Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn
(November 3, 1809 – November 4, 1847)

Celebrate The 200th Birthday Of Felix Mendelssohn

by Gail Smith

Felix Mendelssohn was a gifted child prodigy who composed and was a concert pianist. He was born on February 3, 1809 in Hamburg, Germany. His grandfather was the famous philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn. Felix's Jewish family converted to Christianity and added Bartholdy to their surname. Fanny Mendelssohn was four years old when her brother Felix was born. Their lifestyle was most uncommon. Their parents were very wealthy and their home was surrounded by a magnificent garden with five acres of beautiful flowers and trees. The mansion had large rooms and a theater that was large enough for concerts with hundreds of guests. The family was most generous and had ample guest rooms for artists to stay in. Alexander von Humboldt had even set up a laboratory and observatory in the garden. The family had intellectual conversations with amazing friends at their home most evenings during dinner. Young Felix grew up in this idyllic, stimulating environment yet was absorbed with his first love, music.

Felix began composing at the age of ten and in his early teens had some of his music published. Not only did Felix sketch and draw very well but also wrote poetry. He wrote this poem for his mother on her birthday, March 15, 1826. His mother was a pianist and had given Felix his first piano lessons.

If the composer's tone is grave,
He puts us all to sleep;
If the composer's tone is gay,
He isn't one bit deep.

If the composer's tune is long
Pity the mangy cur;
If the composer's tune is short,
Why then it doesn't stir.

If the composer's line is clear,
Plainly he's a fool;
If the composer is obscure
Send him back to school.

No matter how he turns his phrase,
Nobody's content;
Therefore the composer must
Follow his own bent.

Felix Mendelssohn was inspired by nature and his many trips to compose such pieces as " A Calm Sea", Fingal's Cave. " A Midsummer Night's Dream" was inspired by William Shakespeare while Mendelssohn's famous "Elijah" was inspired by the Bible. Many of his Preludes and Fugues were inspired by his study of Bach's works. While staying at the home of friends in London, Felix composed a piano scherzo for the children when they asked him what the music would sound like if an imaginary fairy played on a make believe musical instrument. Felix's imagination was amazing. This scherzo in E minor comes alive when you think of yellow flowers in the shape of trumpets being played by fairies!

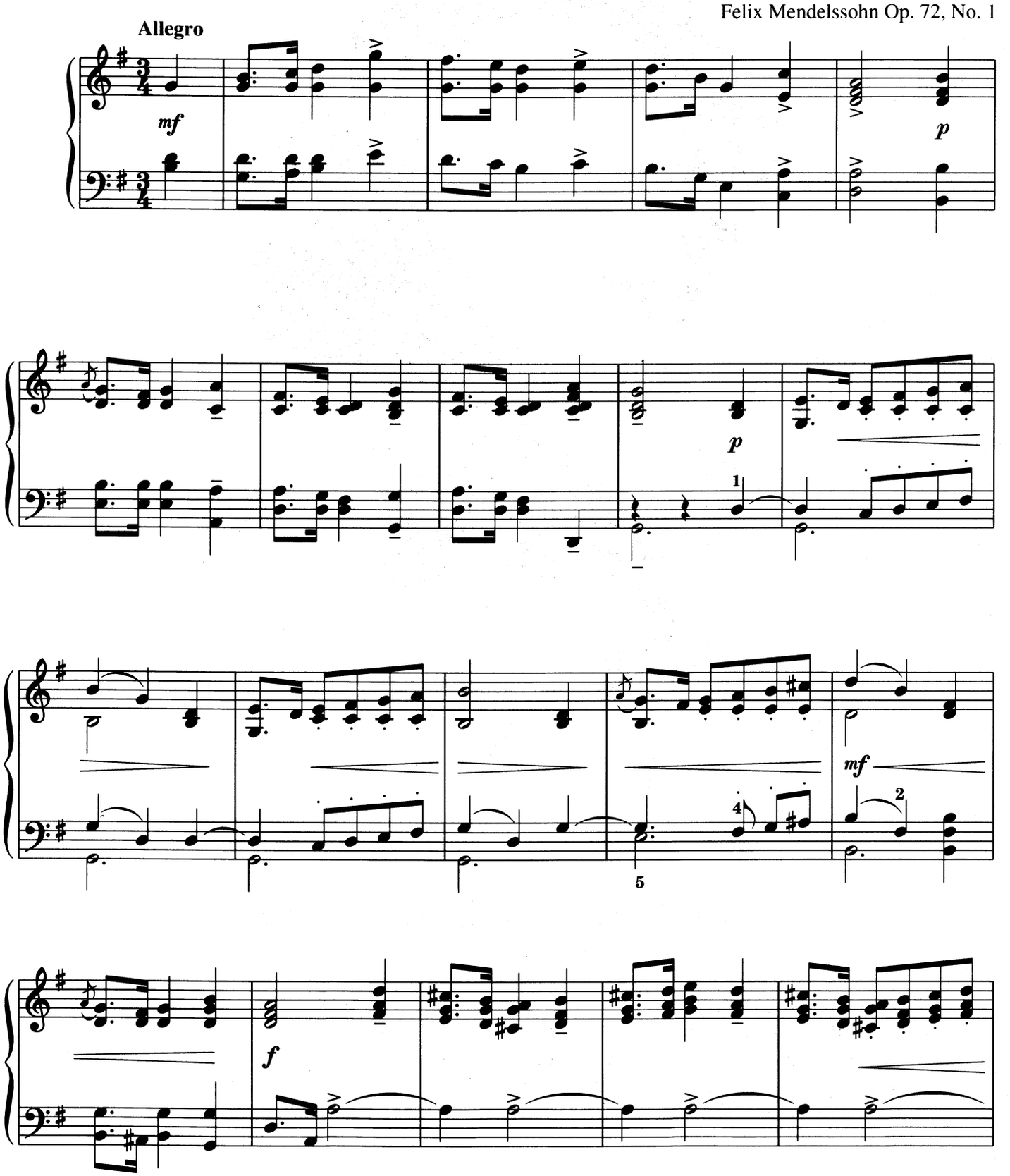
Felix's sister, Fanny played a huge part in her brother's life. She encouraged his composing and they worked together on many songs. She wrote hundreds of letters to him when he was away. Fanny said, "How hard it is for us to rise above our times, our families, our own selves." She was proud of her famous brother, but sad that she was not allowed to have her own music published. Felix ended up publishing six of her pieces under his own name. Growing up; Felix needed Fanny's approval of what he had composed.

