

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy

(b. Hamburg, 3 February 1809; d. Leipzig, 4 November 1847)

Incidental music to Sophocles's *Antigone*, in the German translation by Johann Jakob Christian Donner and August Böckh, op. 55 (1841)

Toward the end of 1840 Felix Mendelssohn, then firmly ensconced in Leipzig at the height of his fame, received an unusual offer from the royal house of Prussia in Berlin: the newly ascended King Frederick William IV wished to reconstitute the Berlin Academy of the Arts and to invite Mendelssohn, as the greatest living German musician, to head its newly founded musical section. Flattered by this high honor and tempted by the large salary of 3,000 a year, Mendelssohn was inclined to accept, and asked for a further specification of his actual duties. This simple question was eventually to embroil him in five years of tedious correspondence with various high-level Prussian bureaucrats. Although he moved with his family to Berlin in 1841, step by step the scope of his duties and the size of his salary were reduced until finally, at the end of 1845, the appointment was terminated by mutual consent and Mendelssohn returned to the more hospitable climate of Leipzig.

The Berlin appointment can hardly be described as musically barren, however. The new king, himself an amateur draftsman with a keen interest in architecture and landscape gardening, was a confirmed adherent of the romantic movement in German arts and letters and sought a revival of classical theater in his private theater in Potsdam. Various projects were proposed to Mendelssohn for musical setting: Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, Racine's *Athalie*, Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. Of these, all but the latter were to reach fruition – spectacularly so in the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – and were duly performed before an invited audience in the king's private theater, followed a short while later by a public performance. Finally Mendelssohn balked at the king's proposal that he write music for the whole of Aeschylus's *Orestia* trilogy, arguing that no living composer was capable of handling such a task. Relations with the king instantaneously cooled; the interesting series of theatrical ventures came to an end; and through Mendelssohn's departure from Berlin and early death the world was withheld a successor to what has undoubtedly become his most popular score, the incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, op. 61.

*Antigone* was the first of Mendelssohn's theatrical projects for Frederick William IV to reach completion. Composed for solo vocalists, men's chorus, and orchestra from September to 10 October 1841, it was given its première in the Neuer Palais, Potsdam, on 28 October 1841 and its first public performance in Leipzig on 5 March 1842. The success was nothing less than sensational and heralded a rebirth of interest in ancient Greek tragedy; Mendelssohn's score, with its modern compositional devices yet its strict adherence to the rules of ancient prosody, was universally praised. A vocal score of the music, dedicated to King Frederick William IV of Prussia, was published by Kistner in Leipzig in 1843, and Mendelssohn himself left behind a transcription of the overture for piano four-hands. Though long overshadowed by the more famous op. 61, *Antigone* has recently attracted the attention of Mendelssohn scholars, who see in it and the Shakespeare setting the strongest evidence of his potential as a dramatic composer.

The Plot: Creon, King of Thebes, has prohibited the burial of Polyneices, who died on the field of battle while attacking the city. Antigone, the dead man's sister and Creon's niece, seeks to give her brother the final rights with the aid of their other sister, Ismene. When Ismene loses heart, Antigone resolves to carry out her plan alone. Betrayed to the king by a guard, the two sisters are condemned by Creon to be immured alive in a cave. Creon's son Haemon takes up the cause of

his beloved Antigone, but in vain. In despair he rushes to his fiancée to die at her side. Creon now begins to doubt the wisdom of placing reasons of state above family ties and human decency: Realizing that Ismene is innocent, he repeals his sentence of death. But not until the blind Tiresias announces that the death of Antigone will cost him a death in his own lineage does he realize that his son, too, is in jeopardy. He hurriedly decides to release Antigone, but it is too late: she has already taken her own life. Haemon, enraged, leaps at his father with his sword, but missing him, stabs himself instead. The news of the double suicide stuns Creon's wife Eurydice, who pronounces a curse on him before taking her own life.

Bradford Robinson, 2005

Performance material: Breitkopf und Härtel, Wiesbaden