FELIX MENDELSSOHN - Composer of the Month

by Gail Smith

Mendelssohn was born November 3, 1809 and died November 4, 1847. Felix accomplished so much in so short a time. He was only 38 years old when he died. Felix's favorite motto was: “What is worth doing at all is worth doing well.”

As a composer, a man, a friend, with society and family Mendelssohn stands apart. He was a man of taste and integrity.

Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg, Germany. His father was a rich banker. His mother spoke several languages, read Homer in the original, and played the piano. When Felix was just three years old, the French captured the city and the family fled to Berlin. A new banking house was established there. The whole family were baptized into the Lutheran Church and adopted the additional name of Bartholdy. They lived in a beautiful home with gardens and a tree lined canal in front of their home. All distinguished musical people who passed through Berlin visited the Mendelssohns.

When Mendelssohn was almost ten years old, he gave his first public piano concert. He also began composing at this age. By the time he was twelve he had composed sonatas, songs, a cantata, and sixty movements. Felix’s writing was very neat and he copied his music in volumes which by the end of his life extended to forty-four in number and are now preserved in the Berlin Library. On every Sunday afternoon at the Mendelssohn home there was a concert given by Felix and his sister Fanny.

Felix Mendelssohn’s grandmother secured a copy of J. S. Bach’s cantatas as a Christmas gift for him in 1823. Mendelssohn was a student of Professor Zelter who admired J. S. Bach. Felix became a great fan of Bach’s music. Yes, teachers can have a great influence on their pupils. Many years later Felix and Fanny formed a choir to perform Bach’s cantata. It was performed on March 11, 1829. This was the first time since Bach’s death that it had been performed. This was the beginning of the Bach revival that has continued to this day.

Mendelssohn found time not only to compose, but also for watercolor painting, swimming, dancing, billiards, chess, and riding. He spent half a year in Rome and was fortunate enough to witness the coronation of a pope. Mendelssohn spent six weeks in Naples, then visited Florence, Genoa, and Milan. From Geneva he walked to Interlachen, where he composed his only waltzes. Mendelssohn went to Paris, then to London where he gave four concerts. After the musical season was over he went to Scotland, stopping at the Hebrides where he was inspired to compose his overture called “Fingal’s Cave”.

After all these trips Mendelssohn had to stay in London for two months recuperating in his room with a lame knee. It prevented him from being present at his sister Fanny’s wedding on October 3, 1829.

Fanny Mendelssohn was also born in November like her brother. Her birthday is November 14, 1805. They were four years apart in age but extremely close friends. Felix valued her judgement and musical advice and used to say that she played better than he did. Fanny constantly promoted his work. Fanny died suddenly while rehearsing a performance of his “Walpurgisnacht” in the family auditorium on May 17, 1847, in Berlin, Germany. Felix fainted when he heard of her death and never regained his full energy. A theme of her music is engraved on the tombstone where she is buried. Fanny published four books of her melodies in her name. Felix published several under his name. She composed over 400 works including

a beautiful piano trio.

Felix spent the summer in Switzerland resting and painting in watercolors. Thirteen large pictures of Swiss scenery are in existence. When Mendelssohn returned home his friends were shocked to see how he had aged. He died Novemeber 4, 1847. All Europe mourned. Scholarships were established in his honor. Busts and statues of him were erected.

The following is a biographical poem that appears in *Celebrate the Piano Book Four*.

Mendelssohn, in Hamburg born,
Of a cultured Jewish race,
Never knew the want or scorn
Many artists have to face.

With his sister Fanny dear
Many cheerful hours he spent
With her voice, and music near,
Little Felix was content.

At an early age he wrote
Music of a beauty rare;
It was played in lands remote,
Till his fame went everywhere.

Great his wordless "Songs," yet sweet,
Little need of words have they,
Language could not thus repeat
All the noble things they say!

