing, eating, and meeting so many people who love this kind of music, I came away with two new terms: "short-top tenor" (that's me), and "chorgasm," as often as I can.

Other Choral Society singers who went to the Berkshire Choral Festival this summer were tenor Jennie Chamblee, altos Pam Lewis and Susan Kalman, and soprano Annette Dawson. They sang Dvorak, Stravinsky, and Rutter. And finally, soprano section leader Cheryl Thompson attended the Salzburg week to perform Schubert and Elgar. ❖

Summer Concert Wrap-up

Songs for the Earth

Afterthoughts from the Diemer sisters:

Composer Emma Lou Diemer: The world premiere of my *Songs for the Earth* has come to pass, and it was wonderful. Thanks to Bob, who interpreted each movement with utmost sensitivity, understanding, and skill; to Gale, whose idea it was to commission a work in honor of her



Emma Lou Diemer at the Davies Symphony Hall reception poses with Paul Nocero and Marty Williams.

parents and who expressed her sentiments so eloquently in the program notes; to Alan, who brings about all good things involving the Choral Society and is great fun as well; to Bryan, who was indispensable with his talent and insight in the learning of the work and in its performance.

And to you, the San Francisco Choral Society, who were superlative, outstanding, and thrilling as you followed every move and direction of your dynamic leader, and sang more beautifully than any large chorus I have ever heard — that unmatched sound from all your voices, singing my music! Composers are not often invited to write major works for large and excellent musical forces. I am immensely grateful to have had the opportunity. It was memorable, exciting, inspiring. Warm thanks to each of you.

We asked Emma Lou's sister, Dorothy, what her reaction was to hearing her poetry realized by her sister.

Poet Dorothy Diemer Hendry: *Realized* is a perfect way of saying what Emma Lou does every time she sets a poem of mine to music. She comprehends the images and feelings and *realizes* them — makes them more intensely real and true — in a marvelously pure and original composition. Since she has accomplished this miracle again and again since her childhood, I perhaps should no longer be amazed, but I am.

Sometimes I write a choral lyric spe-

cifically at Emma Lou's request, but my poem "Experiment" is simply one she chose from my recent scribbling. The other poets far outshine me, but my dark poem serves a central purpose. As Carol Talbeck said in her program notes: "Text and music work together to send us clamoring for the safety of another chance to honor 'fragile, beautiful life'."

Emma Lou has shared with me the book — a beautiful work of art — created by your chorus member Meta Ayers to dramatize "Experiment." Congratulations to all members of the Choral Society! Despite numerous obligations in your lives, you dedicate your superb talents to the interpretation of music. You achieve your purpose of the best performance possible. Members of the audience complete the artistic experience by responding enthusiastically. Thus, all of you admirable people together, in the artistic heart of San Francisco, *realize* the music. My cheers and best wishes always!

Carmina Burana Trifecta

Soprano Mary-Rose Hayes had a unique experience:

Summer 2005 gave me the chance to sing three *Carminas* in just over a month: first at the Royal Albert Hall, London, staged by Concerts from Scratch with a chorus of 1,000 and billed as "the most extrovert performance so far this century," closely followed in San Francisco by a *Carmina* selection at the Tall Ships Regatta on the Embarcadero, and then the grand finale, our own production

at Davies Symphony Hall.

Albert Hall in London, Queen Victoria's extravagant tribute to her beloved consort, was packed, despite the deadly bombings of two days earlier. On stage and overflowing into the stalls, the sopranos were decked out in all shades of blue from palest aqua to navy, altos in red and pink, tenors and basses in festive ties, while conductor Brian Kay called forth a distinctly extrovert sound from the English Festival Orchestra and his massive chorus. Cancel the performance because of the bombings? Forget it! So much better to celebrate sex and spring — Oh, Oh, Oh! — and to head off afterward to the local taverna.

