



Interpretation of “Religious Complex” in Mendelssohn’s “Six Preludes and Fugues” Op.35

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Abstract

As a representative figure of Western romantic music, Mendelssohn’s life was short, but he had rich experiences, extensive creations, and many well-known masterpieces. The calm and rich life endows most of Mendelssohn’s works with an elegant and delicate style. However, this is not to say that Mendelssohn’s works do not contain lofty and tragic elements. For example, in his “Reformation Symphony” “oratorio” and “Serious Variations”, there are many religious and conflicting elements. “Six Preludes and Fugues” Op.35 is Mendelssohn’s late piano work. From the perspective of historical influence and musical value, the study of this work not only has high value and practical significance in piano performance, but also in the study of composers. Through the analysis of his polyphonic piano work, we can further understand the composer’s religious complex in music creation, in order to help us better understand the composer’s style characteristics.

Subject Areas

Music

Keywords

Mendelssohn, “Six Preludes and Fugues” Op.35, Religious Complex

1. Introduction to Mendelssohn

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847) was born in a wealthy Jewish family in Hamburg, Germany, in 1809. His grandfather was a famous philosopher, his father was a successful banker, and his mother was a pianist. The advantages of his family provided him with an excellent growth environment. His parents had a close history with writers, philosophers, thinkers, and others at that time, such as Goethe, Heine, and Hegel [1]. This enabled him to receive a good and abun-

dant cultural education and various elegant arts from an early age. Mendelssohn, like the Austrian gifted composer Mozart, was a child prodigy in music from an early age, and in his childhood, he showed amazing musical talent.

After the 18th century, with the development of the Enlightenment, the idea of democracy and freedom gradually spread. By the 19th century, Western music entered the Romantic era, with the emergence of many Romantic musicians and composers, such as Schumann, Chopin, and Liszt. While playing, they also served as composers. Under the guidance of these outstanding Romantic masters, whether it be vocal music Both piano and orchestral music have a strong personality liberation and free thinking, and these music works are different from the traditions of the classical period in terms of composition techniques, musical structure, and music genre. While Mendelssohn, who lived in the Romantic era, had extensive and close contacts with contemporary musicians, he was soberly aware of the prevailing creative atmosphere in the music industry at that time, which was characterized by the pursuit of luxury, blind flaunting of skills, but empty and tedious content. Mendelssohn did not follow the mainstream and flocked to it. Instead, he learned from his predecessors and emulated the same German people as J. S. Bach and Beethoven, learning classical composition techniques from their masterpieces to gain their own creative inspiration [2]. Therefore, we can understand why there are some composition techniques and themes in Mendelssohn's music works, such as polyphonic composition techniques and religious themes, which were rare at that time.

2. The Creative Background of “Six Preludes and Fugues” Op.35

The piano suite from “Prelude and Fugue” can be traced back to European church music in the 16th century. In J. S. Bach's time, the form of “prelude and fugue” reached its peak. Bach wrote the “Collection of Twelve Averaged Piano Songs”, known as the “Old Testament of Piano Music,” and each of them was a piano suite form of prelude and fugue [3]. In the period of classicism, the main melody music occupied a dominant position, and the forms of preludes and fugues rapidly declined and almost disappeared. During the Romantic period, the free expression of thoughts and emotions was advocated, and various new genres were constantly introduced under the pen of Romantic musicians. The forms of preludes and fugues were even more unpopular. Only Mendelssohn during the Romantic period wrote “Six Preludes and Fugues”, Op.35, and “Three Preludes and Fugues”, Op.37, for the organ, which continued until the 20th century, “24 Preludes and Fugues” by Russian composer Shostakovich, Op.87.

“Six Preludes and Fugues” Op.35 was created from 1827 to 1837, and almost all of his six works were created first. From the year of creation of his works, it can be seen that Mendelssohn did not begin to create preludes until 1836, making the six works form the form of “preludes and Fugues”. [4] For Mendelssohn, J. S. Bach was one of the most admired masters in his mind, and like Bach who achieved his career in Leipzig, Mendelssohn ultimately devoted the rest of his life

in Leipzig. For example, he went to Leipzig to serve as the music director of the Gevanthaus Concert Hall, and founded the oldest Leipzig Conservatory in Germany in Leipzig. Therefore, Mendelssohn was greatly influenced by Bach, and he intentionally imitated the preludes and fugues in Bach's "Collection of Average Rhythm Piano Pieces", creating his own "Six Preludes and Fugues", Op.35.

3. A Brief Analysis of the "Religious Complex" in "Six Preludes and Fugues" Op.35

In "Six Preludes and Fugues" Op.35, the content and composition of the first and second Fugues deserve some research on their spiritual connotation. The first piece is in E minor, and the second piece is in D major. Both the prelude and the fugue are preludes with three voices, and the fugue is a four voice single theme fugue [5]. The following is a brief analysis of these two Fugues in this work.

