

ANALYSIS OF THE HARMONY AND COUNTERPOINT IN FELIX  
MENDELSSOHN'S ORGAN SONATA NO. 2 IN C MINOR, OP. 65

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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MASTER OF MUSIC

BY

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Felix Mendelssohn is known as one of the most influential composers of the German Romantic period. In order to better understand the defining characteristics of Mendelssohn's music, it is beneficial to analyze his compositional techniques and the major influences of his musical output. In addition, I wish to focus on his Organ Sonata No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 65, which I will perform in my organ degree recital. By focusing on this piece, I wish to better explain the contributions to the Romantic music repertoire by Mendelssohn.

For the layout of the research paper, I intend to first briefly discuss the influence of Dietrich Buxtehude on Johann Sebastian Bach before exploring the influential link of Bach to Felix Mendelssohn. This is important because these are the main influences on Mendelssohn's organ sonatas. Secondly, I will discuss Mendelssohn's musical style pertaining to his organ repertoire. In addition, I also will provide a brief analysis of the harmony and counterpoint in his Organ Sonata No. 2, which will include a comparison of the free works, i.e., works without a strict form of Bach and Buxtehude based from the 17<sup>th</sup>-century German composition style.

One can begin to comprehend the organ works of Mendelssohn by first focusing briefly on Johann Sebastian Bach, who served as a significant influence on Mendelssohn's contrapuntal writing. In 1705, Bach travelled by foot from Arnstadt to Lubeck in order to learn more about the music and compositional style of Dietrich Buxtehude, whose outstanding reputation as an organist, development of pedal technique, and use of *stylus phantasticus* likely served as inspiration for Bach to travel more than 250 miles to Lubeck.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 92-101.

According to Johann Mattheson, the use of *stylus phantasticus* pertained to the North German organ toccatas by Johann Jakob Froberger or Buxtehude.<sup>2</sup> This style consisted of an alternation between episodes of monophonic and polyphonic sections in contrasting tempos. The monophonic sections had a virtuosic and improvisatory character, while the polyphonic sections typically contained counterpoint and fugal writing. Contrasting sections were bound by harmony rather than a common melody.

The organ music of Bach would eventually inspire Mendelssohn as a composer for the organ. Mendelssohn, who first began taking keyboard lessons from his mother, eventually studied with Marie Bigot and Ludwig Berger, a former student of the classical composer Muzio Clementi.<sup>3</sup> At the age of ten, Mendelssohn began taking lessons from Carl Friedrich Zelter, who was serving as the Director of the Berlin *Singakademie*. Mendelssohn's parents originally contacted Zelter to give instruction to both Felix and his sister Fanny in counterpoint, fugue, and canon.<sup>4</sup> Zelter introduced the music of Johann Sebastian Bach to Mendelssohn through his own personal copies of keyboard and church music. In turn, Mendelssohn became interested in and devoted to the music of Bach.<sup>5</sup> Mendelssohn additionally took lessons from August Wilhelm Bach from 1820 to 1822. A.W. Bach, who was not biologically related to J.S. Bach, had also studied with Zelter.

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<sup>2</sup> Friedhelm Krummacher, "Bach's Free Organ Works and the *Stylus Phantasticus*," in *J.S. Bach as Organist: His Instruments, Music, and Performance Practices*, ed. George Stauffer and Ernest May (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 162-64.

<sup>3</sup> Siegwart Reichwald, *Mendelssohn in Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 42-3.

<sup>4</sup> William A. Little, "Felix Mendelssohn and his Place in the Organ World of his Time," in *The Mendelssohns: Their Music in History*, ed. John Michael Cooper and Julie D. Prandi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 291-93.

<sup>5</sup> Robert C. Mann, "The Organ Music," in *The Mendelssohn Companion*, ed. Douglass Seaton (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), 628-29.

Mendelssohn's interest in J.S. Bach's organ music was evident when he acquired the Riedl edition of Bach's preludes and fugues for organ in 1823.<sup>6</sup> The collection included the Preludes and Fugues of BWV 543 to BWV 548. This edition of the preludes and fugues of Bach remained in fashion through 1844. In 1832, Mendelssohn and Adolf Bernhard Marx, a lawyer who had worked in Berlin, together prepared an edition of lesser-known organ works by Bach. This edition, titled *Bach's noch wenig bekannte Orgelkompositionen*, was published by the German editors Breitkopf and Hartel in the fall of 1833. The collection included eight organ works, including the Fantasie in G Minor, BWV 542/1 and Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, BWV 565. This was ultimately presented as the first Urtext edition of Bach's organ music available to the public. In 1844, Mendelssohn became an editor for Bach's Schubler Chorales, BWV 645-650.<sup>7</sup> The Schubler Chorales, along with Mendelssohn's Organ Sonatas, Op. 65, were published in 1845.