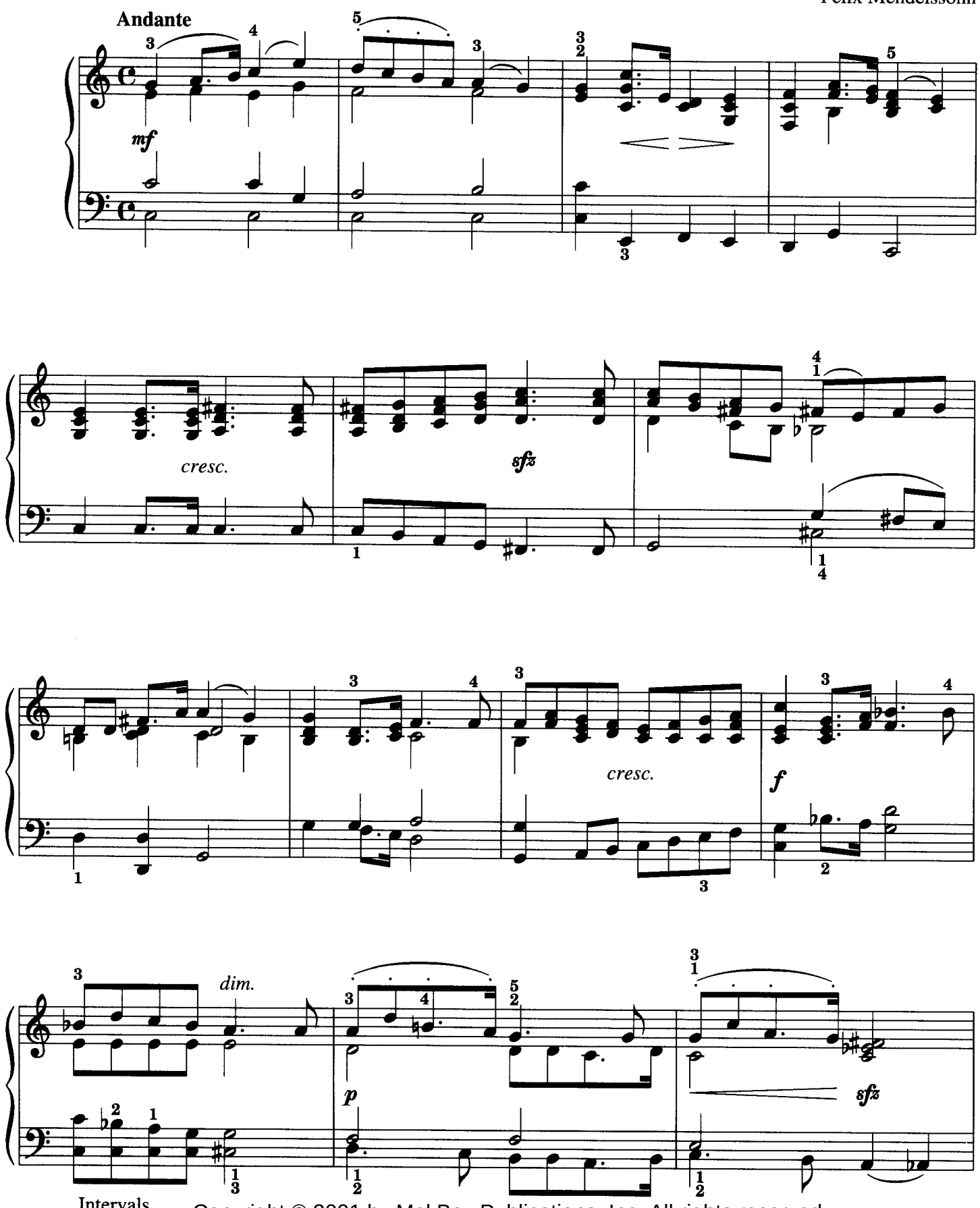
Not alone musician he;
Well he sketched, and much he knew;
Goethe gives his friend to be;
Other great men admired him too.

Fortunate in life and heart,
Full of merriment and fun,
Famous in his chosen art:
Him we call the happy one.

