WIGMORE HALL

Friday 12 July 2024
7.30pm

Mendelssohn Quartets

Elias String Quartet
Sara Bitlloch violin
Donald Grant violin
Simone van der Giessen viola
Marie Bitlloch cello

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Song without Words in D Op. 102 No. 2 (1845)
arranged by Colin Matthews

Song without Words in A minor Op. 85 No. 2 (1834)
arranged by Colin Matthews

Song without Words in C Op. 102 No. 3 (1845)
arranged by Colin Matthews

String Quartet No. 5 in E flat Op. 44 No. 3 (1838)
I. Allegro vivace • II. Scherzo. Assai leggiero vivace • III. Adagio non troppo • IV. Molto allegro con fuoco

Interval

String Quartet No. 2 in A minor Op. 13 (1827)
I. Adagio - Allegro vivace • II. Adagio non lento • III. Intermezzo. Allegretto con moto - Allegro di molto • IV. Presto - Adagio non lento

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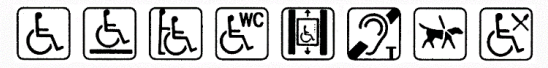

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Mendelssohn played and wrote for string instruments from his earliest youth and never lost his feeling for them, or missed a chance to join a quartet party. Friends attested that he was equally adept on either violin or viola. 'Mendelssohn played because it was his nature', remembered his great friend Ferdinand Hiller. 'Music streamed from him with all the fullness of his inborn genius'.

There's something of that natural instinct for the string quartet medium – the camaraderie of music making with friends, the limitless colours of a string ensemble and the sheer physical pleasure of feeling the notes fall under your hand – in the Quartet No. 5, completed on 6 February 1838 in Leipzig. Mendelssohn had conceived a set of three quartets while on his honeymoon in the Black Forest the previous June, and this was the second to be completed (though it was placed third in the eventual publication). He dedicated the set to Crown Prince Oscar of Sweden – himself a gifted composer, who had met the Mendelssohns on their honeymoon travels. It was a gesture born of genuine affection.

You can tell: there's nothing dutiful about this music, and the opening four-note swirl is exactly the sort of figure that comes almost effortlessly to a skilled string player. But it's also the kind of motif that's charged with energy – an energy that powers a sweeping sonata-form movement, by turns ebullient, dazzling and gloriously songful. The twilit, quicksilver *Scherzo* is a storm in a perfectly crafted nutshell; it vanishes in a puff of fairy-dust.

Everyone gets to sing in the warm-hearted *Adagio non troppo*; Mendelssohn knew and loved Haydn's noble, hymn-like quartet slow movements, though until the peaceful final resolution there's an undercurrent of tension – even restlessness – that's wholly typical of an artist whose mind never seemed to stop creating. Similarly, for all the ebullient good humour and high-speed wit of the finale, Mendelssohn marks it *con fuoco* ('with fire'). There's a Romantic passion beneath all this playfulness and verve.

'What the music I love expresses to me is not a thought that is too indefinite to put into words, but on the contrary, too definite', wrote Mendelssohn to a friend in October 1842. Many musicians feel the same way; and all music lovers would surely agree that music doesn't require words in order to say something profound. In a household as cultured as the Mendelssohns', it's no surprise that Felix and his older sister Fanny, should have played games with that idea – composing short piano pieces, and challenging each other to invent words for them.

It might have been as just such a game that in November 1828, for Fanny's birthday, Felix wrote her a short piano piece. 'Felix has given me a "song without words" for my album (he has lately written several beautiful ones)', she wrote to their friend Karl Klingemann – the first time the term appears, but not the last. Between 1828 and 1845, Felix would write some eight books of *Lieder ohne Worte* for solo piano – 48 pieces in total, each charged with melody and imagination. Performers and listeners were positively encouraged to invent their own stories, images and poetic meanings.

Feel free to do the same with this sequence of three *Songs without Words*, arranged for the Elias String Quartet in 2016 by the composer Colin Matthews. All three are drawn from pieces that Mendelssohn left unpublished, and which subsequently appeared as his Op. 85 and Op. 102. The first, in a questioning D major, suggests a duet or even a partsong with its hymn-like atmosphere and intertwining lines. The second (from Op. 85) is altogether more restless. Op. 102 No. 3 concludes the selection in the spirit of a feather-light scherzo; a true *jeu d'esprit*. The publisher dubbed it 'Tarantelle'.

Don't be misled by opus numbers: completed in Berlin in October 1827, Mendelssohn's A major quartet Op. 13 actually pre-dates his Quartet No. 1, Op. 12, by nearly two years. It's a big, imaginative experiment in the Beethoven tradition; a bold statement from any composer, let alone an 18-year old boy. But this brilliant teenager is already his own man. Mendelssohn opens with an *Adagio* introduction – a warmly harmonised quotation from his own song 'Frage' ('Question'), composed earlier that year: '*Is it true? Is it true that over there on the leafy path, you always wait for me by the vine-covered wall? And that with the moonlight and the little stars, you inquire about me also?*'

Make no mistake, we're in a Romantic universe now, and Mendelssohn is clearly in love with shape of his melody (listen in particular to the rhythm of its final phrases). With a sudden, chilly swirl of semiquavers the key switches to the minor, and the *Allegro vivace* speeds off with a theme whose rhythm and shape derive from that same tune – though utterly transformed.

The connections continue in the *Adagio non lento*, where the outer sections of the movement frame a melancholy central episode which, as it builds in speed and intensity, refers back to the *Allegro*. The *Intermezzo* is a lilting foretaste of Brahms and Schumann, with a central interlude of purest gossamer. And with a sudden *tremolando* and an impassioned recitative for the first violin, Mendelssohn launches his finale in high Romantic style. He quotes Beethoven, and launches a series of stormy ideas, all (in turn) derived from the 'Frage' introduction. So when he ends the quartet with a quiet A major restatement of that entire introduction, the circle is closed.

Some years later, Mendelssohn attended a performance of the Quartet in Paris. While the finale was playing, one audience member – unaware that he was sitting next to the composer – turned to him during the finale and whispered, 'That theme's in one of his symphonies, too!' 'Whose?' 'Why – Beethoven, of course – the composer of this quartet!'. 'This', mused Mendelssohn, 'was bittersweet'.