My analysis will also include a comparison of the free works, i.e., works without a strict form of Bach and Buxtehude based from the 17<sup>th</sup>-century German composition style. These free works by both composers include preludes, fantasies, and toccatas. This links to the Mendelssohn sonata because title "Sonata" is also used loosely vs. the common Classical identification. Originally, Mendelssohn conceptualized his sonatas as free-form, multi-sectional works, which changed in title identification until settling on the term "Sonata."

*Grave*, the first movement of Mendelssohn's Organ Sonata No. 2, is unusual in that it can serve as an introduction to the second movement marked *Adagio*.<sup>8</sup> The movement builds on the opening phrase in the soprano line through the end of the slur in measure two, shown below in

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<sup>6</sup> William A. Little, *Mendelssohn and the Organ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 119.

<sup>7</sup> Nobuaki Ebata, Tomita Yo, and Ian Mills, "Mendelssohn and the Schubler Chorales (BWV 645-650): A New Source Found in the Riemenschneider Bach Institute Collection," *Bach* 44, no. 1 (July 2013): 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph W. G. Hathaway, *Analysis of Mendelssohn's Organ Works* (New York: AMS Press, 1978), 22.

Example 1. This opening phrase, consisting of two separate two-note slurs followed by a longer slur, repeats on the anacrusis of measure three, and ends on the dominant of C minor.

Immediately following the dominant chord, the left hand proceeds with its own subject that starts on an ascending minor seventh from the anacrusis of measure five. At the same time, the opening phrase with multiple slurs continues in the right hand. This time, the phrase mainly consists of motion by minor seconds. The end of the phrase occurs in measure six when ending in C minor, seen below in Example 1.

Example 1: Mendelssohn, Organ Sonata No. 2. First movement, mm. 1-6.

The image shows a musical score for Mendelssohn's Organ Sonata No. 2, First movement, measures 1-6. The score is written for Manual and Pedal. The Manual part is in the treble clef and the Pedal part is in the bass clef. The key signature is C minor (three flats) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked 'Grave M.M. 69'. The score includes dynamics such as 'f' (forte) and 'p' (piano). The Manual part features a melodic line with slurs and dynamics, while the Pedal part provides a rhythmic accompaniment. The score is labeled 'Opus 65 Nr. 2' in the top right corner.

These two subjects presented by both hands repeat in invertible counterpoint through measure thirteen. The right hand's subject from the anacrusis of measure five then switches with the left hand's subject on the pickup to measure seven, which cadences to F minor in measure eight. Measure seven also includes a third voice in the alto. Both subjects invert between hands as the tenor takes the first subject and the soprano assumes the second subject. The exchange of voices is a technique often found in the imitative pieces of Bach, seen in Example 2 from his C-major prelude from BWV 545. In measure seven of the example, the soprano line's sixteenth notes lies over the left hand's eighth notes. The hands then exchange voices in the following measure as the left hand plays the sixteenth notes and the right hand resorts to eighth notes.

Example 2: Bach, Prelude and Fugue in C Major, BWV 545. Mm. 1-8.

As soon as this phrase cadences to C minor in measure ten, the pedal enters with the second subject starting on D, and the first subject reappears in the soprano line. This phrase goes to G minor on beat three of measure twelve. However, the phrase elongates with the ascending sequences of the right hand's eighth notes and pedal's half notes to measure fourteen.

The anacrusis of measure fourteen begins similarly to the movement's opening in texturally with the original subject. This time, the left hand presents a held G, which sustains through the end of the movement as an inverted dominant pedal.<sup>9</sup> In measure seventeen, an A-dominant-seventh chord leads to a C-minor chord in second inversion. Fragments of the opening movement's subject, consisting of two-note slurs, repeat and descend chromatically to the downbeat of measure twenty. An ascending line in the pedal on beat two of this bar begins an eventual final cadence to G major, the dominant of the movement. On beat four of the final

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Dyke and Hilary Norris, "Mendelssohn's Six Sonatas for Organ: The Case for an Influence from Clavierübung III," *Organists' Review* 95, no. 1 (February 2009): 17.

measure, a further elongation of the held G from the left hand continues with the soprano's high G on the second manual keyboard. This G, now in a different register and a contrasting dynamic level of pianissimo from forte, indicates a quiet announcement of the second movement.

