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Mendelssohn Quartet opus 12

Felix Mendelssohn wrote his earliest chamber music as a teenager -- three piano quartets, the string octet, the first viola quintet and his first two string quartets -- and it is unquestionably the greatest teenaged chamber music ever written. Not only was this boy a creative prodigy of the highest order, but he was born into a wealthy and cultured Berlin family, and from an early age was surrounded by some of the leading literary and artistic lights of his time, so that the seeds of his talent found fertile ground in which to develop.

His Quartet in E-flat, opus 12, is his first published quartet, and is extraordinary for its dramatic scope. This is the work of a composer with staged, even operatic spectacle on his mind, rather than instrumental concert music. It is customary to view Mendelssohn as the "classicist" of his generation, the one who observed the bounded forms and structures and wrote exquisite, inspired music within those bounds. However, in this quartet (and its companion quartet, opus 13), there is a sense of pushing the envelope in regard to form and expression. One hears this most obviously in the frequent bursts of recitative in the first violin part -- in the first, third and fourth movements -- where it steps outside the normal, steady pulse of the proceedings and makes a more personal, solitary utterance. Dramatic in a different way, but just as affecting, is the sighing gesture that opens the piece, a clear paraphrase of the opening to Beethoven's "Harp" Quartet. Beethoven had died only a year or two before, and one can hear in Mendelssohn's music a valediction, a farewell, to the older composer. Further echoes of Beethoven's quartet can be heard throughout this first movement, but it does not share the strong, brilliant sensibility of the "Harp"; in Mendelssohn's music, a gentle yet ardent muse is at work, sometimes fiery but never muscular.

Later in the first movement, a brooding, dark melody appears in the second violin. Mendelssohn expressly delays the introduction of this idea until the development section, a later-than-customary point to introduce new material, subverting again our expectations of how a concert piece should progress: the opera is before us once more, and an ominous character has appeared out of the blue onstage. This character will continue to stalk the music, appearing near the end of the first movement and again in the finale, a shadow hovering at the edge of consciousness.

Possibly the most famous work in the young composer's output is his *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream*, an enraptured response to the Shakespeare comedy which Mendelssohn had read in Schlegel's translation. The second movement of this quartet could well have been written under the spell of the same play: hushed throughout, it has a

tiptoeing, charmed quality replete with short quick bowstrokes and plucked strings. The elfin, poised feeling of the minor-key main section contrasts with the quicksilver flutter of the major-key Trio section, the prancing fairies versus the winged ones.

With the third movement we are back in the operatic realm, where the first violin sings an intimate and fervent aria. Despite its strict formal underpinnings, this movement unfolds almost as a stream of consciousness; and despite its brevity, it covers an enormous emotional range. There is the hushed but deeply felt opening; the second phrase, more florid and leading to a state of much greater agitation; a brief recitative that brings us momentarily back to the state of the opening; and then the same cycle, played out on a larger, more intense scale. After the second, more intense recitative, there is a tender, brief coda and a momentary, cadential calm. Barely have we exhaled when the calm is shattered by the two opening chords of the Finale.

This final movement is perhaps the most arresting example of how Mendelssohn departs from the received formats for an instrumental chamber work. First of all, it opens not in the home key of E flat major, which would be customary procedure, but rather in c minor. This lends an enormous dramatic charge to the music, and is a significant innovation; although Beethoven (*Eroica* Symphony, quartets opp. 127 and 130) and Schubert (Cello Quintet, Piano Sonata in B flat) had tried it on as a brief introductory gesture, Mendelssohn in this quartet chooses to extend the foreign key center through almost the entire movement, before relenting and returning to E flat at last in the coda. The mood of the movement, as if in reaction, is turbulent, unsettled, even anguished at times. About midway through the movement, old melodies from the first movement start to be heard, and in the coda, they take over completely, so that we seem to have returned, nostalgically, to that earlier, gentler world. In doing this, Mendelssohn is treating us to an early example of a cyclical form, an ultra-Romantic conceit that anticipates Wagner and his imitators, but which here evokes the simple, beautiful feeling of being welcomed back into a loving childhood home.

Note by Misha Amory