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## **Mendelssohn String Quartet in F-minor, Op. 80**

“It would be difficult to cite any piece of music which so completely impresses the listener with a sensation of gloomy foreboding, of anguish of mind, and of the most poetic melancholy, as does this masterly and eloquent composition.”

Thus Julius Benedict, who had known Felix Mendelssohn since they were both boys, described his friend’s last major composition, the Op. 80 f minor string quartet. Composed during the final months of the composer’s life, during the period in which Mendelssohn described his mood to a visitor as “gray on gray,” the creative impetus for this most dark and barren of works was the death of Mendelssohn’s deeply beloved sister, Fanny. She had died during a rehearsal of her brother’s *Erste Walpurgisnacht*; upon learning of her death two days after the fact Mendelssohn shrieked and collapsed to the ground. The loss was to saturate the short remainder of the composer’s life with grief.

To Fanny’s husband Felix wrote “if the sight of my handwriting checks your tears, put the letter away for we have nothing left now but to weep from our inmost hearts.” Having been convinced to travel to Switzerland for a rest, Mendelssohn spent his time painting watercolors, often featuring the famed covered bridge of Lucerne, the roof of which housed scenes of the *Totentanz*, the dance of death. It is also during this stay that the f minor quartet was composed. It was to be followed only by a few songs, the last of which closes with the lines “only I suffer pain, I will suffer without end, since, most beloved, you must part from me and I from you.”

It is surely no accident that the Op. 80 quartet is set in the key of Beethoven’s “*Quartetto serioso*,” Op. 95. It shares with that work an atmosphere of anguish and foreboding, although the enigmatic major key ending of Beethoven’s quartet finds no analogous music here, Mendelssohn’s work tenaciously clinging to the minor mode through its final chords, with no hint of catharsis to be had. Mendelssohn had always been a master of the *agitato* mood (for example the opening of the e minor quartet, Op. 44 No.2, or of either piano trio) but here it finds a new, more abstract quality, often divorced from melodic inspiration. The piece opens with a tremulous sense of portent, pure anxiety and unease. It is an inner storm, and the themes which follow wrestle with despair. The defiance of denial in the face of death is felt, as well as the suffering that reality brings. The first movement is unremittingly driven, unstable even in more lyrical moments.

Mendelssohn is well known for his inimitable brand of scherzo, epitomized by the scherzo from the incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, evoking magical fairy dust and the dancing of sprites. The scherzo of the f minor quartet betrays no hint of such lightness; it is full of almost brutal syncopations and jarring stabs. Here it again brings to mind Beethoven's Op. 95 scherzo, with its comparable vicious sense of terror. The texture of the trio section is spare and desolate, with the lower instruments playing in octaves an almost passacaglia-like line while the violins play a ghostly tune above. If there is dancing of spirits here it is the dance of chthonic demons, gruesome and dark.

The deeply felt slow movement may have been modeled after the monumental slow movement of Beethoven's quartet Op. 59 No.1, sharing its breadth and spacious sense of sadness. It is interesting to ponder whether Mendelssohn knew of the words Beethoven had written over the sketch for this movement, "a weeping willow or acacia tree on my brother's grave." It opens with a sinking bass line answered by a shivering sigh which begins the melodic material in the first violin. Melancholic acceptance and tender memory permeate the movement, with prevalent dotted rhythms resonating as the heartbeat of forsaken love.

Rarely is any solidity to be found in the finale of this quartet, with menacingly rumbling figures underscoring the darting melodic lines. In fact the rumbling takes over the movement entirely at several points, an abstract trembling of the soul. This is distilled psychological disquiet, bereft of any human voice. Eventually a wild triplet rhythm appears in the first violin, a final desperate attempt to break free of the bleakness. The quartet ends, however, with anger and fist-shaking, raw and untransformed.

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