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MENDELSSOHN

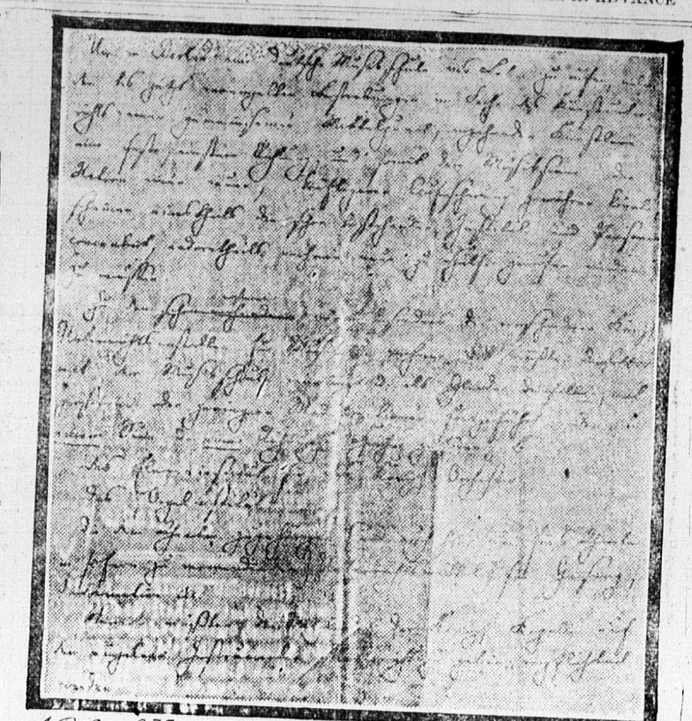
A CENTENARY OF THE FAMOUS GERMAN MUSICIAN

by Waldon Fawcett

Mendelssohn in his Prime

The Hand of Mendelssohn

Profile of Mendelssohn



A Page of Mendelssohn's Manuscript showing his Peculiar Handwriting

Cecile Mendelssohn, Wife of the Famous Composer

Mendelssohn as he Appeared in Death

The year 1909, a year of notable centennials, holds two that are of preminent significance to musicians and the entire music-loving world. On February 3 occurs the centenary of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, known to the world at large as Mendelssohn—and a date but a few weeks later, or March 1, to be exact, marks the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Frederic Chopin. Both of these composers have by their work made deep impress upon the history of music, but the achievements of Mendelssohn perhaps stand out as the most pretentious and the present centennial will serve to not only draw popular attention to the composer of the "Spring Song" and other masterpieces, but will also emphasize his unusual personality and remarkable career.

At the very outset of this glimpse of Mendelssohn's life it may be well to explain his acquisition of the name Bartholdy—an appendix which has been responsible for many perplexing mistakes on the part of music lovers and others. The grandfather of the composer, Moses Mendelssohn, was the greatest Jewish teacher and thinker of his time, and his son, Abraham, father of the composer, was scarcely less notably successful as a banker. The latter married Miss Solomon, an exceptionally fine amateur musician, and it was through her influence that the family drifted away from the Jewish faith. Her brother, a man of great wealth and influence, had become converted to the Christian Church, and had taken the name Bartholdy. He induced his brother-in-law to follow his example, and accordingly all the children, including Felix, were baptized in the Lutheran Church and adopted the name Bartholdy.

The famous composer was born in Hamburg, but a couple of years later his parents removed to Berlin. From the time the child was old enough to comprehend anything about music, his mother, who, as above explained, was very talented, commenced his systematic instruction, beginning with only lessons of five minutes a day, which interval was gradually increased. From early youth Felix and the other children were instructed both in pianoforte and violin, and the youngster who was to develop into the great composer of his day made his first public appearance in Berlin when only nine years of age. When little Felix was barely 11 years of age he entered the Berlin Academy, and almost from that very day he made attempts at musical composition. Ere he had reached his twelfth birthday anniversary he had composed no less than 50 complete movements, including a cantata and a comedy in three scenes.

When Mendelssohn was but 17 years of age he composed the famous overture to the "Midsummer Night's Dream," which the critics of all time have been unanimous in pronouncing the most remarkable example of musical precocity in the history of the world. A year later the boy's first opera was produced at the Grand Opera House in Berlin and met with pronounced success. When little past 20 years of age Mendelssohn was offered the chair of music at the Berlin University, but declined, and about this time undertook a concert tour of England, where he was hailed as one of the great composers and pianists of the day. This experience was followed by concert tours of Scotland, Austria, Italy, Switzerland and France.