The second movement, *Adagio*, is composed in a "free" aria form, i.e., not like an ABA strict form. It begins with the soprano's sustained G as part of a seven-bar phrase going to G minor on the downbeat of measure thirty. At the end of the soprano's opening phrase, the tenor line repeats this phrase an eleventh down on D. Harmonically, this tenor line leads to B-flat major on the downbeat of measure thirty-eight. Mendelssohn, again like Bach, exchanges the position of the melody from soprano to tenor. Homophonic texture prevails, and the left hand, now playing on the Positif keyboard, plays accompanying sixteenth notes in two lower voices. These sixteenth notes in the left hand feature parallel motion in sixths through measure forty-three.

Once the tenor line finishes its melodic line in measure thirty-eight, a brief exchange occurs between the soprano and tenor. The soprano entrance in this measure lasts for two measures and begins on a high F. This two-bar entrance repeats in the tenor line a twelfth below on B-flat and leads to F minor. Immediately afterward, the soprano responds with the beginning melody, which now starts on C. The melody stretches by including a descending sequence from measures forty-seven to forty-nine. These measures move strictly by whole or half steps in each of the parts. Melodically, the line descends to the soprano's low B-natural in measure fifty-one before ascending to a held high G in the following measure. This G marks a return to the principal melody in the original key. In measure fifty-five, another long high G enters above the existing melody and takes over the remaining melodic phrase leading to measure sixty. A quick

exchange between the dominant and subsidiary keyboards indicates the end of this second movement and finally cadences to C minor in measure sixty-six.

A third movement, *Allegro maestoso e vivace*, proceeds as a stately 3/4 march in C major. This movement is in strong contrast to the second movement by switching to this parallel major and shifting to a dynamic level from pianissimo to fortissimo. The opening subject continues to beat two of measure sixteen. Repetition of dotted eighths and following sixteenth notes occurs on the anacrusis of measure seventeen. At this point, an exercise in counterpoint is created through the use of imitation between the soprano and tenor lines, shown in Example 3. In measure seventeen, the tenor ascends from G-sharp, which is followed immediately by the soprano line in the following measure. This imitation repeats again with the tenor line in measure nineteen. Now the line ascends starting on A-sharp and repeats in the soprano line in measure twenty. This rhythm from the movement's first two measures continues and leads up to a B dominant chord with a minor-ninth chord in measure twenty-four. The pedal outlines a B dominant harmony in eighth notes beginning in measure twenty-two before returning to the subject in measure twenty-six.

Example 3: Mendelssohn, Organ Sonata No. 2. Third movement, mm. 16-20.

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and the lower staff is in bass clef. The music consists of several measures of music, primarily chords and melodic lines. A dotted eighth-note followed by a sixteenth-note rhythm is prominent. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The score shows the beginning of a counterpoint exercise between the soprano and tenor lines.

This same idea of subject-and-answer repeats leading to measure forty-four. The opening subject starts once again, but then includes a deceptive cadence in measure fifty-one. Quarter notes take over rhythmically and a dominant pedal occurs for four measures beginning in bar fifty-eight. The march ends with a tonic pedal and immediately launches into the fourth and final movement, indicated by *attacca la Fuga*.

Mendelssohn's fourth movement is a fugue, marked *Fuga: Allegro moderato*. This is the final movement of the sonata, which links to the final sections in the free works of Bach and Buxtehude because they are also based on fugal writing. For example, the beginning of the fugue from Buxtehude's Praeludium, BuxWV 147, shown below in measure twenty-five of Example 4, marks the last section of the free work as a whole.

Example 4: Buxtehude, Praeludium, BuxWV 147. Mm. 21-35.

The image displays a musical score for Buxtehude's Praeludium, BuxWV 147, covering measures 21 through 35. The score is presented in three systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a common time signature. The first system (measures 21-24) features a complex texture with rapid sixteenth-note passages in the right hand and a more rhythmic bass line. The second system (measures 25-30) shows a shift to a more homophonic texture with block chords and moving lines. The third system (measures 31-35) continues this homophonic style, ending with a final cadence. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

The final movement of Mendelssohn's sonata begins with a five-measure subject entry in the left hand on C. The second entry of the subject comes in measure six a perfect fifth higher on G. While the right hand plays the second subject entry, the left-hand line continues with the counter-subject, shown below in Example 5. A third subject entrance is indicated in the soprano voice at measure twelve. The alto line now carries the counter-subject in measure thirteen. In measure fourteen, Mendelssohn inserts a two-bar fragment of the counter-subject that is slightly altered rhythmically. The pedal marks the fourth and final subject entrance on a low G in measure seventeen. Like the first two subject entrances, the soprano's third subject entrance follows with the counter-subject on the anacrusis of measure eighteen.

