

Mendelssohn Quartet, opus 44 #3

Among the musical genius of his generation, Felix Mendelssohn is regarded as the traditionalist, a conservative who trod the paths of his predecessors. Compared to the work of Berlioz, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, and most dramatically Wagner, Mendelssohn's seems to have been touched only subtly by the Romantic movement. He is able to attain beauty and profundity with a completely original voice while dwelling happily within forms and boundaries favored by Haydn and Mozart half a century earlier, whereas his contemporaries sought new structures and mediums to house their ideas, in accord with the changing sensibility of the time: gigantic operatic trajectories, leitmotif, pianistic miniatures, rhapsodic forms, extra-musical programs. The Romanticism in Mendelssohn is to be found rather in his musical characters: he was a master of pathos, and his work is also full of heroic gesture. In this respect, he claims ties to Beethoven, rather than the earlier masters; indeed he shows Beethoven's affective influence more than any other composer of his generation.

The three opus 44 quartets date from 1838, when the composer was newly married; in fact, he was already at work on them during his honeymoon the year before. The third of these quartets recalls, in some ways, his celebrated and youthful Octet, sharing not only its key of E-flat major, but its overarching mood of triumph and exuberance. There are important differences too. The quartet is more considered, more "composerly" than the octet, and one senses Mendelssohn reveling in the challenge of writing big music for the smaller, four-voice force, marshalling the sonic and contrapuntal potential of that force imaginatively, and capitalizing on its greater intimacy in quiet moments.

The first movement is substantial, among the longest opening movements in his chamber music output. Its opening gesture, which is distinguished by four rapid sixteenth notes, dominates throughout: when these sixteenths are not part of this melody, they are nearly always present in contrapuntal interplay or as a background hum. Energetic and rarely pausing for breath, the movement as a whole is unabashedly joyful, a life-affirmation.

The second movement, a Scherzo, is a minor-key world inhabited by fleet and shadowy textures. Mendelssohn was celebrated for his scherzo writing, most notably his elfin Scherzo from his *Midsummer Night's Dream* music; but the remarkable thing is that no two of his Scherzos are alike. In this quartet, the scherzo is light on its feet but does not have the quicksilver quality found in the Octet, for example; it is a tightly reasoned work of counterpoint, conspiratorial rather than effortlessly airborne. The movement closes with a whispered unison passage, another signature gesture.

The slow third movement has the quality of an intimate love confession. It is set in the dark key of A-flat major, but the main idea has a strong minor coloring to it, which deepens the passionate sensibility of the opening. The movement's other distinguishing feature is the appearance of a flowing sixteenth-note idea rather early on, which persists throughout and blurs the straightforward A-B-A structure; as a result we feel less settled, less sure of our whereabouts as this flow carries us through many changing landscapes, sometimes hopeful, sometimes anguished, sometimes consoling.

The Finale is brilliant, percolating, and irrepressible. Here the mood reverts largely to that of the opening movement, if anything even more festive and fun-loving. In contrast with the slow movement, the Finale is crystal-clear structurally: it is a celebration of unambiguous form, of knowing where one stands at all times. Rapid and virtuosic gestures abound, punctuated only occasionally by calmer moments. Especially notable is the closing passage of the movement. Here, material that was used earlier to close a section simply and quietly becomes a victorious and affirmative song, decorated by bravura filigree in the first violin, spiralling upward to a fortissimo that concludes the work.

Note by Misha Amory