
Review

Farrakhan plays Mendelssohn

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and Fred Haight

In 1993, the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam, astonished the world with a virtuoso performance of one of the most tender and compassionate pieces of music in the Classical repertoire, Felix Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor, Opus 64. The recently released videotape "For Love of Music—Farrakhan Plays the Violin" not only features the historic May 1993 concert, but also gives viewers an inside look at how and why that concert came to be. While there is no question that Farrakhan's startling solo performance, accompanied by the New World Orchestra conducted by Michael Morgan, is the high point of the videotape, it is also true that, as a totality, the complete production is an artful composition.

In the introductory moments, we learn that Louis Farrakhan's love of the violin and Classical music is not new or casual, but an art form he has been committed to for over fifty years. We also learn, through the words of his son Mustapha, that although circumstances had forced Farrakhan's formal training to cease some forty-four years prior to his 1993 performance, music was always very much part of his life. Mustapha remembers a household in which he and his eight brothers and sisters were wakened to the sounds of their father's violin.

Despite Farrakhan's obvious love of the instrument, the fact that he did not play publicly for some four decades was also a personal decision. At first, the young Louis Walcott was forced to abandon his formal training when he left his home in Boston to attend college in the South, where there were no Classical teachers for young blacks. In 1955, when Louis Walcott meets Elijah Muhammad for the first time, he responds to Muhammad's plea that his followers choose between entertainment and religion. It was Muhammad's view that the black people in America had enough entertainers and athletes, but were in desperate need of thinkers. Louis Walcott, soon to be Louis Farrakhan, dedicated himself to becoming a thinker and, at least for awhile, put away his beloved instrument.

By 1989, when the Mosque Maryam was dedicated in Chicago, Farrakhan had risen to lead the Nation of Islam, and was, depending on who was doing the talking, the most respected or most feared black leader in America. At the

dedication of the mosque, Sylvia Olden Lee, a pianist and teacher of international stature (the first African-American professional musician at the New York Metropolitan Opera, where she was Vocal Coach 1954-56, and professor of vocal interpretation at the Curtis Institute of Music for more than 20 years), accompanied a fine young singer. We learn that afterwards, at a dinner at the minister's home, a string quartet played. Mrs. Lee reports that, obviously inspired by the day's events, when someone handed Farrakhan his violin, he rose to perform.

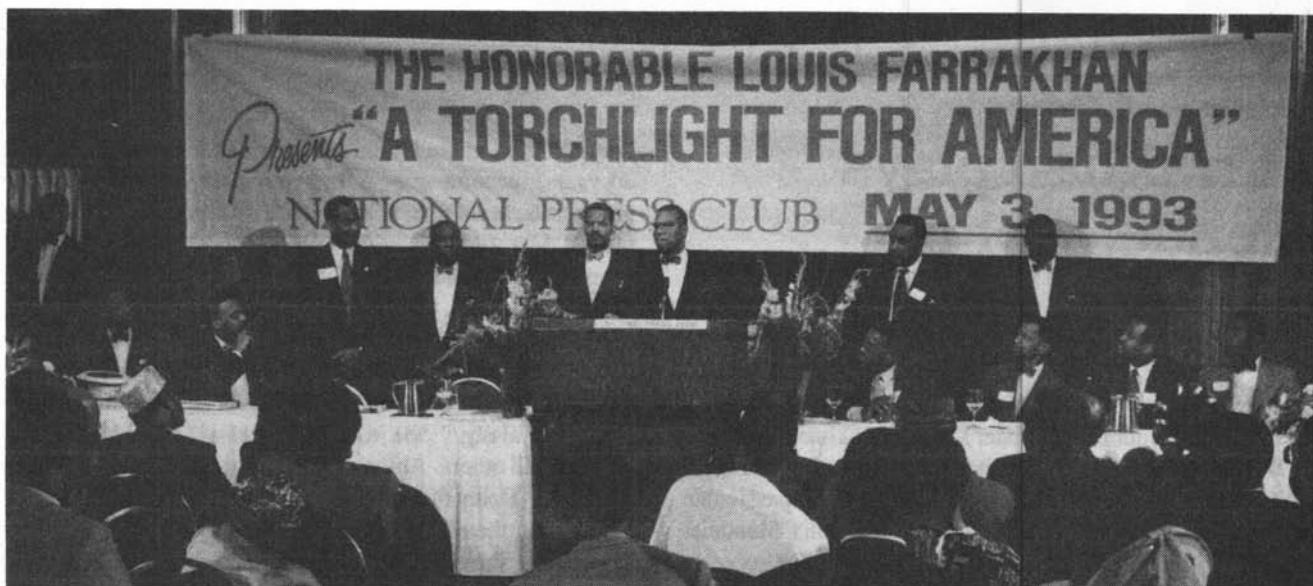
Lee admits that she didn't expect much. "But," she reports, "I was absolutely startled. His performance was captivating; brilliant; prestissimos flying as he made his instrument sing along." She was so impressed, in fact, that she began to tell others. Among those she spoke to was Dr. Willis Patterson, Dean of the University of Michigan School of Music, and then head of the National Association of Negro Musicians. She asked him if he had a celebrity performer for the association's upcoming conference. When he said he did not, she suggested he invite Louis Farrakhan. Patterson was shocked. "Can he play?" he asked her. Sylvia Lee replied, "Oh, he can play; he plays like Isaac Stern."

