

Organist Gail claims Mendelssohn never rejected Jewish heritage

BY ROBERT CLAYTON

LEGENDARY composer Felix Mendelssohn never rejected his Jewish heritage despite converting to Christianity.

So says organist Gail Archer, who is celebrating Mendelssohn's bicentennial anniversary with a five-concert, five-month long series of performances in New York exploring his primary organ works.

She said: "Part of the Jewish heritage is a respect of learning for learning's sake. Mendelssohn was so well educated that he was able to accept Protestantism without rejecting his Jewish heritage.

"His grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, was a leading figure in the Jewish enlightenment and his family was wrestling with various religious issues in their lifetime."

She continued: "He was fearless in promoting Israel and was very interested in its historical path. He always took a rigorous intellectual



GAIL ARCHER: Anniversary concerts

approach to things and was a marvellous leader."

New Jersey-born Gail, a Methodist who became Roman Catholic, will journey through some of Manhattan's prominent religious institutions, including the Central Synagogue, during her

performances.

"Over the last 50 years, a new appreciation of Mendelssohn's work has developed," she added. "I'm thrilled to be casting a spotlight not only on his music, but also the century-long vilification of his music and his tragically short life."

Closer to home, the 200th anniversary of Mendelssohn's birth is being marked at the Cheltenham Festival.

His contribution to the classical music world will be commemorated from July 3-18 not only through a celebration of his own music but with an investigation of Jewish music across the centuries.

Key performances by Mendelssohn at Cheltenham include a range of his chamber works, from the *Songs without Words* for solo piano to the string *Octet*; *Hear My Prayer*, featuring the soprano solo *O for the wings of a Dove*; and orchestral favourites such as the *Violin Concerto* and the *Hebrides* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* overtures.

Artists will feature cellist Steven Isserlis, pianist Angela Hewitt, the Nash Ensemble, soprano Elizabeth Watts, the Choir of Trinity College Cambridge and conductor Edward Gardner with the Hallé Orchestra.

Cheltenham's wider investigation of music by composers of Jewish heritage across the centuries will include Sephardic chant, performed by Jewish (early) music specialists Joglaresa; 16th century music for viol consort by members of the Lupo and Bassano families, Jewish émigrés from Venice brought to England in 1540 by Henry VIII; Swiss klezmer quintet Kol Simcha; a night of classic Hollywood film scores, featuring music by Korngold, Herrmann, Steiner, Waxman, Rosza, Raksin, Newman and Kaper; new works by Alexander Goehr and Michael Zev Gordon; and key works by Mahler, Schoenberg, Korngold, Copland, Bernstein, Finzi, Steve Reich and Philip Glass.

Details: www.cheltenhamfestivals.com or 01242 227979.