When the composer was 24 years of age he accepted an offer of the position of conductor of the Lower Rhine Musical Festival, and so favorable was the impression made by the young musician that he was immediately appointed Town Musical Director of Dusseldorf at the impressive salary of $450 a year, which seems to have been quite acceptable to him. This post served as a stepping stone to that of conductor of the famous Gewhandhus Orchestra in Leipzig. He made this organization the foremost orchestra in Europe and the people of Leipzig became more than enthusiastic over Mendelssohn and his work.

In the year 1837, when Mendelssohn was 28 years of age, he was married to Cecile Charlotte Sophie Jeanrenaud, a very beautiful girl, the daughter of a French Protestant clergyman. The domestic life of the couple was ideal, the composer manifesting in his home few of those eccentricities which have made so many a musical genius a trying life partner. Nor was his home life by any means care free, for in time five children joined the household and the health of Mendelssohn's wife was not always of the best. It is recorded that the composer not only instructed his children in music, but only taught them such fundamental branches as reading spelling and geography.

When he had been married about four years the Emperor invited Mendelssohn to Berlin to conduct the orchestral and choral concerts. The professional jealousy aroused, which is ever the bane of the musicial world made this portion of his career a path of thorns and he finally announced his intention to resign. Thereupon the Emperor, who was very fond of him, induced him to remain and organize a choir at the cathedral. This he did so successfully that the monarch appointed him Royal General Musical Director. A year later he organized the Leipzig Conservatory and in 1844 he conducted the London Philharmonic concerts. Two years later he made his ninth and last visit to England, where he had attained, if anything, greater popularity than in Germany—and conducted at Birmingham the first performance of "The Elijah," which composition ranks with "St. Paul" as his greatest work.

When Mendelssohn returned to Leipzig from this English tour the effect of the culmination of years of overwork began to make itself distressingly manifest and he was obliged to resign his conductorship of the orchestra and his position at the conservatory. Then came the shock of the news of the death of Mendelssohn's favorite and very talented sister, Fanny Hensel, and this blow, coming but a few years after the death of his mother, of whom he was very fond, seemed crushing in effect and the composer went into a rapid decline, his death occurring on November 4, 1847, at the comparatively early age of 38 years.

The career of Mendelssohn was almost unique in that he did not have to suffer the privations and hardships which seem to have been the lot of almost every musical genius in early youth. The son of wealthy and indulgent parents, he never faced poverty or serious self-denial, and it is not unlikely, as has frequently been suggested, that this happy childhood was largely responsible for the marvelous creative power which the composer displayed in his earliest musical work. Incidentally it may be mentioned that in early youth Mendelssohn manifested literary talent only slightly less remarkable than his musical ability. When scarcely a dozen years of age he wrote letters that would have done credit to a young man of twice his years, and his unusual attainments in this direction could not be better proven than by the fact that he greatly interested the Poet Goethe, who became one of his closest friends, Goethe always declared that Mendelssohn's performances were infinitely superior to those of Mozart at the same age.

Not only could Mendelssohn work or idle as fancy dictated, but he had in his own home the facilities that invariably prove a boon to struggling musical genius. The best musical instruments of the period were, of course, provided, and the dining-room of the Bartholdy mansion was admirably adapted for use as a concert hall. Indeed, a concert was held there regularly each week, and young Felix's compositions were thus played before sympathetic audiences as rapidly as they were completed. As the young composer progressed, his father considered the advisability of having him round out his musical education in Paris, but after visiting the French capital decided that the Teuton atmosphere was best.

Mendelssohn, although during much of his life was not in the most robust health, was very fond of travel. He especially enjoyed Italy, but England always held the first place in his affections. For while he pronounced London "a smoky nest," he confessed that it was ever his "favorite residence." Perhaps this liking was partly due to the enthusiastic acclaim with which Mendelssohn was always greeted in the Tight Little Isle. The appreciation of Mendelssohn in England which speedily grew to virtual idolatry, was the more marked because contrasted with the skeptical coldness of the audiences in Berlin. And in turn we find that some measure of Mendelssohn's instantaneous success in the British metropolis was due to the fact that, though a musician, he was a "gentleman," the definition of which in this case was that being a man of means he did not demand pay for his playing or conducting, which circumstance placed him in the eyes of the thrifty Britishers on a pinnacle far above those less fortunate musicians who must derive livelihood from their art.

