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Mendelssohn Quartet opus 44 #1

The 28-year-old Felix Mendelssohn composed his three Opus 44 quartets over the course of about a year, from 1837 to 1838. This was a period of success and happiness for the young composer; he had been appointed conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra two years earlier in 1835, had had a great success with his oratorio "St. Paul" in 1836 and had gotten married in 1837. He was also emerging as a respected authority on music of the past: he was responsible in great part for re-introducing the masterpieces of Bach and Händel to European audiences, and in 1839 helped Schumann bring Schubert's C major Symphony to light, eleven years after that composer's death. Equally, he intersected with the great musicians of his time -- Chopin, Berlioz, Schumann, the pianist Ignaz Moscheles and the violinist Joseph Joachim -- not to mention other luminaries such as Goethe and Hegel. With Mendelssohn we have a creative figure who was no secluded hermit; he was bent on forging the connections in the musical world of his time, be they from the music of the past, among his many contemporary fellow geniuses, or in the discovery of the next musical generation. Often one can hear this social quality in his music as well: a peculiar grace, light or joy that is calculated not to awe, but rather to welcome the listener, to extend an inspired hand in fellowship.

The D major quartet, opus 44 #1, is decidedly filled with light and joy. Although it was actually the last of the three opus 44 quartets to be composed, it seems that Mendelssohn was particularly proud of it, which may be the reason it was published as the first of the set. D major is a brilliant key for stringed instruments, and the composer plays to that quality. The first movement is a rather epic creation, built on a grand scale. Full of energy, it seems in its biggest moments to have trombones and timpani straining to make themselves heard through the slender medium of the quartet. Although it is technically composed in a sonata-allegro form, the experience of hearing it evokes not so much a strict form as an odyssey, a journey to many different lands. There are two reasons for this. First, there are many different thematic ideas that turn up one after the other, like so many islands in an archipelago: the exuberant opening melody, with a rocketing figure in the first violin; a sweet chromatic figure in a softer dynamic; a momentary tender aside in the viola; a hushed, choral utterance in a minor key; and a merry caper to the end of the exposition. Second, there is a musical "ship": an omnipresent rolling 8th-note texture that creates an inexorable motion, bearing us from one island to the next.

The second movement is a kind of homage to the minuet, insofar as it carries that title; but this music seems far removed from the dance floor. It is whispered, evanescent,

gliding; if dancers are suggested, their feet do not touch the ground. The contrasting Trio section in the middle is even more surreal: here we are in a minor key, and the fairies from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* start to take form in an eddy of rising 8th-notes. By and by the main section steals back in and rounds off the movement, with a coda that recalls a fairy shadow or two.

Next comes the extraordinary slow movement of the work. The first violin sings a melancholy "song without words", a simple melody whose plucked accompaniment in the lower strings transforms the singer into a solitary troubadour. But it is the rolling 16th-note figure in the second violin part that stamps the scene most memorably. Handed from instrument to instrument, this 16th-note texture persists all the way through the movement almost without interruption, the vehicle that carries the listener through periods of sunlight and shadow. Ultimately the first violin reaches an anguished peroration, bringing a sense of true grief well beyond the tender sorrow that came before; after which nothing remains but to bring the movement to a resigned close.

With the final movement we return to the celebratory atmosphere of the first movement. After a euphoric opening salvo, the music whirls away in a tarantella-like dance. An almost giddy joyfulness pervades this material; but it has a habit of suddenly getting stuck in a repeating rhythmic groove, quieting, and then recovering itself, spinning off in another harmonic direction. Contrasting with all this energy is another melody, more tender and personal but no less blissful, that intercedes from time to time to offer relief from the dance. A remarkable, Jovian coda rounds off the work, wherein the imagined brasses and drums of the first movement make their appearance one final time.

Note by Misha Amory