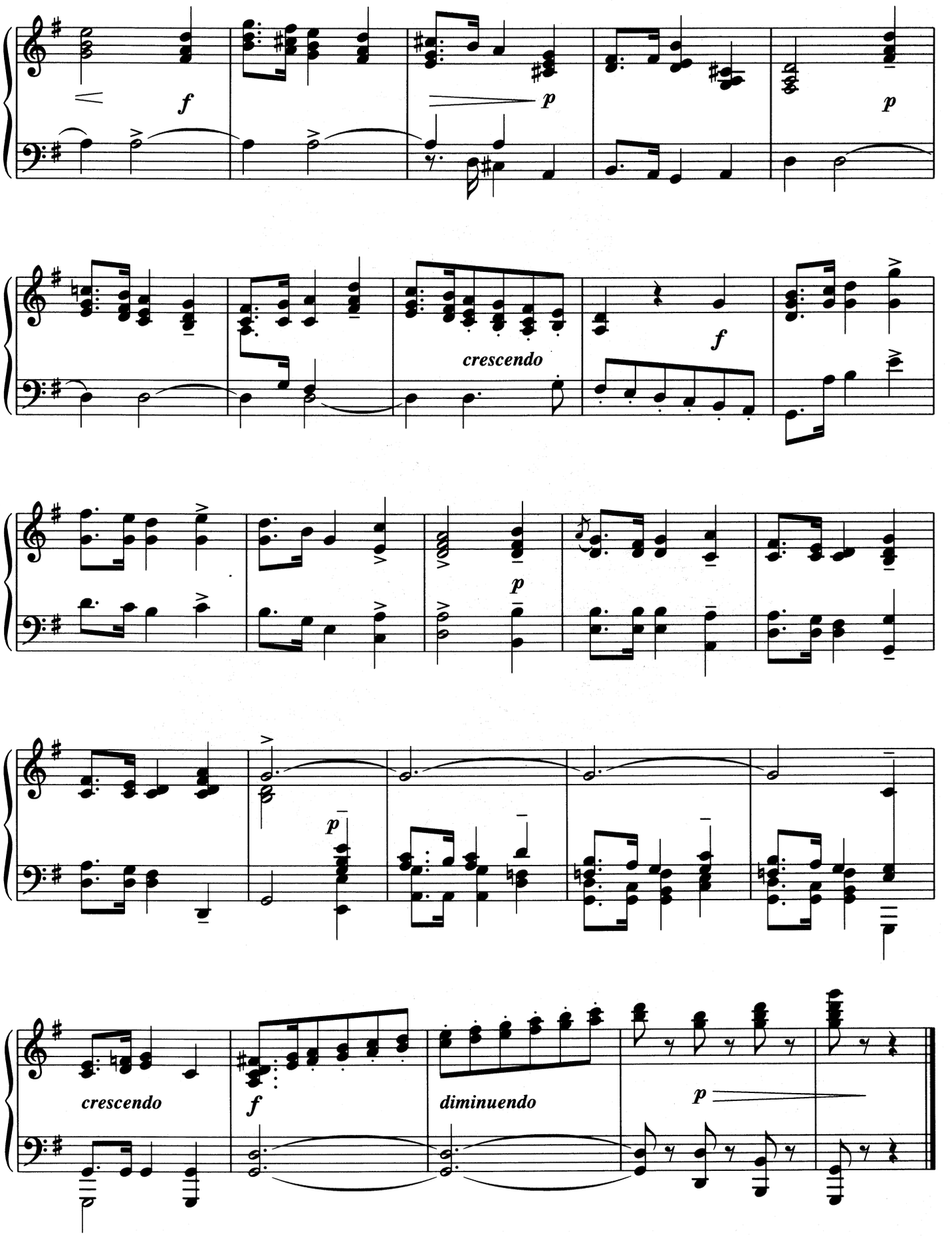
Felix revived the works of J.S. Bach and conducted Bach's great St. Matthew Passion which had not been heard since Bach himself performed it eighty years earlier. A thousand people were turned away that evening when Felix conducted it.

Felix married Cecile Jeanrenaud and they had five lovely children. During his life, Felix composed choral works, symphonies, piano concertos, sting quartets, trios. Three sonatas, Variations serieuses in D minor (Op. 54), fantasias and 48 short piano pieces titled "Songs without Words". Felix also composed for the organ. Felix was devastated when his sister Fanny died unexpectantly and he died six months later at the age of 38 in Leipzig, Germany on November 4, 1847. Mendelssohn's famous Wedding March from the Overture of "A Midsummer Night's Dream", is probably heard more than any of his other works.

From "Six Pieces for Children"

Felix Mendelssohn Op. 72, No. 1




f
p
p
crescendo
f
p
p
crescendo
f
diminuendo
p