Move on to San Francisco several weeks later, on a sunny, wind-whipped afternoon beside the bay. There, against a background of be-flagged, square-rigged sailing ships, a scaled-down Choral Society of maybe 50 performed a scaled-down *Carmina*, gallantly accompanied by Inara Morgenstern on an unamplified keyboard, while conductor Bryan Baker explained the themes of sex, spring, and the perversity of fortune to a handful of tourists on bleachers and a group of puzzled Mexican and Russian sailors.

And at last, the culmination at Davies Hall under Maestro Geary's baton. The magnificent tenors and basses didn't miss a syllable of "Puellula." Alan was happy with the takings at the gate. The soloists were spectacular, and the swan brought down the house. May he rest in blackened peace! ❖

Bryan Baker Previews Festival of Carols Program

"Christmas comes anew" is the fitting theme of "Noël nouvelet" by Mark Reise, a new piece for this year's Festival of Carols concerts. It is a rousing piece, not difficult and very effective. Doug Morton and the gang will be back with their brass bonanza, and Reiko will play the organ from "on high." I have asked Brian Thorsett, the wonderful young tenor who sang the Mozart *Requiem* with us, to be our soloist.

We will sing some old friends like "Fanfare for Christmas Day," the ever popular "I wonder as I wander," and "O Holy Night." And we'll make some new friends, including two Latin-flavored pieces: the gently lilting "A la nanita nana"

(half in Spanish and half in English), and the famous Spanish dance "On December Five and Twenty."

This Festival of Carols program will also feature two new and fairly easy pieces about children of varied cultures: the delicate "Some Children See Him" by Alfred Burt, and Arnold Freed's stirring "Where were you born?" We'll reprise Gustav Holst's moving "Let All Mortal Flesh" from last year, and we'll conclude with his "Christmas Day." I look forward to seeing many of you for this uplifting pair of holiday concerts. ❖

— Bryan Baker



FELIX continued from page 1

delssohn, revered by Jews and non-Jews alike. Felix was strongly influenced by his grandfather's ideas about how Jews and other minorities could integrate into the dominant society of their time. Moses counseled social emancipation, and his son Abraham, Felix's father, taking advantage of the social climate that allowed for the assimilation of Jews into the upper classes, followed through on Moses' philosophy by baptizing his young children in the Lutheran church. Felix lived as a Lutheran all his life; his sacred music is redolent with the harmonies and rhythms of Lutheran hymns.

However, Felix's Jewish background remained a strong legacy. His father suggested adopting his conversion name, Bartholdy, in order to erase the obviously Jewish name Mendelssohn from his son's identity. Felix would have none of this and retained Mendelssohn as his surname, although to please his father he added Bartholdy to his published works. While Felix's Jewish background always set him apart from most of his colleagues and countrymen, it was principally after his death that his Jewish identity was used against him. Richard Wagner's anti-Semitic tract, *Jewry in Music*, claimed that Mendelssohn and other Jewish composers were incapable of true musical greatness because of their Jewish heritage. Almost a century later, Adolph Hitler tried to expunge Mendelssohn's music from the German repertoire entirely. He even urged German composers to write new music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to replace Mendelssohn's own early masterwork. But during his lifetime Mendelssohn's genius was able to flower because he did not have to remain an outsider in his own culture, and he could pour all his gifts into mainstream society. These lines from Goethe, which Mendelssohn set to music, are at the heart of his relationship to his life and times: "And if we are robbed of our old customs, Who can rob us of thy light?"¹

Mendelssohn straddled two religious cultures, Jewish and Protestant, as well as the classical and romantic periods. In both areas, he was able to reconcile the divisions with his usual brilliance and grace. In music, he developed his own aesthetic: reformist rather than revolutionary, centrist rather than innovative.

As a citizen in anti-Semitic Germany, his many talents and irresistible personality enabled him to bridge the great social and religious divisions of his time.

The unique influence in Felix's life was his older sister Fanny. She, too, was a musical prodigy, although her identity as an upper-class woman profoundly limited the way she was able to use her amazing gifts. Most of her life she composed only smaller musical forms for her intimate circle. While her musical salons were famous, she only wrote music for the drawing rooms rather than large works for the concert hall. In the past 50 years, feminist scholarship has repopularized many of Fanny's works and unearthed others.

