

Reprintable only with permission from the author.

Mendelssohn String Quartet in E minor, Op. 44 no. 2

The year 1838 found Felix Mendelssohn at the height of his powers, a 28-year-old newlywed with a burgeoning international reputation as a composer, conductor and man of letters. He was a veritable cultural intersection, acquainted since his youth with Goethe and Hegel, the friend of such musical coevals as Schumann, Berlioz and Chopin, and the tireless champion of Bach and Händel, whose music he re-introduced to nineteenth-century audiences in Europe. It is fair to label him the “conservative” among the great musical genius of his time; after the extraordinary creative accomplishments of his late teens, his mature works seem to retrench, to aim at a stricter observance of received Classical forms and proportions. But to categorize Mendelssohn as old-fashioned or unadventurous would be to ignore the freshness of his voice, his gift for pathos, and the thoroughly Romantic sensibility that suffused so much of his mature work.

The opus 44 string quartets are a case in point. In comparison with the early quartets, opus 12 and 13, they are formally more traditional, less experimental, tauter and more balanced — and yet they are original, expressive and full of delight. Opus 44 #2 in e minor is the slenderest quartet of the set, arguably more dramatic and less discursive than its neighbors. The first movement opens with a melody that might be a distant relative of the “Mannheim

rocket” (an ascending arpeggio championed by Classical composers for its excitement and brio, such as can be heard at the opening of the Finale of Mozart’s 40th Symphony). But if so, here the rocket is transformed, a

troubled, clouded version that makes its way upward through a shuddering, syncopated accompaniment. Angst and agitation are the bywords for this entire movement, which in some ways foreshadows the opening movement of the Violin Concerto, written a year later: the two movements, both in e minor, share a brooding restlessness, full of questing motion, and also a radiant, charmed second melody played over a held bass note, which offers some solace. But they are true to their respective genres as well, with the concerto movement exploring the soaring lyrical solo line, and the quartet movement embracing the quartet's potential for many-voiced conspiracy, conversation and conflict.

The second movement is a vivid Scherzo, bright and sun-splashed. The defining gesture here is a rapidly repeated single note, a shake of brilliant plumage that disperses into a nimble upward or downward scale. This music is put through a series of capers, sometimes contrapuntally and sometimes in unison. Athletically graceful, almost manic in its most intense moments, it

looks for relief to an easier, lilting melody that surfaces in the first violin, and later to a more mournful call in the viola.

The third movement is a lyrical slow movement, whose aria is sung almost completely by the first violin over an undulating second-violin obbligato. This obbligato line flows almost without cease throughout the movement, passing from voice to voice, evoking with its texture some of the composer's *Songs Without Words*. The atmosphere is tender, but much of the movement is richly and spaciously scored, with a wide range between melody and bass, so that the music, for all of its intimate qualities, is as if painted on a large canvas, a panoramic scene unfolding before us. Only twice does the running obbligato come to a resting point, a

moment of repose in which the quartet intones a chorale, a grave, simple counterweight to the movement's wandering motion.

The Finale is an intense and energetic chase, a return to the minor key and to swift motion. Here Mendelssohn resorts to rhythmic invention of all kinds, from the propulsive accompanimental tattoo of the opening to the use of hemiola (groupings of beats in pairs over $3/4$ time, which excitingly destabilizes the pulse) to the perpetual-motion deployment of the first violin part over a melody in the lower lines. No sooner has the music reached a sunnier, major-key area, than it lightens on its feet, contracting into a quicker *Animato* pace: on no account will the music be permitted to find ease. After a section in which the main material is thoroughly developed and explored, the sunny major-key atmosphere returns, setting up an expectation of a euphoric, joyful conclusion; but Mendelssohn subverts our expectations by sneaking back to the minor key and setting the stage for an exciting, driven coda of almost orchestral power.

Note by Misha Amory