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Mendelssohn Viola Quintet in B-flat, opus 87

The B-flat Viola Quintet of Felix Mendelssohn would have to count as one of the composer's "mature" works, since he wrote it in 1845, only two years before his death; and yet he was only thirty-six at the time. It is the second of his two viola quintets, the first, in A major, having been one of his prodigious teenage masterpieces. The viola quintet as a genre was first made great by Mozart, who composed six; after him, however, there were very few contributors across the years, with one quintet from Beethoven, two from Mendelssohn, two from Brahms, one from Dvorak and one from Bruckner, and effectively none from the major composers of the 20th century. This is surprising in view of the rich symmetry and combinatorial potential of the scoring.

Mendelssohn's B-flat Quintet has reminded many of his famous Octet, which he wrote twenty years earlier at the age of 16. The opening of each work is exuberant, brilliant, even heroic, and displays the first violin in a truly soloistic capacity, with the other parts supporting in an effervescent, fevered accompaniment. In the quintet, this mood is followed by a turbulent triplet passage, and finally a songful second theme that is introduced by the first viola. Despite some shadowy low points, the extroverted character of the opening unquestionably dominates this movement; it is as if the quintet aspires at times to become an entire string orchestra.

The second movement is an Intermezzo, substituting here for the more common quicksilver Mendelssohn Scherzo. Grave rather than fleeting, the movement is a graceful, antique dance in 6/8 time. Although it is in the dark key of g minor, there is a kind of lift in the music that suggests that behind the stern mask there might be a smiling face, or at least a twinkle in the eye; but the dancer is not giving anything away.

The third movement, on the other hand, is unambivalently grief-stricken. The hushed opening, with its dotted rhythms, evokes a funeral march. Perhaps the movement is a distant cousin of the well-known slow movement from Schumann's piano quintet, but in Mendelssohn's work the rhythmic unity among the five instruments confers an even more somber hue on the proceedings. After a more anguished transitional passage, a consoling, intimate second theme appears in a major key; later in the movement, the forces of major and minor struggle for supremacy, culminating in an astonishing climax that has an almost religious fervor.

The finale is active, genial, festive, a more easy-going companion to the first movement. In this final movement, the emphasis is on contrapuntal movement, the agile passing-around of ideas from voice to voice. Again the String Octet comes to mind, with its own energetic, contrapuntal finale; even in little details the two movements recall one another, such as when the first viola introduces a new idea in mid-movement that becomes an important force. Despite a surprise pause near the movement's end, with a teasing interjection, the trumpet-like idea that opened the movement gets the final word.

Note by Misha Amory