



Goethe and Zelter: Musical Dialogues

Lorraine Byrne Bodley

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Goethe and Zelter spent a staggering 33 years corresponding or in the case of each artist, over two thirds of their lives. Zelter's position as director of the Sing-Akademie zu Berlin and Goethe's location in Weimar resulted in a wide-ranging correspondence. Goethe's letters offer a chronicle of his musical development, from the time of his journey to Italy to the final months of his life. Zelter's letters retrace his path as stonemason to Professor of Music in Berlin. The 891 letters that passed between these artists provide an important musical record of the music performed in public concerts in Berlin and in the private and semi-public soirées of the Weimar court. Their letters are those of men actively engaged in the musical developments of their time. The legacy contains a wide spectrum of letters, casual and thoughtfully composed, spontaneous and written for publication, rich with the details of Goethe's and Zelter's musical lives. Through Zelter, Goethe gained access to the professional music world he craved and became acquainted with the prodigious talent of Felix Mendelssohn. A single letter from Zelter might bear a letter from Felix Mendelssohn to another recipient of the same family, reflecting a certain community in the Mendelssohn household where letters were not considered private but shared with others in a circle of friends or family. Goethe recognized the value of such correspondence: he complains when his friend is slow to send letters in return for those written to him by the poet, a complaint common in this written culture where letters provided news, introductions, literary and musical works. This famous correspondence contains a medley of many issues in literature, art, and science; but the main focus of this translation is the music dialogues of these artists.

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