

Felix Mendelssohn—grandson of the great Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, the father of Liberal Judaism—is well known for his “songs without words” for piano. In his organ music, “hymns without words” take their place alongside the composer’s handsome counterpoint, quite consciously emulating J.S. Bach’s.

Bach’s setting of “Ah, Stay with Us, Lord Jesus Christ” was originally part of a cantata for the Second Day of Easter, first performed on 2 April 1725, with the virtuoso solo part played by a *violoncello piccolo*. The hymn refers to the same event from the Gospel of Luke as does Albert de Klerk’s symphonic poem *Mane nobiscum*: usually referred to as “The Pilgrims to Emmaus,” the story should really be called “The First Supper.” We hear the two “pilgrims” walk their mournful journey, then the conversation between the Stranger (a solo for the Flute stop) and the disciples, a lively duet. As they are about to share supper, the Lord’s Prayer—cited as Gregorian chant—is interrupted at the words “panem nostrum” (“our daily bread”). Stammering those words over and again, the disciples recognize the risen Christ—as He vanishes from their sight. The work ends in exaltation (“Were not our hearts burning in us?”). De Klerk, especially famous for his improvisations, was for many years organist of the exquisite Adema organ of Haarlem’s classy St. Joseph’s Church.

Paul Hindemith’s third organ sonata was written to welcome the composer’s wife Gertrud to America. Mrs. Hindemith, part Jewish, finally joined her husband in New York in September 1940 after a long and arduous journey. The last movement of the sonata cites an old German folksong:

I bid her then goodnight, my girl,
My one and only true love.
She spoke to me with kindly words:
“My love, we must be parting—
But, God knows when,
We’ll meet again
In joy forever lasting.”

—Jan-Piet Knijff