



The Holy See

CONCERT OFFERED BY THE GEWANDHAUS ORCHESTRA OF LEIPZIG
ON THE OCCASION OF THE HOLY FATHER'S 85TH BIRTHDAY

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Paul VI Hall
Friday, 20 April 2012*

[Video]

*Mr Minister President,
Distinguished Guests from the Free State of Saxony and the City of Leipzig,
Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,*

With this splendid performance of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy's Symphony n. 2, the "Lobgesang", you have offered me and everyone present a precious gift on my birthday. In fact this symphony is a great hymn of praise to God, a prayer with which we have praised and thanked the Lord for his gifts. First of all, however, I would like to thank those who made this experience possible. In the first place, the Gewandhausorchester, which in itself has no need of introduction: it is one of the oldest orchestras in the world with a tradition of excellent performances and indisputable fame. I extend my cordial thanks to the splendid choirs and soloists and, in particular to Maestro Riccardo Chailly for his vibrant interpretation. I extend my gratitude to the Minister President and to the Representatives of the Free State of Saxony, to the Mayor and to the Delegation of the City of Leipzig, to the Ecclesiastical Authorities, as well as to the Directors of the Gewandhaus and to all those who have come from Germany.

Mendelssohn, the "Lobgesang" Symphony, Gewandhaus: three elements that are not linked only this evening but have been linked from the outset. Indeed the great symphony for choir, soloists

and orchestra which we have heard was composed by Mendelssohn to celebrate the fourth centenary of the invention of the press and was actually performed on 24 June 1840 for the first time in the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, Johan Sebastian Bach's church by the Gewandhaus Orchestra; on the podium was Mendelssohn himself, who was the conductor of this ancient and prestigious orchestra for years.

This composition consists of three movements for orchestra alone, without a solution of continuity, and then of a sort of cantata with soloists and choir. In a letter to his friend Karl Klingemann, Mendelssohn himself explained that in this Symphony "first the instruments sing praise in their congenial manner, then the choir and the individual voices". Music as praise of God, the supreme Beauty, is the basis of Mendelssohn's approach to composition, not only of his liturgical or sacred music but of the whole of his opus. For him, as Julius Schubring says, sacred music as such was not higher up the ladder than other music; every form of music was to serve and honour God in its own way. And the motto that Mendelssohn wrote on the score of the "Lobgesang" says: "I want to see all the arts, particularly music, at the service of the One who has given and created them". Our author's ethical and religious world was not separate from his concept of art, indeed it was an integral part of it: *Kunst un Leben sind nich sweierlei*", art and life are not two separate things but one, he wrote.

Profound unity of life — whose unifying element is faith — characterized Mendelssohn's entire existence and guided his decisions. In his letters we perceive this pervasive theme. He said to his friend Schirmer on 9 January 1841, referring to the family: "Of course, worries and serious days are at times not lacking... and yet one can only pray God fervently to preserve the health and happiness he has given us". And on 17 January 1843 in Klingemann, he wrote: "I cannot but thank God on my knees every day for every good he gives me". His was therefore a solid and convinced faith, deeply nourished by Sacred Scripture, as, among other pieces, his two Oratorios, *Paulus* and *Elias*, demonstrate, as well as the symphony we have heard which is full of biblical references, especially from the Psalms and from St Paul. I find it difficult to evoke some of the intense moments we have experienced this evening; I would only like to mention the marvellous duet of the sopranos and choir on the words "*Ich harrete des Herrn, und er neigte sich zu mir un hörte mein Fleh'n*", from Psalm 40: "I have hoped in the Lord and he bent down to me and heard my cry"; it is the hymn of those who place all their hope in God and are certain that they will not be disappointed.

I once again thank the Orchestra and Choir of the Gewandhaus, the Choir of the Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk (MDR), the soloists and the director, as well as the Authorities of the Free State of Saxony and of the City of Leipzig for the performance of this "luminous work" (Robert Schumann), which has enabled us all to praise God, and I have been able to thank God once again in a special way for the years of my life and ministry.

I would like to conclude with the words that Robert Schumann wrote in the *Neue Zeitschrift für*

Musik, after attending the first performance of the symphony we have heard and which are intended to be an invitation on which to reflect: “Let us, as the text splendidly set to music by the Maestro says, increasingly ‘abandon the works of darkness and take up the weapons of light’”.

My thanks and good evening to you all!