Etude

No. 48

Felix Mendelssohn



Intervals

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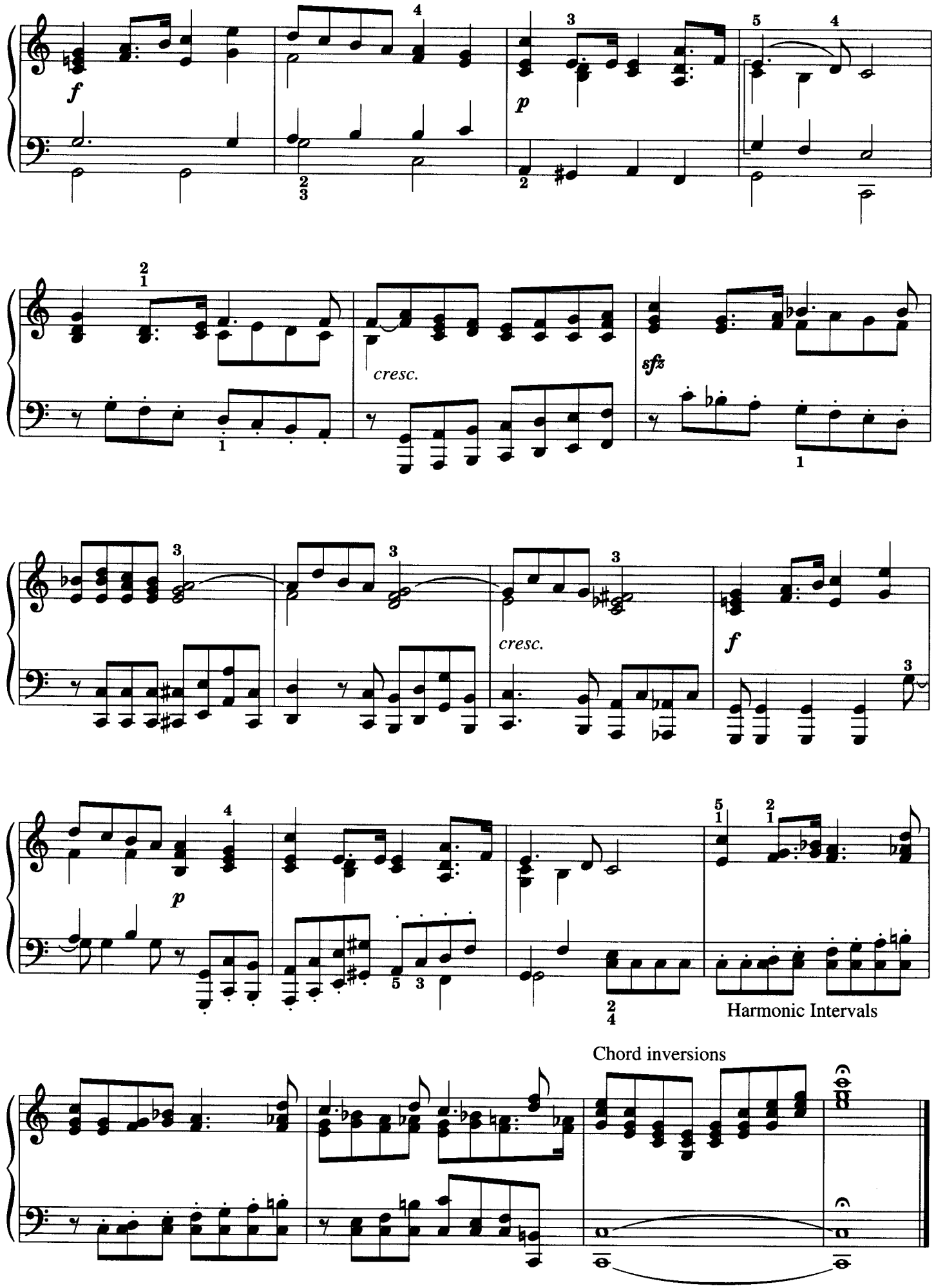
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Harmonic Intervals
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