3.1. Religious Chants

The first fugue in E minor was created in 1827, with a length of more than 100 bars, reaching 133 small pieces. "The length of the fugue is longer than 100 bars, and only one fugue in Bach's" Collection of Average Rhythm Piano Pieces "has a length exceeding 100 bars. It can be seen that Mendelssohn's fugue compositions are different from those of his predecessors and have a richer content". This fugue was created by Mendelssohn in memory of his deceased friend Auguste Hanstein. Therefore, a chant (as shown in **Figure 1**) was added at the end of this fugue to express condolences to his old friend.

The symbol of this chant is "Choral", meaning "choir written for choir, choral". Such a symbol fills the melody with religious flavor. At this time, the tonality is changed from the previous minor e to major e, and the melody is carried out by four harmonic chords, coupled with a concise and clear octave accompaniment of the left hand rhythm, giving the chant a solemn and mournful musical image. This chant not only appears at the end of the entire fugue, but also is the climax of the entire fugue. Mendelssohn wrote such a chant in the fugue, which is very different from other composers' fugues. This not only conveys the mourning and yearning for the dead, but also reveals Mendelssohn's strong religious complex. This chant gives this fugue the meaning of "solemnity".

3.2. Retro Creation

The second fugue in D major was written in 1834, with a tonality of D major and a single theme fugue in four voices. It is the shortest of the six fugues, with only 73 bars. The length of the fugue is similar to that in Bach's "Collection of Piano Music with Twelve Averages" (As shown in **Figure 2**).

It is worth mentioning that Mendelssohn's Fugue in D major is related to Bach's "Piano with Twelve Averages". There are some similarities in the fifth fugue (as shown in **Figure 3**).



Figure 1. Choral.



Figure 2. Fugue in D major.

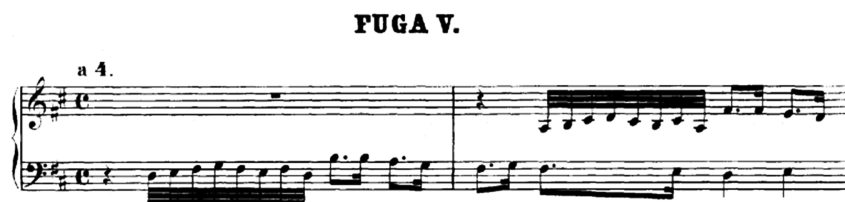


Figure 3. Bach's Fugue in D major.

Through comparison, it can be seen that the tonality of the two fugues is the same, both in D major, and the theme tone is very similar. Mendelssohn used D, B, A, and G in the first two bars of his second fugue, respectively. These core theme tones are also used in Bach's fugue. At the same time, in the first bar of the two fugues, there are the lowest to highest notes such as D-B, from the first level to the sixth level, and both use punctuation rhythm at the beginning, which is a downward trend in tone. Therefore, it can be said that the themes of these two fugues are similar, while Mendelssohn's fugue theme is more like a reduced form of Bach's fugue theme. From this, we can see the influence of Bach on Mendelssohn, as well as Mendelssohn's admiration and imitation of Bach [6]. This not only reflects Mendelssohn's retro creative tendency, but also indicates Mendelssohn's serious attitude in creating this work.

3.3. Summary

Through the analysis of the first and second fugues in "Six Preludes and Fugues Op.35", we can see that Mendelssohn not only paid tribute to his predecessor, Bach, but also developed and created Bach's technology while expressing romantic emotions, which is a major feature of Mendelssohn's classical creative tendencies. At the same time, Mendelssohn also demonstrated his religious piety

in these two Fugues, which well reflected his own religious complex. His classical creative tendencies and religious complex make this late work also have a “religious nature”.

4. Conclusion

This article introduces Mendelssohn’s life and composition, and analyzes the first and second fugues in his “Six Preludes and Fugues Op.35”. Although Mendelssohn was a musician in the Romantic period, he also created many works with romantic spiritual temperament in his life, but unlike other Romantic musicians, his works not only have secular beauty and true feelings, not only did he have brilliant and exquisite dazzling skills and difficult and difficult techniques, but he also had the rare religious calm and contemplation and solemn solemnity of that era. What is more commendable is that he paid tribute to and learned from the masters and sages. In that era, he still adhered to classical creative techniques, and introduced new ones through the old, combining classical composition techniques with the spirit of romanticism, making the two complement each other and shine brilliantly. This highlights Mendelssohn’s “solemnity” in his late piano works: religious complex and classical tendency.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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