

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 7 April 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)

Andante sostenuto and Variations Op. 81 No. 1 (1847)

Scherzo Op. 81 No. 2 (1847)

Capriccio Op. 81 No. 3 (1843)

Fugue Op. 81 No. 4 (1827)

Fanny Mendelssohn (1805-1847)

String Quartet in E flat (1834)

*I. Adagio ma non troppo • II. Allegretto •
III. Romanze • IV. Allegro molto vivace*

Interval

Felix Mendelssohn

String Quartet No. 6 in F minor Op. 80 (1847)

*I. Allegro vivace assai • II. Allegro assai •
III. Adagio • IV. Finale. Allegro molto*

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Felix Mendelssohn was a virtuoso instrumentalist. 'Mendelssohn's playing was to him what flying is to a bird', recalled his friend Ferdinand Hiller. 'No-one wonders why a lark flies. In the same way, Mendelssohn played because it was his nature'. Hiller was speaking primarily of Mendelssohn's skill as a pianist, but Felix was also an extremely fine violinist, and played string chamber music throughout his life (switching to viola when necessary). As a composer, he conceived his musical ideas as things to be performed and heard. It was entirely natural to him – when working through a particular compositional problem, or testing his ideas – that he should do so through the discipline and clarity of the string quartet.

Certainly the short works that Mendelssohn's publisher Breitkopf & Härtel issued in 1850, three years after his death, as *4 Pieces* Op. 81, were never meant to be heard as a group. But they were simply too imaginative, too poetic and too beautifully finished to be left unheard. Two, perhaps, truly belong together: the opening *Andante* (a theme and variations) and the brilliant *Scherzo* date from the last year of the composer's life and might have been intended as part of an unfinished quartet. The *Capriccio*, written in 1843, has been heard as a preparatory exercise for the Violin Concerto of 1844 (they share the key of E minor). And the last is the first: Felix wrote the *Fugue* in December 1827 as a counterpoint exercise for his teacher Carl Friedrich Zelter. But already, in this superbly-assured little piece, we can hear how Bach quietly influenced Mendelssohn's own music: the twin worlds of the Baroque organist and the brilliant young Romantic flowing eloquently together.

The Mendelssohns' childhood home in Berlin resounded with chamber music. Fanny was the pianist, Felix the violinist and their younger brother Paul was a cellist. Paul went on to pursue a career in finance, but Felix and Fanny both went on to be published composers, with Felix initially publishing several of Fanny's songs under his own name (principally, it seems, as a gesture of kindness; it wasn't felt respectable that a woman of marriageable age should be published under her own name, although Fanny's husband Willhem Hensel – whom she married in 1829 – was supportive of her composing). But brother and sister grew up surrounded by each other's music, and shared the same influences to an extent that it's unsurprising that their compositions have a genuine family resemblance.

Fanny Mendelssohn composed her only string quartet between 26 August and 23 October 1834, initially as a rewrite of a piano sonata that she'd sketched in 1829. She'd been immersing herself in Beethoven, and some listeners have heard the sighing motif that opens the quartet as an echo both of Beethoven's Quartet Op. 74 and of Felix's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, itself a homage to Beethoven. Fanny's approach is entirely individual: a lyrical,

questioning first movement finds its release in a rhythmically-driven C minor scherzo, prefiguring the way the richly-harmonised, bittersweet *Romanze* yields to a brilliant, bustling finale, exuberantly written for all four instruments. It's wholly original, and Felix reacted with surprise when she showed him the score in January 1835: he worried that Fanny's freedom with classical form might lead the piece to sound 'undefined'. 'Though', he added, 'I do not know if I could have done any better'.

At the end of August 1847, the English writer Henry Chorley spent three days with Felix Mendelssohn at Interlaken in Switzerland. In between rainstorms they walked together, discussing art and politics. After a final day in the high Alps, admiring the waterfall of the Staubbach, they parted. 'My very last [memory] is the sight of him turning down the road to wend back to Interlaken alone', wrote Chorley: [...] I thought even then, as I followed his figure, looking none the younger for the loose dark coat and the wide-brimmed straw hat bound with black crape which he wore, that he was much too depressed and worn, and walked too heavily!

Eleven weeks later Mendelssohn was dead at the age of 38 – exhausted by two decades of continual creative activity, and heartbroken by the sudden death on 14 May that year of his beloved sister Fanny. The black crape on his hat was no coincidence. On hearing the news of Fanny's death he had fallen unconscious to the ground, and the summer in Interlaken was intended to help him convalesce. 'It has been very good for me to work', he told Chorley, 'and I wanted to make something sharp and close and strict'. Chorley recalled that he 'mentioned that stupendous *quartett* in F minor which we have since known as one of the most impassioned outpourings of sadness existing in instrumental music'.

Mendelssohn wrote his final string quartet at high speed, amid the rainstorms of Interlaken, and was said to have called it his 'requiem für Fanny'. His lifelong experience with string chamber music gave him a strong starting point: F minor is the key of Beethoven's ferocious Quartet Op. 95, as well as the tragic key of *Egmont*. But it's also possible to hear Alpine storms echoing the artist's emotions (Mendelssohn was a Romantic, after all) in the torrential first movement.

Restless cross-rhythms destabilise the second movement; the chromatic central section is sombre and spectral. And from its opening sigh onwards, the *Adagio* is explicitly a homage to Beethoven: an attempt, under deep emotion, to express something that may be inexpressible before the *Finale* resumes the deluge of grief. As the end approaches, the first violin scrambles defiantly heavenwards as the closing chords assert an uncompromising F minor. This is music written *in extremis*: no happy ending is possible, either in art or in life.

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