

Review:

MENÉNDEZ PLAYS MENDELSSOHN AT HARVARD

Fifty souls braved the snow showers on Tuesday, February 3, to attend the Boston AGO Chapter bicentenary celebration of Felix Mendelssohn's birth. Organ virtuoso Ezekiel Martín Menéndez played a recital of the six Mendelssohn organ sonatas at Adolphus Busch Hall at Harvard University on the famous 1958 Flentrop organ. The organ was commissioned by E Power Biggs, used for radio broadcasts and LP recordings, and donated to Harvard after Biggs' death. Recently renovated by Noack, the instrument sounded wonderful in the generous acoustics of the hall. The Flentrop may seem an unlikely choice for a Mendelssohn recital. However, in his opening remarks EMM suggested that this organ in sound and action was more like the organs Mendelssohn himself played than those we are likely to hear Mendelssohn on nowadays.

This recital was a revelation in two respects: the clarity with which each note could be heard and the presentation of all six sonatas in a single program. Dr. Menéndez is especially to be commended for his mastery of the notes, shaping of the movements, beauty of registration, maintenance of singing melodic line throughout amidst crisp articulation, pure virtuosity in the brisk tempi of the fast movements, and relaxed tempi in the slow movements, and musicality throughout. The ingenious order of presentation was Sonatas V, VI, and IV before the intermission, and Sonatas III, II, and I after. Thus each half presented a shorter opening work, a substantial entrée, and a brilliant finale. At the end the audience responded with a standing ovation.

Finally, on a personal note, my own first acquaintance with the organ sonatas was hearing the E. Power Biggs LP of Sonatas I and VI at St Paul's Cathedral, London, as a teenage organ student. An anecdote records Mendelssohn himself playing an organ postlude there in 1837. To disperse the crowd, a verger dismissed the calcant, so the instrument gave out during the pedal cadenza of Bach's A minor fugue, nearly causing a riot among the frustrated auditors. Presently I especially enjoy listening to the following DVDs of the sonatas, each splendidly played and quite different in style and sound: John Scott on the Willis/Mander at St Paul's, London (Hyperion), Thomas Murray on Hook and Simmons organs in Boston (Raven), and James Hammann on the "Mendelssohn organ", a Stumm at Neckargemuend, Germany (Raven). All are available at www.ohscatalog.org.

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