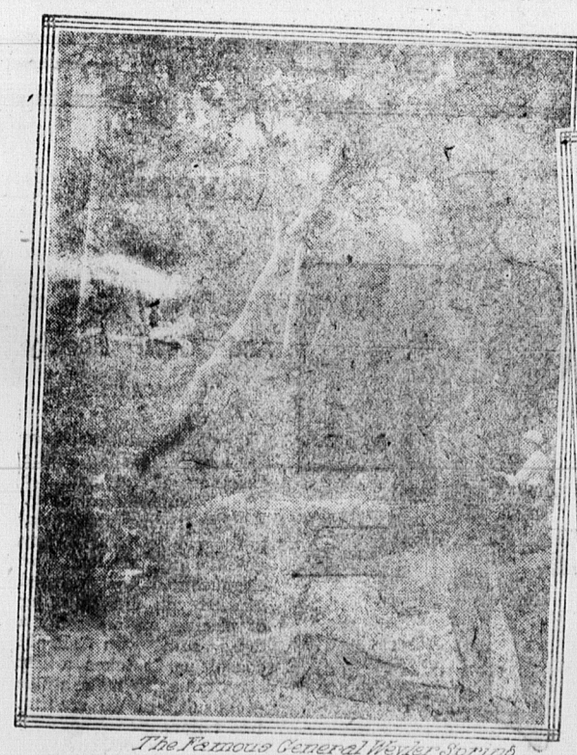
From the above reference to the apathy of Berlin, it may be suspected that Mendelssohn, despite the almost uninterrupted success and his freedom from care anent money matters did not pass through his comparatively brief career without some heartburnings. Aside from the lethargy of Berlin, there was the circumstance that Mendelssohn was never as successful as he desired in operatic composition and some of the criticisms which assailed his operas stung him to the quick. No mention of Mendelssohn's life in England would be at all adequate without reference to his friendship for Jenny Lind. The famous songstress fulfilled his ideal of an artist and it was for her that he wrote his greatest work, "Elijah."

It is a sad commentary on Mendelssohn's career in Great Britain that the very triumph he achieved was indirectly his undoing. He became the "lion" of the hour and was feted far beyond the capacity of a frail physique, already weakened by overwork. The sequel of this high-tension social life was that he became a victim of nervous exhaustion, as his father had been before him, and also his beloved sister. In the end he was afflicted with headaches so severe that he could not tolerate the slightest noise—not even, as though an irony of fate, the sound of a piano.

