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Mendelssohn Quartet opus 13

Anyone who wishes to make the case that Felix Mendelssohn is Western music's "Greatest Teenaged Genius" has a substantial body of compositions to draw on as evidence. Probably the most celebrated of these are the *Octet* and the *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream*, written at 16 years and 17 years old, respectively. If one were to choose one more "greatest" work from Mendelssohn's teenaged years, it would almost certainly be the opus 13 String Quartet, the astonishing product of an 18-year-old.

This quartet is an unquestioned masterpiece in its own right. It has an immense narrative and dramatic arc, a wide spectrum of compelling characters and moods and impeccable compositional craftsmanship.

However, the work has importance in a more special sense, because it depicts the composer in a parley with Beethoven, a composer who cast his shadow over generations of composers who followed him.

Beethoven died in March 1827, and Mendelssohn wrote opus 13 just a few months later. His quartet is virtually a homage to the older composer's quartet writing, particularly his opus 95 and opus 132 quartets. The first movement patterns itself after opus 132's first movement: an Allegro that explodes out of the slow opening in a flurry of 16th notes, a main melody that is airborne, seeming to pose restless questions that have no answers, an overall trajectory that alternates between turbulence and grace without ever finding true repose. Like opus 132, Mendelssohn's work is full of operatic fancy, most obviously at the opening of the finale, where he imitates opus 132's passionate first-violin recitative over shuddering tremolandi. And at the center of Mendelssohn's lovely slow movement, just as in the slow movement of Beethoven's opus 95 quartet, there is a plaintive idea that starts in the viola and is taken up by each of the other voices in turn, a melancholy fugue that gradually increases in complexity and intensity.

The Beethoven-Mendelssohn bond that exists in this quartet is so well known that it is easy for us to miss the extraordinary part of it, which is that in 1827 most of the world was flummoxed by Beethoven's late style,

either professing bewilderment or else dismissing the composer as having gone off the rails. But the 18-year-old kid from Berlin not only recognized the importance of this music, he powerfully subsumed it and reflected it back in his own language. It is striking that these “Beethoven moments”, when we hear them in Mendelssohn’s piece, sound almost like quotations, and yet they are pure Mendelssohn and belong completely to the younger composer’s original creative vision.

Despite the Beethovenian preoccupation, the quartet can also be seen as part of the continuum of Mendelssohn’s own composerly evolution, deeply connected to his other youthful efforts. A superficial example of this is the third movement, a quaint and playful scherzo. The outer sections, which feature a poised, charming melody over a strummed accompaniment, recall powerfully the world of the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* Overture from one year earlier — elfin, peculiar, not quite of this world. The quicksilver inner section takes to the air with fluttering wings; whoever we thought we saw has disappeared, leaving a trace of laughter behind.

But the more interesting connection involves a song that Mendelssohn wrote just short time before, named “Frage” (Question). This song is directly quoted in the quartet, first in the opening section of the first movement and again at the very end of the piece. The “question” in the song is as follows:

*Is it true?
Is it true that over there in the leafy walkway,
you wait for me constantly by the vine-covered wall?
And that you ask for news of me from the moonlight and the little stars?*

When this music is quoted at the opening, we get only the three syllables of the question — “is it true?” The adolescent hope and uncertainty of this question provide the dramatic tension that drives the entire work, and only at the very end do we hear the music that accompanies the answer in the song: “What I feel, only she grasps — she who feels with me and stays ever faithful to me.” From this perspective the piece becomes a musical evocation of a young person in turmoil, grappling with the anxieties of his time of life and seeking to resolve them. Strikingly, when the answer arrives at the piece’s conclusion, the tempo loosens forward into a gently flowing tempo, and the completeness of the quoted answer,

in contrast with the inarticulate, fragmented question, has a deeply reassuring effect. Again returning to Beethoven's opus 132, it is tempting to compare the psychological import of the Heilige Dankgesang (the "holy song of thanks" that is Beethoven's slow movement) with the end of Mendelssohn's quartet. Both are evocations of a state of mind after a crisis has passed. Beethoven, the aging agnostic, is expressing thanks to a deity that he cannot even name with any certainty; he does this with music that spirals ever outwards, towards ever greater richness and complexity, filled with awe. The music does not reach a firm conclusion, of necessity, as it is engaging with something infinite.

Mendelssohn, still half a child, is describing the resolution of a crisis of youthful love, and the beauty of his music rests on feelings of utter security: being sure of his beloved, coming home after a long and turbulent journey of the soul, being enfolded, consoled. It is a common enough mindset for someone so young; the ability to express it so transcendently is anything but.

Note by Misha Amory