
MOSCHELES and his place in the Early Romantic Era

by

Henry Roche

Until the last couple of years or so, Ignaz Moscheles was known only as one of the great early Romantic pianists, and as the composer of a set of piano studies for advanced performers. But since his compositions have begun to be broadcast and recorded, those who have heard his G minor piano concerto, his Sonate Melancolique, or his Concert Studies, must be aware that his was no ordinary creative talent.

As his great-great-grandson, I had already come to recognise his serious, almost devout approach to his art, and the charm and simplicity of his friendships and family life, before I discovered, with something of a thrill, that all this was present in his music, together with that natural rhythmic power and vitality which was so striking an aspect of his playing. And above all this, he is a master of that strange combination of unity and variety which is sometimes called form, and without which no piece of music can hold the whole attention of the listener.

Born in 1794 in Prague, Moscheles was brought up on a strict classical diet of Mozart, Clementi and C.P.E. Bach, which sustained him throughout his life. The young pupil had to exercise considerable self-control, for he was already under the heady influence of Beethoven. He had discovered and learned the Pathétique Sonata at the age of seven, and though he used to speak with amusement in later years of the hash he must have made of it, his love and unbounded admiration for Beethoven continued to colour his whole life.

His student years were spent in Vienna, where he became intimate with Salieri, Meyerbeer and others; above all with Hummel, sixteen years his senior, and the foremost representative of the "Viennese School" of pianism. The observant Moscheles listened with admiration to Hummel's pearly runs and velvet legato, and worked hard to incorporate them into his own more dynamic "bravura" style; but he always preferred the depth and resonance of the "English" type of pianoforte, as made by Clementi and later by Erard, to the lighter Viennese instruments. Two camps were formed around these protagonists, who nevertheless remained on the friendliest of terms. It is interesting to note that although Moscheles modelled his sextet on the style of Hummel's septet, he used to call his own work "a light, youthful effort" compared with its forerunner (it is, beside this, an unusually fine composition).

In Vienna, too, he met and worked for his idol Beethoven, arranging a piano score of Fidelio under the composer's guiding eye. He was also one of the first to champion Beethoven's lesser known music by playing the last sonatas to public or private gatherings, and later by conducting the Missa Solemnis and Choral Symphony before London audiences.

For several years Moscheles led the life of a travelling virtuoso. He established a European reputation with his "Alexander variations" for piano and orchestra, and he gained equal fame for his brilliant and masterly improvisations. Numerous friendships were cemented in these years. In Paris in 1821 he was frequently with Spohr, and expressed his dismay at the lack of public enthusiasm for his friend's works. He loved Spohr's "beautiful treatment of the subjects, admirable modulation and instrumentation", although finding a certain "want of novelty in the leading ideas".

Another friend was Weber, whose style was in many ways so like Moscheles' own. In 1825 Moscheles and his young wife, Charlotte Embden, settled in London, where in 1826 they witnessed Weber's last illness and untimely death. He had, said Moscheles, "the imperishable glory of leading back to German music a public vacillating between Mozart, Beethoven and Rossini".

Moscheles was still a youngish man when Chopin, Liszt and Berlioz ushered in the true Romantic Era. Berlioz's music he never liked, Liszt's he disapproved of, and only on hearing Chopin's own playing in 1839 did he declare that at last he understood his music. Always the stumbling-block was his hatred of turbulence and confusion, and of mannerism or showmanship; and though he kept an open and receptive mind for new music, all his long life there was no young composer in his judgment to be compared for purity and nobility with Felix Mendelssohn. Their meeting in Berlin in 1824, the growth of their lifelong and delightful friendship, their duets and their discussions - all this could fill another article. Enough here to say that at Mendelssohn's earnest request Moscheles moved to Leipzig in 1846 as professor of piano and composition at Felix's new conservatoire, and there, despite the irreparable loss of his young friend after only a year, he stayed until his death in 1870, remaining young and active up to his last years, keeping an ear open for Wagner's operas, and never ceasing to spread the understanding of the great masters.

Why has he been passed over as a composer? Between concerts and a very busy teaching career, he wrote eight piano concertos, several sonatas and sets of variations, a host of piano fantasias, some magnificent and prophetic studies, and a moderate amount of pianoforte chamber music.

The reason for its disappearance from print must lie, first, in his chancing to fall between two eras, and secondly, in his simple, unaffected approach in the midst of an age which thirsteth after noise and effect. His quiet unwillingness to push himself in front of a public whose appreciation was gradually diminishing - this goes against the grain in a time when individualism is deified; when the tragic or romantic personality is idealised, such a sane and healthy approach to life can easily go unsung.

His works are of great historical interest - not only was he one of the first to coax the charm and pure vocal melody of Italian opera from the keyboard, but his exploration of piano technique often reveals depths of romanticism startlingly prophetic of Schumann or Brahms. His Studies of 1827, I am sure, provided suggestions and even models for Chopin's op. 10 and 25, which, by transforming the genre into something ethereal, must have hastened the eclipse of their more concise predecessors.

But Moscheles' music is of more than historical importance. It has a charm and vitality whose effect after 150 years is as immediate and as lasting as when it was written. Let us hope that at least a selection of his now unobtainable music will find its way back into print before very long.

Suggestions for further reading, compiled by the editor:

The Life of Moscheles, by his wife
Charlotte Moscheles, from the
composer's letters and diaries.
2 Vols.

Available from the Central Music Library,
Buckingham Palace Road, London, S.W.1. and
probably most libraries with good music
departments.

The following books have useful chapters on Moscheles:

The Great Pianists, by
Harold C. Schonberg (Gollancz)

The Sonata since Beethoven, by
William S. Newman (Chapel Hill,
University of North Carolina Press).

Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians

Wilhelm Speyer, der Friederikomponist, by
Edward Speyer, contains many references to
Moscheles, and letters to and from Speyer.
Available through libraries, but quite rare.
In German.

MOSCHELES DISCOGRAPHY

There are just three records available of music by Moscheles and the Da Camera issue has not yet been released in England. The records are:

- 1) Da Camera SM92805: Sextet in E flat major for piano, violin, flute, two horns and 'cello, Op. 35 (1815).
Septet in D major for piano, violin, viola, clarinet, horn, 'cello and double basses Op. 88 (1832). Performed by members of the Consortium Classicum:
Warner Genuit (piano), Sandor Karolyi (violin), Jurgen Kussmaul (viola), Bernhard Braunholz (cello), Walter Meuter (double bass), Klaus Pohlers (flute), Dieter Klöcker (clarinet), Alois Spach (horn), Nikolaus Gröger (horn).
- 2) Vox STGBY636: Piano Concerto No. 3 in G minor, Op. 60 (1821) Characteristic Studies, Op. 70 (No. 5, 9, 12, 13, 14, 24) Characteristic Studies, Op. 95 (No. 3, 4, 6, 10) Performed by Michael Ponti (piano), and the Philharmonia Hungarica conducted by Othmar Maga.
- 3) Revolution RCFOO4 Sonate mélancolique in F sharp minor, Op. 49 La Leggerezza, Op. 51, No. 2; La Tenerezza, Op. 52; Gigue, Op. 58; La petite Babillarde, Op. 66; Characteristic Studies, Op. 95 (No. 4, 5, 11) Performed by Philip Challis (piano).