An invitation was sent and accepted. Minister Farrakhan played the Massenet "Meditation from Thais," but the idea of performing the piece he was learning when his formal training had ended—the Mendelssohn Concerto—was born. Minister Farrakhan wanted to play it as a gift that he would give to others for his own sixtieth birthday. Having only learned the first movement of the three-movement piece, Farrakhan dedicated the next two years of his life to studying and perfecting it. During those two years, only those closest to him knew of his plan. He did not alter his grueling travel and speaking schedule. In fact, it was during this period that Louis Farrakhan spoke in every major city in the United States with the goal of reaching 1 million black men. Yet he found the hours he needed to practice and to study. His teacher, a Russian Jewish concert artist by the name of Elaine Skorodin Fohrman, often accompanied him.

Some of Louis Farrakhan's critics claimed that he selected a piece by Mendelssohn, a Jewish composer, as a cheap trick to cover his alleged anti-Semitism. But when his son Mustapha is asked why Mendelssohn, he looks surprised. "Why Mendelssohn? It had to be Mendelssohn. He loved him."

The rest of the videotape tells a beautiful story of everything that went into the preparation of the concert. Minister Farrakhan's dedication to the music is only part of the story. We learn that an entire community had to mobilize to see the concert realized. A great deal of fear and slander and prejudice had to be overcome. Just before we are taken to the performance, Farrakhan tries to explain his motivation in taking on this task.

He tells us, "Music, like truth, is the essence of my life. When I put down my violin to dedicate myself to my people, some of my thinking became narrow and nationalistic. But



In May 1993—the same month he achieved his two-year project of performing the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto—Louis Farrakhan appeared in Washington, D.C. as part of his speaking tour of all the nation's major cities.

music expands my breast and I can feel not only the pain of my own people, but all of humanity. Its universality teaches of the beauty of all human beings.” He talks about how the human heart, like a fine instrument, can be crafted through the beauty of music to clear away ignorance and “lift men from where they are to where God wants them to be. People don’t know Farrakhan; they don’t know the soul of the man. I’d like them to.” On his choice of Mendelssohn, Farrakhan says, “The man’s music was simply Divine.”

But what of Farrakhan’s music? By this time in the video, the viewer has no doubt of the nobility of the man or the mission, despite the venomous slanders that accompany nearly every mention of his name in print. The desire to use beautiful music to heal wounds, to open doors, especially for young people who might otherwise never be exposed to an orchestral Classical performance, has to do some good. But, we also know that the Mendelssohn piece remains out of reach to even some professionals. The bowing is very complex. The piece leaps from the lowest note to the highest; there are trills; double stops; all in quick succession. Well, we think, even a tiny step in the right direction is better than nothing.

Finally, we arrive at the doors of Chicago’s Christ Universal Temple. It is time for the concert. But can Farrakhan play? To quote the *New York Times* critic (something we almost never do in this publication), “Can Louis Farrakhan play the violin? God bless us! He certainly can.”

The performance

First, a word on the composition. In most Classical concertos, there is a pause between the three movements. But, in this concerto, taking a cue from the late Beethoven, Mendelssohn links all three movements together without a break,

indicating that he had a strong idea of the work as an integrated whole. Farrakhan clearly comprehends Mendelssohn’s intent, and succeeds admirably in developing such a concept of this work.

For example, the first movement of the Concerto is indicated “Allegro” (fast) and the third movement “Allegro molto vivace” (fast and very full of life). Although the emphasis “molto vivace” does not necessarily imply faster than simple “Allegro,” violinists always play it very quickly, rather than think about what the indication actually means. The result is, that although the third movement of the piece is joyous, in most recorded performances, the passion of the previous movements dissipates. The movement is usually only half as long as the first and tends to become a bit fluffy and light. Farrakhan takes the movement at a slower pace, allowing it to retain its jubilancy without becoming unserious. The listener hears the echoes of the first movement in his mind’s ear, just as the composer intended. (Indeed, the transition from the second to the third, an “Allegretto ma non troppo” quotes from the first movement in order to underline the link.)