Example 5: Mendelssohn, Organ Sonata No. 2. Fourth movement, mm. 1-30.

Fuga  
Allegro moderato M. M. ♩ = 132

In measure twenty-two, a counter exposition begins in the left hand, which ascends from the bass clef to the treble clef.<sup>10</sup> This second exposition has the same subject as the previous exposition, but now starts in the key of D major. In contrast to the first exposition, the counter-subject is only presented once. Presentation of the counter-subject is unusual in that it begins with the soprano line in measure twenty-three and transfers to the pedal. This voice transfer occurs on beat three of the same measure where the soprano and pedal share a D in different registers. Finally, the counter-subject is confirmed in the pedal line as the soprano drops out for one quarter rest.

The alto line announces a second subject entrance on G in measure twenty-eight. This line continues as the higher soprano line in measures thirty-one to thirty-two. As the subject ends in measure thirty-two, it is re-written as the alto line as the third subject entry arrives in the soprano on a high D. After the soprano subject entrance, a cadence leads to G major in measure thirty-nine. The pedal line fails to provide a statement of the subject during the second exposition. Instead, it contains primarily long ascending and descending lines in stepwise motion from measures twenty-eight to thirty-six.

Once the counter exposition ends, the subject starts on G in the soprano line at measure thirty-nine over a tonic pedal. The alto line joins the soprano's subject line a sixth below for four measures. Instead of finishing the subject statement in measure forty-three, the soprano line restarts the subject line on C-sharp. This time, the lowest voice in the manual plays with the subject line a third below through measure forty-seven. As these two voices finish their statement of the subject, both the pedal and alto lines enter with their own statements of the subject in the following measure. The pedal line executes the entire subject starting on E while

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph W. G. Hathaway, *Analysis of Mendelssohn's Organ Works* (New York: AMS Press, 1978), 30.

the alto includes an altered version of the subject where the final two measures of the statement are shifted down an octave to accommodate for the soprano line.

A new counter-subject, which is presented as eighth notes in Example 6, includes a diminution of the subject's first four notes in measure thirty-nine. Pitches G, A, G, and C appear in notes two to five of the left hand of measure thirty-nine. The eighth notes are transferred to the alto line in measure forty-three and the soprano line in measure forty-eight. Eighth notes then quickly exchange between alto and soprano starting in measure fifty-three. These eighth notes continue in all of the voices through measure ninety-five.

Example 6: Mendelssohn, Organ Sonata No. 2. Fourth movement, mm. 39-50.

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff is in Treble clef, the middle in Bass clef, and the bottom in a lower Bass clef. The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 39 to 44, and the second system covers measures 45 to 50. The music features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are numerous fingering numbers (1-5) and articulation marks (accents, slurs) throughout the score.

The subject returns on C in the soprano while the two voices below accompany together in thirds and sixths. A return to this subject statement is preceded by two false subject entrances in the tenor and alto lines starting two measures prior. When the soprano finishes the subject on F-natural in measure sixty-one, this F-natural is held and becomes a chain of suspensions to the downbeat of measure sixty-three. In this measure, a two-bar fragment of the subject enters in the

pedal while the sustained D resolves down to C-sharp, now part of a four-note diminution of the subject. The two-bar fragment of the subject in the pedal is part of an ascending sequence until measure sixty-seven, at which point a full statement of the subject begins on C.

Fragments of the subject and counter-subject in eighth notes proceed at this time through measure seventy-five. A dialogue of the four-note subject diminution occurs between the all three upper parts, particularly between the tenor and alto voices starting in measures sixty-eight to seventy. As the tenor assumes responsibility of the eighth notes, the soprano inserts a four-note excerpt of the subject starting on beat three of measure seventy-two. Starting in this same measure, the pedal plays ascending whole notes starting on E up to B below middle C in measure seventy-six.

Beginning in this measure, the alto announces the subject on G and continues to measure seventy-nine. However, this measure includes the last measure of the subject as if it were stated on C instead of G. The soprano enters on beat two of measure seventy-six with a descending chromatic line from G to E on the downbeat of the next measure. As soon as the line arrives on E, the eighth-note counter-subject follows and eventually descends from a high A to low D at measure eighty-three. This D marks the first four notes of the subject and lands on a pedal G, which lasts for eight measures. Once the pedal D arrives in measure eighty-three, a series of four-note subject diminutions starts in the soprano. After introduced once in the soprano, it occurs twice in the alto and three more times in the tenor.

