

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 18 June 2024
7.30pm

Elias String Quartet

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

Heath Quartet

Sara Wolstenholme violin
Juliette Roos violin
Gary Pomeroy viola
Christopher Murray cello

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 4 in E minor Op. 44 No. 2 (1837)
*I. Allegro assai appassionato • II. Scherzo.
Allegro di molto • III. Andante • IV. Presto agitato*

String Quintet No. 1 in A Op. 18 (1826, rev. 1832)
*I. Allegro con moto • II. Intermezzo. Andante
sostenuto • III. Scherzo. Allegro di molto •
IV. Allegro vivace*

Interval

Octet in E flat Op. 20 (1825)
*I. Allegro moderato ma con fuoco • II. Andante •
III. Scherzo. Allegro leggierissimo • IV. Presto*



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Freiburg im Breisgau lies between the Rhine and the Black Forest, its medieval streets threaded by trickling streams and its horizons framed by wooded hills. It was the destination of Felix and Cécile Mendelssohn's honeymoon: they had married in Frankfurt on 28 March 1837, and promptly set out for the Rhineland in a new blue and brown barouche. Freiburg delighted Felix: 'We saunter through the afternoon in the warm sunshine and talk of the past and future; I can say with thankfulness that I am a happy man', he wrote to his sister Fanny on 10 April. But Mendelssohn being Mendelssohn, he added, 'I intend to work very hard...I have almost finished a string quartet. I am in the right mood for working...'

The honeymoon quartet would be published the following year as the second of Mendelssohn's three string quartets Op. 44 (although it was actually the first to be composed). By then, it had already been premièred in Leipzig by a group led by the violinist Ferdinand David – later to become the dedicatee of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, with which it shares the key of E minor. That might seem a melancholy vein of inspiration to tap during a honeymoon in such idyllic surroundings, but the lyricism, brilliance and headlong verve of Mendelssohn's first movement has the freshness and ardour of a mountain torrent. David's virtuosity had already left its impression.

The second movement, a dancing, sparkling Scherzo written on the point of a needle, is as energetic as the third is lyrical: a true song without words, expressing the warmest of emotions in the most eloquent of styles before sinking to a tender close. And then we're off again, in a headlong finale that plays itself out with the directness and vigour of a spring rainstorm. Mendelssohn moves with unflinching purpose and absolute assurance: a composer in a hurry. But then (as a great romantic poet once put it) when you realise you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible.

Mendelssohn completed his String Quintet Op. 18 in Berlin in late May 1826: the first chamber work that he completed after the Octet itself. His teenage inspiration was burning high, and if the Scherzo of this Quintet with two violas sounds remarkably like the 'fairy music' from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture, that's because he was working on the two pieces at exactly the same time. He was pleased with the result. 'The octet and quintet make a very good appearance among my works, better, in fact than many pieces that already figure there', he wrote to Fanny from Paris, in January 1832. By then he was finalising plans to publish the Quintet. It was to carry a dedication to Eduard Rietz, his violin teacher, and the dedicatee of the Octet. But first, it was to be performed by the string quartet of Pierre Baillot, leader of the Paris opera orchestra. Mendelssohn planned to compose a 'grand adagio' for the Quintet to showcase Baillot's glorious tone – 'the

performers are calling loudly for one, and they are right', he reported. Then, on 3 February 1832 – Mendelssohn's 23rd birthday – came devastating news from Berlin: Rietz had died at the age of 30. Distraught, Mendelssohn withdrew the Quintet's minuet, and replaced it permanently with Baillot's 'adagio' – now designated an *Intermezzo* and described by Mendelssohn as a *Nachruf* ('obituary') for Rietz.

It's a broad and noble movement that gives the leader every chance to sing – surely the best possible tribute to a chamber-music violinist and a friend. And it gives a centre of gravity to a quintet that's otherwise very much the work of a teenage genius on a roll. The first *Allegro* is sweetly lyrical where the Octet had been expansive, and the graceful turns of phrase give way to sparky, minor-key inventions in the second group. The glittering high spirits of the finale, meanwhile, channel Beethoven with an exuberance and wit that Haydn would surely have relished. No string player could ask for more.

'Mendelssohn never touched a string instrument the whole year round', remembered his friend Ferdinand Hiller. 'But if he wanted to, he could do it – as he could most other things'. The music of Mendelssohn's childhood was dominated by string chamber music, and among the Mendelssohn children, Fanny was the pianist, Felix the violinist and younger brother Paul was the cellist. Paul went on to pursue a career in finance, but together they grew up immersed in the classical chamber repertoire.

Even so, Felix's String Octet Op. 20 – written in the autumn of 1825 for the 23rd birthday (17 October) of Eduard Rietz – is little short of a miracle. The effortless melodic invention, the structural mastery and, above all, Mendelssohn's magical and wholly original sense of instrumental texture – all these elements are present, fully formed, in this work by a 16-year-old boy. Donald Tovey felt that 'eight string players might easily practice it for a lifetime without coming to an end of their delight in producing its marvels of tone-colour'.

The opening theme swings upwards through nearly three octaves in as many bars before tumbling impetuously back down again – youthful energy matched by playful self-confidence. The graceful Italianate *Andante* is a pool of shade amidst this brilliant light; Felix told Fanny, however, that the Scherzo was inspired by lines from Goethe's *Faust*: 'Trails of cloud and mist brighten from above/breeze in the foliage and wind in the reeds/and everything is scattered'. The second cello lights the touchpaper for the finale and Mendelssohn throws every technical trick at this breathtaking *moto perpetuo*. The energy is unflinching as the Octet speeds to its close.

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