Maestro Michael Morgan comments earlier in the video that it is in the second movement that Louis Farrakhan’s character comes out. A very interesting thing happens.

Maestro Morgan begins the movement in the slow, Adagio-like tempo in which it is usually played. When the violin enters, Farrakhan speeds up to the Andante (walking pace) which Mendelssohn himself indicated. We see Morgan turn his head with a puzzled look before he adjusts to the soloist’s tempo. This is a cantabile (singing) movement. The traditional slower tempo allows a violinist to show how well he can make his instrument sing. But the Andante tempo taken by Farrakhan, with his instrument still singing beautifully, keeps

Wagner and Mendelssohn

The arch-racist and proto-Nazi composer Richard Wagner dared not attack the Jewish-born Felix Mendelssohn as long as he lived. But shortly after the composer's death in 1847, Wagner published his notorious *Der Jude in der Musik* (The Jew in Music).

Since he could not credibly claim that Mendelssohn lacked skill, Wagner invented a more insidious slander. Wagner said that "the Jew" could make a clever imitation of western Classical music, but that, since the Jew lacked a real soul, he could never really feel it. Thus, the image of Mendelssohn as a brilliant but superficial composer was made "official."

This "official line" was perpetrated

in England by Wagner's chief propagandist there, the Fabian socialist George Bernard Shaw. It was carried to the extreme by the Nazis, who banned Mendelssohn's music and tore down his statue that stood in front of the Leipzig Gewandhaus, where he had reintroduced Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" to the world.

No musician would endorse Wagner's anti-Semitism today, but prejudice is a subtle thing. The image of Mendelssohn as a "dandy" and emotional lightweight has never been completely rectified. The celebrations of the sesquicentennial of Mendelssohn's death in 1997, will offer a chance for setting matters straight.



Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

a certain edge of tension coming out of the first movement and leading into the third. The concept of the work as a whole is developed, and a respect for its seriousness maintained.

Farrakhan's ability to make his instrument sing deserves attention. All good instrumental music is based on the human voice and Minister Farrakhan has the mastery of bowing technique necessary to organize phrasing as he desires. But, there is also something more.

When Minister Farrakhan addresses the audience at the conclusion of his triumphant performance, he speaks of the fact that in music, every note has a different vibration, just as every human being "vibrates" differently. He jokes that the warm-up of any orchestra sounds like pure chaos—until the oboist plays the "A" to which the orchestra tunes. But, he emphasizes, it is the composer who organizes all the tones into a beautiful harmony. What the world needs now, he says, is a divine composer "to put us together on the staff of life, so we can combine to produce beauty, harmony, and peace."

In music, this quality is developed through polyphony (many voices). A single instrument, like the violin, can capture the qualities of different species of human voice, such as soprano and mezzo-soprano. This polyphony is further differentiated by the different registers that exist within each species of voice. We do not know the extent of the Minister's knowledge of vocal registration, but in the above-mentioned comments (which clearly moved the members of the orchestra), he brings in a most valuable quality from outside formal musical study per se. The tendency in today's media-run culture is toward a homogenization, or flattening-out, of the differences

both between unique individuals in society, and between different voices and vocal registers in music. This habit undermines the idea that man is made in the image of God, because it flattens the quality that can only be manifested in the sovereign individual's creative mind. A leader who works to develop creative individuals would tend to also orient toward such differentiation in music.

Let's examine one example here. Mrs. Fohrman, in an early section of the video, mentions the talent Farrakhan demonstrates in playing the very difficult cadenza in the first movement. It most be noted that this cadenza is unique. Mendelssohn places it in the middle of the movement rather than the end, and it is clearly a tribute to the "Chaconne" for solo violin by J.S. Bach, a piece where Bach developed the principle of polyphony in a single instrument to undreamt-of heights. The Mendelssohn cadenza emphasizes a low voice, something most unusual. The violin most often plays in the soprano or mezzo-soprano range, but here we find the quality of a human tenor voice in its middle and lower registers! Farrakhan, though clearly capable of playing this passage with great speed, makes a point of slowing certain portions of it down, in order to make that very unique tenor voice sing, while playing the higher notes much more lightly.

The videotape is highly recommended. We also think it would be a most valuable addition to the curriculum of any educational institution, from elementary school on up. And, we can only hope that Minister Farrakhan will continue to develop in this direction—something very sorely needed in music, and in society today.