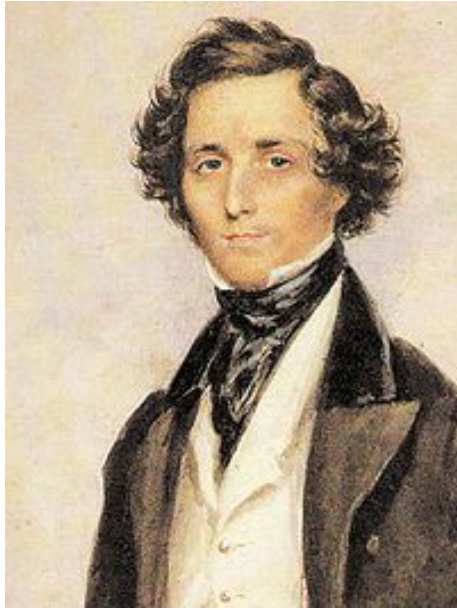


# Mendelssohn at The Vyne



Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) was born in Hamburg, a musical prodigy, the son of a banker, and the grandson of the famous philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn. (The wry comment of Abraham, the banker, was: Once I was known as the son of my father. Now I am known as the father of my son.) Felix forged close ties with Britain. His first trip, a tour of Scotland, inspired some of his most famous works: *Fingal's Cave* & the 'Scottish' Symphony. Many important premieres were given in Birmingham – the Second Piano Concerto, *Elijah* – and he was often in the company of Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort.

Mendelssohn was the most popular composer in England during the middle of the 19th century.

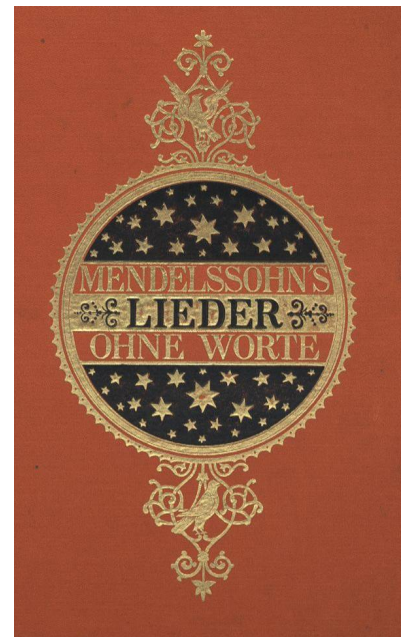
Charles Lennard Chute, who left The Vyne to the National Trust on his death in 1956, owned many of Mendelssohn's works, including scores to his oratorios *Elijah* and *Saint Paul*, the *Lobgesang*, and psalm settings in English, all of which survive in the house. Earlier Chute family members would certainly have known of Mendelssohn's fame, and it is likely that residents or visitors played his music on the Broadwood piano in The Vyne's Saloon.

## The Songs Without Words

Mendelssohn and his sister Fanny (another musical prodigy) pioneered a new concept in piano music, the *Song without Words*. Felix's First Book was published in London in 1832. Several further sets followed, and the pieces were republished throughout the nineteenth century both in their original piano versions and in a variety of arrangements for other instruments.

Other composers were producing short melodic piano pieces – Chopin's Nocturnes, Schumann's character pieces, later Grieg's Lyric Pieces. The crucial distinction between these and a Song without Words is often ignored. The Mendelssohns' description makes a reference, albeit a negative one, to *language*.

Mendelssohn is one of few composers who could speak six languages. David Owen Norris believes that the melodies of the *Songs without Words* act like a language – not any existing spoken language, but a rhetorical musical language of Mendelssohn's own invention, with its secret syntax still to be explored. The clues we'll be following include the mark *sf*, usually understood to mean an accent of force, which Mendelssohn used more often than any other composer, and the apparently unnecessary proliferation of 'hairpins' and



the words *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, which are all supposed to refer only to how loud or soft you play. But what if they meant something else as well?

## The Broadwood Grand Piano

The instrument in The Vyne's Saloon was made by the London firm of John Broadwood & Sons, the leading piano manufacturer in Britain. It was ordered by William Chute and delivered to his house in Eaton Place, London, in July 1846. It was probably moved to The Vyne shortly afterward, and it was pictured in the Saloon in an 1860 watercolour by Martha Chute.



During Mendelssohn's lifetime, Broadwoods were the most technically advanced pianos of all, and some of his music was composed specifically to demonstrate their special features. Mendelssohn's Aunt Sarah had a Broadwood in Berlin, and his close friend, the composer and pianist William Sterndale Bennett, was renowned as a Broadwood player.

It's pleasing that the Broadwood at The Vyne should have been made before Mendelssohn's early death: it's just the sort of piano he would have played at the rehearsals for the premiere of *Elijah*.

## David Owen Norris

David Owen Norris was the first winner of the Gilmore Artist Award in America. His unusually varied career has also seen him as a repetiteur at the Royal Opera House, harpist at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Artistic Director of the Petworth Festival & the Cardiff International Festival, Gresham Professor of Music, and Chairman of the Steans Institute for Singers at the Ravinia Festival in Chicago. He is Professor of Musical Performance at the University of Southampton, and Visiting Professor at the Royal College of Music and at the Royal Northern College of Music.

## Performers and pieces

Today's players are all students at the University of Southampton, and they are each performing a different piece from one of Mendelssohn's sets of *Songs Without Words*.

Tim Feasey: Op. 62, no. 3 in E minor

Adam Rean: Op. 38, no. 2 in C minor

Sam Coleman: Op. 30, no. 3 in E major

Marianne Yacoub: Op. 19, no. 1 in E major

Eleanor Purvis & Lorna Beckett: Op. 62, no. 1 in G major (duet)