THE ISLE of PINES,

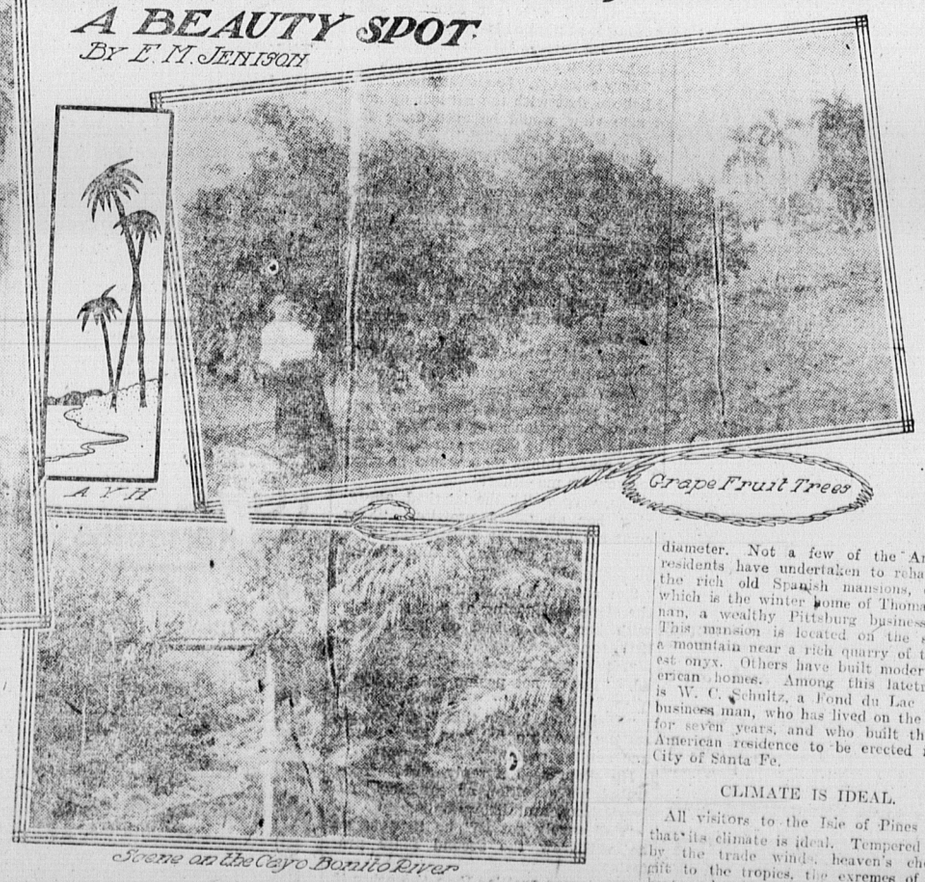
A BEAUTY SPOT

By E. M. Jenison



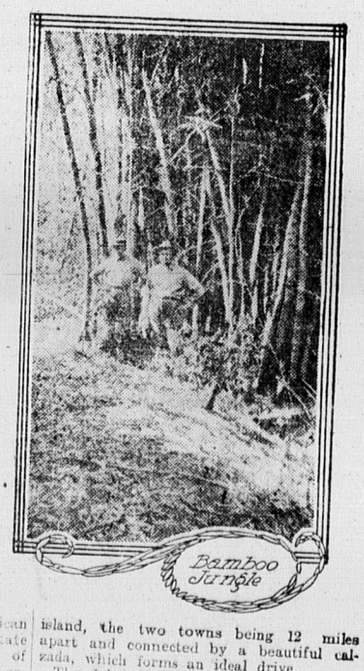
The Famous General Weyler Spring

Avenue of Royal Palms



Scene on the Ceyo Bonito River

Grape Fruit Trees



Bamboo Jungle

IT IS a trite saying that the Americans are developing into a nation of globe trotters, and are becoming far more familiar with the scenic attractions of the old world than with the beauties of their own country. Thus many a person who has scaled Alpine Heights or reveled in the beauties of the Rhine, may dwell in absolute ignorance of the sublime magnificence of the Yosemite and the Yellowstone, or the grandeur of Niagara.

It is small wonder, therefore, that right at our very doors lies one of the most famous beauty spots of the world, concerning which the general public has very meagre knowledge, indeed. The Isle of Pines, while not one of Uncle Sam's possessions, is at least under his protectorate during the present administration of affairs in Cuba, and is entitled to more attention on the part of the American people than it has received.

POCKET EDITION OF THE TROPICS.

Size is not one of the claims to distinction. As a matter of fact, it is no larger than the average county in the States. It is about 30 miles wide by 40 miles long, and comprises some 800,000 acres, all told. To the man who is accustomed to the broad sweeps of country afforded by the Panhandle or the plains of Wyoming, it might appear to be merely a pocket edition of the tropics, but a closer examination would reveal the fact that it is, indeed, a jewel with a superb setting.

DISCOVERED BY COLUMBUS.

History tells us that the Isaule of Pines was discovered by Columbus in 1494, having been christened "Evangelist Island" by that intrepid navigator. Its present name, "Isla de Pinos" or "Isle of Pines," is of later origin; so called, it is said, by reason of the large number of beautiful pine trees that are native to the island, this being unusual for a semi-tropical country.

A strip of salt water and a marsh divided the island into two parts. The lower section, containing some 200,000 acres, abounds in mahogany, ebony and other precious woods; while the upper section, some 600,000 acres, affords in its mountains, hills and valleys rare vistas of scenic beauty, even rivalling the Bahamas. The mountains and hills are covered with forests, which include the stately royal palm and magnificent pines, the latter ranging from 60 to 100 feet in height. In addition to these are great masses of shrubbery, affording a riot of color and luxuriance such as may be found only in a tropical or semi-tropical country. Flowers of rare beauty and fragrance grow in boundless profusion and form a veritable carpet of richest coloring. The trees are filled with birds of the most brilliant plumage, adding gayety to the scene, and forming a picture which appeals with peculiar force to the lover of nature.

SPRINGS AND STREAMS.