The presence of Fanny in his life was the most important influence on Felix as a musician and composer. From earliest childhood, Felix had a playmate, a partner, a friend, uniquely attuned to his sensibilities in music. There was almost no one in the musical world, child or adult, who would have been able to keep up with him except Fanny. Felix and Fanny were pupil and teacher to each other in the egalitarian space of a close family. He was never alone with his prodigious talents, as is so often the fate of children with special gifts. Rather, brother and sister were connected in love by their world of music, a reality beyond each of their personalities,

which bonded and supported them. They were allies in their phenomenal abilities; as children they played, sang, and composed together. When Fanny was 17 (and Felix 13), she wrote: "He has no musical adviser other than me, also he never puts a thought on paper without first having submitted it to me for examination." Throughout their lives they were each other's foremost musical colleagues, critics, and confidants. When Fanny died of a stroke conducting his music at a rehearsal, Felix went into deep mourning; six months later he, too, was dead of a stroke.

Mendelssohn's music almost always sounds as if it emerged from a place of joy and delight, and his relationship to Fanny was undoubtedly central to that quality. In his lifetime he found many friends in music, including the greatest composers and performers of his time, but none could equal his sister, and that may be the greatest gift and determinant of his creative life. ❖

— Arthur Colman and Pilar Montero

¹ Goethe, "Erste Walpurgisnacht" (1831).

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The Inertia Beverage Group — Drink Charitably!

The Choral Society has formed a mutually beneficial partnership with the Inertia Beverage Group. You get exclusive access to fabulous wines, and for every wine that you purchase, Inertia donates 10% of the sale to the Choral Society. Now *that* is an incentive to start drinking — er, shopping!

Beyond providing a new mechanism to buy premium wines generally not available in retail stores, Inertia introduces you to new vineyards and wines. Every month Drink Charitably! features five wines offered at a discount to give you new treats to taste at dinner, add to your wine cellar, and give as holiday gifts.

The Inertia Beverage Group graciously provided an array of their outstanding wines at our reception for Emma Lou Diemer in August. Those wines are all available online:

Beaucannon: Trifecta Estate 2000, Cabernet Sauvignon Estate 2001, Chardonnay Estate 2002

Benessere: 2002 Sangiovese

Chameleon: 2002 Barbera California, 2003 Petite Sirah Napa Valley

Chumeia Vineyards: Chumeia Cabernet Sauvignon, Central Coast 2001

Humanitas: L'Huile du Garagiste, 2003 Santa Barbara Chardonnay, 2003 Monterey County Cabernet Sauvignon

Medlock Ames: 2001 Merlot

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We are extremely grateful to Inertia Beverage Group for their generous sup-

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Kirk Eichelberger, Bass

The first time Kirk Eichelberger sang *Elijah*, he was in the chorus of the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. "It was the first classical piece I ever sang," he says. He had grown up in a musical family in Sacramento; his parents and all his siblings sang and played various instruments. "I was the best singer and the worst pianist," he recalls. His early ambition was to be a lead guitarist and singer in a rock band. In college, after exposure to choral music such as that performance of *Elijah*, the works of Bach, and the *Messiah*, Kirk underwent a musical transformation and "defaulted," as he



puts it, into classical voice. Realizing that he needed to tackle the study of opera, after graduating he moved to Chicago, where Wagnerian soprano Margaret Har-

shaw took him under her wing. Kirk went on to earn a Master of Voice degree in Vocal Performance at the University of Cincinnati's College Conservatory of Music in 2000.

Further study with the Merola Opera Program and the Western Opera Theater brought Kirk back to California.

A busy career in opera, in oratorio, and on the concert stage then had him singing all over the country for the next couple of years. The desire to be with his family (Kirk and his wife, Tonya, have two sons, ages just two and almost four) led

him to take a residency at Opera San Jose, where he currently continues to work his way through the bass roles in the operatic repertoire.

