

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 30 May 2024
7.30pm

Elias String Quartet

Sara Bitlloch violin
Donald Grant violin
Simone van der Giessen viola
Marie Bitlloch cell
Gary Pomeroy viola

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 3 in D Op. 44 No. 1 (1838)

*I. Molto allegro vivace • II. Menuetto.
Un poco allegretto • III. Andante espressivo ma con
moto • IV. Presto con brio*

String Quartet No. 1 in E flat Op. 12 (1829)

*I. Adagio non troppo - Allegro non tardante •
II. Canzonetta. Allegretto • III. Andante espressivo •
IV. Molto allegro vivace*

Interval

String Quintet No. 2 in B flat Op. 87 (1845)

*I. Allegro vivace • II. Andante scherzando •
III. Adagio e lento • IV. Allegro molto vivace*

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'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'. To hear just how much joy Mendelssohn found in violin playing, listen to the opening of his **String Quartet Op. 44 No. 1**. Few Classical quartets begin with such torrential bravura. Or listen to the quartet's finale: the brilliant, whirling tarantella that Mendelssohn felt he hadn't quite achieved in his 'Italian' Symphony four years earlier, but which he brings off here without breaking a drop of perspiration. From his earliest youth, Mendelssohn had understood the string quartet from the inside.

That goes for the moments of quiet intimacy too – like the sweet, shapely *Menuetto* that takes the place of Mendelssohn's more usual quicksilver scherzo. The whispered minor-key violin solo that uncoils over a dark sustained chord in the central interlude is a quartet-effect as old as Haydn. The *Andante espressivo* third movement, meanwhile, doubles as a delicate, skittish intermezzo; together, these two inner movements elegantly counterbalance the headlong energy of the outer pair.

It's beautifully done, and Mendelssohn knew it. 'I have just finished my third Quartet, in D major, and like it much. I hope it may please you as well,' he wrote to the violinist Ferdinand David, on 30 July 1838. 'I rather think it will, since it is more spirited and seems to me likely to be more grateful to the players than the others'. He dedicated the Op. 44 quartets to Crown Prince Oscar of Sweden – a skilled composer whom Mendelssohn had met in Frankfurt while on his honeymoon in June the previous year. But no matter how public its ambition, and how brilliant its execution, Mendelssohn's D major Quartet remains (as chamber music should) the 'music of friends'.

The assurance and polish of Mendelssohn's first published string quartet should come as no surprise. The year was 1829: behind him lay at least two other string quartets, twelve exuberant youthful string 'symphonies' and – supremely – the magnificent String Octet of 1825. Compared to Beethoven's Op. 18, Mendelssohn's **String Quartet No. 1 Op. 12** is a work of superb clarity and assurance; written by a highly experienced master of chamber music – even if that master was only 21 years old.

He seems to have composed it almost on the wing. 'My quartet is now in the middle of the last movement, and I think it will be completed in a few days,' wrote Felix to his sister Fanny on 10 September 1829 from his lodgings in Great Portland Street, London – where he had returned, after his tour to Scotland and Wales, just four days previously. His confidence was well-placed; the finished score is dated 14 September 1829. It also carries another, more cryptic inscription: the initials 'B.P.' Betty Pistor was a member of the Berlin *Singakademie*; whether Felix's love for her was requited is unclear, and he never told her

of the quartet's dedication – which he changed years later.

But he opened the lyrical first-movement *Allegro non tardante* ('without delay' – this really is a young composer in a hurry) with the interval B flat – E flat: a musical cipher for Betty's name. And after the summer storm of the finale plays itself out, the same rising pair of notes brings the whole work to a peaceful close. The young Felix is too civilised to wear his references blatantly, and if the opening *Adagio* is a direct reference to Beethoven's 'Harp' Quartet, the delicately dancing *Canzonetta* is an exquisitely-gauged exercise in his own brand of subtly-shaded musical fantasy just as the brief *Andante* has a singing sweetness that's entirely Mendelssohn's own. The finale's plunge into C minor seems merely to reveal something that has always been going on in the background: a perfectly-gauged discharge of emotional tension by a composer who, at 21, already knows precisely where he's going, and the swiftest and most poetic way to get there.

Mendelssohn's **Second String Quintet Op. 87**, completed on 8 July 1845 at the spa of Soden near Frankfurt, and published after its composer's death, has not always received the love that it deserves. More than one commentator has remarked that it seems at times like a re-tread of the String Octet of 1825 – pointing to the virtuosic, high-energy opening *Allegro vivace*, with its brilliant opening and its graceful, gliding second subject. There might be something in that, though Mendelssohn could scarcely have chosen a better model, and it certainly makes for a thrilling opening movement. But string writing was at the forefront of his imagination in 1845; he had completed his E minor Violin Concerto only months earlier. Shortly before that had come the comparably-inspired *Midsummer Night's Dream* incidental music, and the quintet's scherzo benefits from that experience too: a minuet-like *Andante* which gradually expands into a measured and magical piece of fairy-music, worked out with clockwork precision.

And now we hear something very different. The first bars of the D minor *Adagio* immediately establish an atmosphere of deep seriousness, not to say sorrow. In the movement that unfolds from them Mendelssohn's command of pace and instrumental technique combines – through angry *tremolandi*, tragic chorales, obsessive rhythms and a heartfelt cello solo – to express some of the most impassioned emotion in all his music. After that experience, the speeding, sparkling finale, with its sweet second subject, can feel like both a release and a benediction. Mendelssohn's Second String Quintet is the work of a mature man and artist, and in the 19th Century those qualities made it one of the most popular of all his chamber works. It was played 40 times in as many seasons of the Monday Popular Concert series at St James's Hall, London.

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