Hundreds of sparkling streams, fed by apparently inexhaustible springs, pour forth their clear waters from mountain and hillside. Many of these waters are credited with medicinal properties, and have been made use of on this account since the days of Spanish possession. The famous Weyler spring is so named for the reason that this well-known general made regular pilgrimages to it in order to obtain relief from an ailment of long standing. And while giving health, these streams also yield up vast stores of fish and afford the disciples of Isaac Walton an opportunity to ply the rod and reel to the heart's content.

While the gospel of good roads is being preached in this country with only indifferent success, it may not be amiss to call attention to the fact that down in the Isle of Pines it is not only preached, but put in practice. The government has constructed about 50 miles of calzadas, or government roads, which will compare favorably with the average city boulevard, and the work is going steadily forward. An appropriation of $250,000 has been made by the Cuban government for road building, sanitation and public buildings since the Magoon administration was inaugurated, and it is expected that an additional appropriation of $100,000 will be made in the next budget.

These roads, which connect the two more important towns and are tapped by intersecting roads reaching to all parts of the island, appeal alike to the bicycle rider, the horseman and the automobilist. They are in themselves an element of beauty as well as utility, and have contributed no small part toward the favorable impression made on visitors.

The diversity of island scenery found in valleys, on hill and mountainside has a counterpart in the variety of fruits that may be grown within a small area. In one private garden in the City of Santa Fe, for instance, may be found 47 different kinds of fruit, all growing and ripening to perfection, affording a continuous fruiting season of 12 months in the year. In other nearby gardens may be found rare plants transplanted from Jamaica, the Bahamas and other tropical and semi-tropical countries to adorn the grounds of the well-to-do residents of this little island and, incidentally, to charm the eye of the casual visitor and impress him with the salubrious climate of the place. Among the trees used for ornamental purposes may be mentioned the Spanish Laurel. It grows to an immense size, one specimen which adorns the public park at Santa Fe measuring 110 feet in diameter. Not a few of the American residents have undertaken to rehabilitate the rich old Spanish mansions, one of which is the winter home of Thomas Leeman, a wealthy Pittsburg business man. This mansion is located on the side of a mountain near a rich quarry of the finest onyx. Others have built modern American homes. Among this latetr class is W. C. Schultz, a Fond du Lac (Wis.) business man, who has lived on the island for seven years, and who built the first American residence to be erected in the City of Santa Fe.

CLIMATE IS IDEAL.

All visitors to the Isle of Pines agree that its climate is ideal. Tempered daily by the trade winds, heaven's choicest gift to the tropics, the extremes of both heat and cold are unknown and frost is unknown. This makes a winter paradise, but the island is really seen at its best during the months of April, May and June. At that time the tree and plant life take on new beauties and the panorama of color reaches its climax.

One of the peculiarities of the island is its apparent freedom from storms of a violent character. While Cuba has suffered from time to time from hurricanes and cyclones the latter island, only 40 miles away, has been practicaly immune from them. This, it is believed, is due to the fact that it is protected on three sides by Cuba and is afforded still further protection by numerous keys.

TWO GOOD TOWNS.

There are two good towns on the island. One is the City of Santa Fe, with an elevation of 400 feet above sea level, and having its port at Jucaro. Then there is Nueva Gerona on the other side of the island, the two towns being 12 miles apart and connected by a beautiful calzada, which forms an ideal drive.

The Isle of Pines affords a fine pleasure ground for those who enjoy hunting and fishing. While there is no large game on the island, an abundance of quail, wild pigeon, ducks and sand hill crane make good shooting. The rivers abound in fish, most of these being of the 'gamey sort,' while lobsters, too are found. The many clusters and chains of small islands surrounding the coast make it one of the most delightful places for yachting. Lovers of this truly royal sport may spend the winter in comfort, sailing about the island, fishing and incidentally engaging in that most enticing sport of tortoise-shell hunting.

Though the American population of the Isle of Pines was confined to a dozen or so people no longer ago than 1901, it now numbers about 2,000, and the social side of life is not being neglected. There are church societies and schools, while at Santa Fe the Hibiscus Club, an organization with a membership of a score or more of ladies, meets regularly and follows out lines of work not far different from those taken up by woman's clubs in the States.

The men on the island—well, here is what Richard Harding Davis, the well-known novelist, has to say of them after visiting the island: "The men I met—and I went all over the Island—were genuine settlers. They were men who had sold their farms in the States and had come to the Isle of Pines to make a new home, and were busy as bees in making it. * * * These men are as fine representatives of the American of modest means as you will find in any part of our country. From every part of it they have come, but chiefly from Iowa and Wisconsin."