The part of *Elijah* seems made for Kirk. After Bob Geary heard him in the title role with the Oakland East Bay Symphony in 2003, he asked Kirk to be the San Francisco Choral Society's *Elijah* in this fall's performances. (Kirk even returned to the Moody Bible Institute in 1997 to sing the role, a notable promotion from his first appearance there in the piece as a chorister!) Joshua Kosman of the *San Francisco Chronicle* said of Kirk's Oakland performance: "He was an imposing presence in the title role of *Elijah*, his singing weighty and true and laced with a nice touch of sardonic ferocity." Anna Karen Dudley wrote in the *San Francisco Classical Voice* of that performance: "Kirk Eichelberger was the very embodiment of *Elijah*, by turns pleading, scolding, reassuring, triumphing, despairing. He is a gifted actor — sensitive both to large emotions and to details of language — and a gifted singer, varying the colors of his voice for maximum effect."

Despite his successful operatic career, Kirk feels a special affinity for concert and oratorio work. "It was my first love," he says. "It leaves you free to concentrate on the music." At age 32, he knows he has plenty of time to master all the great operatic bass roles and to travel the world singing them. He has no plans to start teaching voice. "I just can't tell someone else how to do what I do," he says.

For now, he prefers to do most of his singing close to home, where he can watch his boys grow up. He and Tonya have recently embarked on a major remodel of their house, and Kirk has been pleasantly surprised to discover that he has another talent — in home renovation. ❖

— O'Brien Young

New Board Member Caroline Damsky

If you've been wondering about that tall soprano with the beautiful voice, she's six-foot, one-inch Caroline Damsky, who joined the Choral Society in 1997.

Caroline grew up in Manhattan. Her introduction to choral singing began at a girls' middle school and high school in New York City. There she had a wonderful choral director in addition to a strong academic education. She took a break from singing during her college years, but later joined a 16-voice group in Philadelphia where she sang everything from madrigals to spirituals to Hindemith. Fast forward to 1997, when her first marriage had dissolved and she began dating Peter Sargent, who then sang with the Choral Society. Peter convinced her to try out, and she was hooked immediately.

In 2000, while Peter was singing with the 24-voice San Francisco Concert Chorus, Caroline auditioned for that group when she found out they were going on a singing tour in France! Peter and Caroline continued to sing together in the Concert Chorus until this year, when Peter left that group to join the San Francisco Symphony Chorus. She and Peter have sung in the Berkshire Choral Festival for seven or eight years, and they were married in 2003.

Caroline went to college at Stanford. Discovering that she loved research, she went on to get her Ph.D. from Penn, and she spent another ten years as a postdoctoral fellow and faculty member at The

Wistar Institute in Philadelphia before coming to UCSF in 1985. In her research, she thinks of herself as a behavioral scientist on the cellular level, trying to understand the "social rules" that govern the proper development and organization of cells into tissues during development, and their maintenance in adult tissues. Breakdown of these rules results in serious disorders such as cancer and arthritis. In the last couple of years, Caroline has closed down her research lab and has assumed major administrative responsibilities as associate dean for academic affairs in the School of Dentistry at UCSF.

Caroline enjoys cooking, traveling, singing, living in Noe Valley, and trying to find time to spend with her grown daughter, Lee, who lives in New York. Clearly Caroline brings a wealth of talent and experience to our chorus and to our board, and we feel fortunate to have her. ❖

— Wendy Heumann



1973: Lee, age 3, and Caroline, ageless

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port. Now singers who appreciate fine wine can enjoy this unique offering and help the chorus too. The next time you're looking for boutique wines or searching for that perfect gift, go online to: www.inertiabev.com/sfcs.html. Be sure to use Promo Code SFCSMAX when making your purchases! ❖

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CALENDAR

Sat, Nov 12 at 8 P.M. Sun, Nov 13 at 4 P.M.	Mendelssohn <i>Elijah</i> Calvary Presbyterian Church
Sat, Dec 17 at 8 P.M. Sun, Dec 18 at 4 P.M.	Festival of Carols First Unitarian Universalist Church
Fri, Apr 7 at 8 P.M. Sat, Apr 8 at 8 P.M.	Monteverdi <i>Vespers 1610</i> St. Ignatius Church

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