In measure eighty-five, the subject appears in the soprano on D. The last measure of the subject is repeated in a descending sequence leading to a C minor chord in second inversion in measure ninety-two. This descending sequence is accompanied by four-note subject diminutions in the alto and tenor. From C minor, it shifts harmonically as the pedal's eighth-note counter-

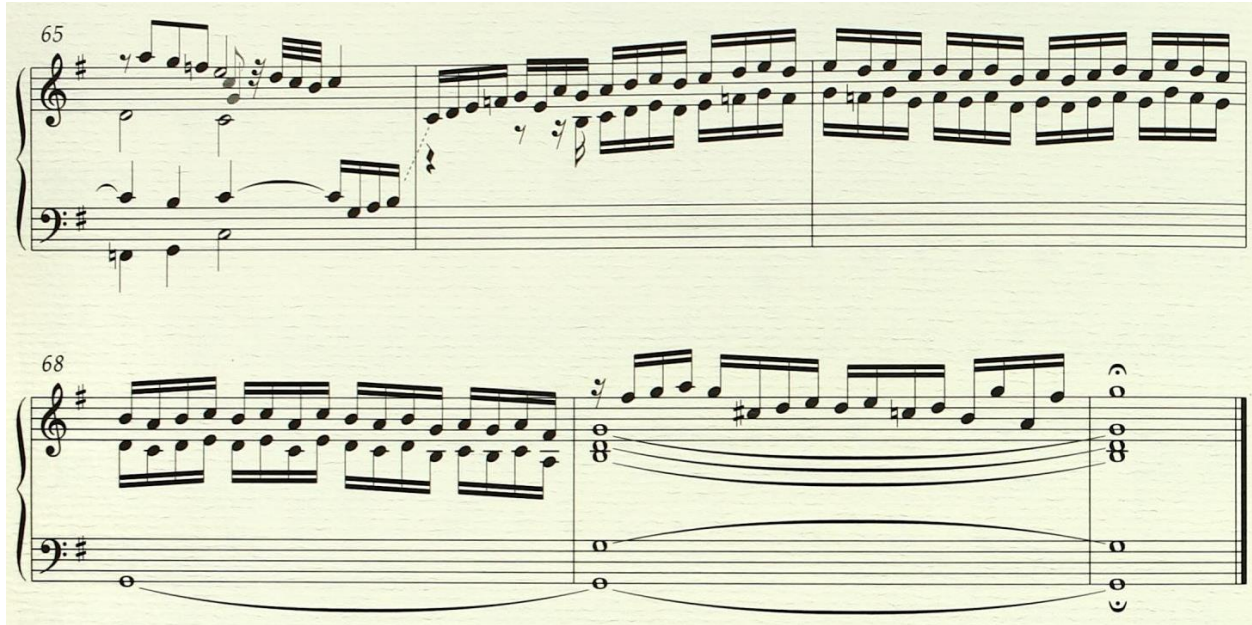
subject, beginning on the offbeat of measure ninety-two, lands on F-sharp and outlines an ascending F-sharp fully-diminished chord to F-sharp one octave above. The pedal descends from measure ninety-four to a return of the subject on G in the pedal of measure ninety-six.

At this point, the texture shifts to a more homophonic approach as the top three voices sing together rhythmically for three measures. One final statement of the subject on G appears in the soprano line on beat two of measure 102. This time, the rhythm is slightly altered in the beginning of the subject where the first note is a quarter note instead of a half note. The key of C major does not officially return in this movement until measure 103 and cadences to a final tonic chord in measure 108. The coda section of the fugue starting in measure 103 also draws upon the free works of Buxtehude that also ended in a coda, seen below in Examples 7 and 8. These coda sections from Mendelssohn and Buxtehude show that the harmonic rhythm slows down as they lead to their final cadences.

Example 7: Mendelssohn, Organ Sonata No. 2. Fourth movement, mm. 103-108.



Example 8: Buxtehude, Praeludium, BuxWV 147. Mm. 65-70.



As discussed before, Mendelssohn was influenced as a composer by Bach. He was significantly influenced by Bach's contrapuntal writing, evident in his Organ Sonata No. 2. Specifically, the first and fourth movements in particular are of interest regarding contrapuntal features and texture. The fourth movement, a fugue, contains numerous features of contrapuntal writing that complicate the texture, including two counter-subjects, subject diminutions, and chains of suspensions. Altogether, analysis of Mendelssohn's Organ Sonata No. 2 helps us point to his compositional techniques and influence of both Bach and Buxtehude.

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