

MENDELSSOHN

String Quartets • 3 No. 3 and Op. '0'

New Zealand String Quartet



Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809–1847) String Quartets • 3

Born in Hamburg in 1809, eldest son of the banker Abraham Mendelssohn and grandson of the great Jewish thinker Moses Mendelssohn, Felix Mendelssohn, who took the additional name Bartholdy on his baptism as a Christian, Heine's ticket of admission to European culture, was brought up in Berlin, where his family settled in 1812. Here he enjoyed the wide cultural opportunities that his family offered, through their own interests and connections.

Mendelssohn's early gifts, manifested in a number of directions, included marked musical precocity, both as a player and as a performer, at a remarkably early age. These exceptional abilities received every encouragement from his family and their friends, although Abraham Mendelssohn entertained early doubts about the desirability of his son taking the profession of musician. These reservations were in part put to rest by the advice of Cherubini in Paris and by the increasing signs of the bov's musical abilities and interests.

Early manhood brought Mendelssohn the opportunity to travel, as far south as Naples and as far north as The Hebrides, with Italy and Scotland both providing the inspiration for later symphonies. His career involved him in the Lower Rhine Festival in Düsseldorf and a period as city director of music, followed, in 1835, by appointment as conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig. Here he was able to continue the work he had started in Berlin six years earlier, when he had conducted in Berlin a revival of Bach's St Matthew Passion. Leipzig was to provide a degree of satisfaction that he could not find in Berlin, where he returned at the invitation of King Friedrich Wilhelm IV in 1841. In Leipzig once more, in 1843, he established a new Conservatory, spending his final years there, until his death at the age of 38 on 4th November 1847, six months after the death of his gifted and beloved sister Fanny.

In spite of his early precocity, which had brought a piano trio in 1820, piano quartets and sonatas, and, in

1825, the *Octet*, it was not until 1827 that Mendelssohn wrote a string quartet that satisfied him, later to be published as *String Quartet No. 2 in A minor, Op. 13*. His first attempt at the form had been in 1823, a work that had remained unpublished, while his last completed quartet was written in 1847. Before his death he had started a second quartet, of which two movements, an *Andante* in E major and a *Scherzo* in A minor were published posthumously.

Mendelssohn wrote the three string quartets that make up Op. 44 in 1837-38, ten years after his first published attempts at the form. The work published as the first of the set, the String Quartet in D major, Op. 44, No. 1, was the last to be written. It was first performed in Leipzig on 16th February 1839 by the quartet led by the violinist Ferdinand David and was apparently Mendelssohn's favourite of the three. The first movement opens with all the thematic clarity that Mendelssohn hoped to achieve. The dramatic first violin melody is accompanied by tremolo second violin and viola and a lightly sketched cello part. Second subject material appears first in the key of F sharp minor, but it is the opening theme that is a dominant element in this sonata-form movement. The second movement is a gently suave Minuet and a B minor Trio with running quaver figuration. This is followed by a particularly effective Andante espressivo con moto, a B minor movement in which the first violin melody is accompanied by a running semiguaver second violin part and the plucked notes of viola and cello. The final Presto con brio provides a brilliant conclusion, in the spirit in which the work had begun.

The Tema con variazioni, Op. 81, No. 1, was written in the last year of Mendelssohn's life and intended as a movement in a new quartet. The E major theme, marked Andante sostenuto, is followed by a variation in which the viola takes up the theme. The second variation, Un poco più animato, is in triplets, followed by a version in first violin semiquavers, figuration taken up by the cello

in the variation that follows. This leads to an E minor *Presto* with a final return to the theme itself and a coda in which the viola returns, as before, to a version of the material. The *Scherzo, Op. 81, No. 2*, brings inevitable echoes of earlier works in this characteristic form, yet with an occasional tinge of melancholy and with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* never too far away.

Mendelssohn's first attempt at the form of the string quartet was in March 1823, when he was fourteen, but the work, unnumbered by the composer and therefore presumably not intended for publication, was only finally published in 1879. This String Quartet in E flat major is, of course, a remarkable achievement, bearing in mind the composer's age, although Mendelssohn had been taking lessons in composition from Carl Zelter since he was eight and had already produced the first eight of his twelve

String Symphonies and was working on the rest of the set. 1821, indeed, had seen the composition of a set of Fifteen Fugues for string quartet. The String Quartet makes relatively modest technical demands on the performers. The first movement is in sonata-form and is followed by a modified ternary form Adagio non troppo, sombre enough in colouring. The mood changes with the Minuetto and Trio, the first with a touch of Haydn in its approach to the form, a minuet not intended for dancing, and a more original trio section that provides the necessary contrast. The quartet ends with a fugue in which Mendelssohn makes remarkably assured use of three subjects, expertly deployed and reflecting not only Zelter's teaching but also Mendelssohn's own study of counterpoint and love for the music of Bach.

Keith Anderson

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Acclaimed for its dynamic performing style, eloquent communication and beautiful sound, the New Zealand String Quartet has distinguished itself internationally for its imaginative programming, including cycles of composers' music from Mozart to Berg, and the championing of music from New Zealand. The Quartet has made acclaimed débuts in London at the Wigmore Hall, in New York at the prestigious Frick Collection and at the Library of Congress in Washington, and has undertaken concert tours in Europe, North America and Asia, as well as performing over forty concerts a year in its own country. Their extensive discography includes music by Bartók, Ravel, Debussy, Beethoven, Dvořák, Székely, Berg and Wolf and numerous works by New Zealand composers. The first two sets of their complete Mendelssohn string quartets for the Naxos label, of which this is the third volume, have been highly praised by critics including *The Gramophone* magazine. The ensemble's innovative collaborations have included performances with numerous internationally renowned artists and concertos with the BBC Scottish Symphony, the Auckland Chamber Orchestra and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. The group has been Quartet-in-Residence at Victoria University of Wellington, now the New Zealand School of Music, since 1991. For more information, visit www.nzsq.co.nz.





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Praised by *The Gramophone* for the 'deep feeling' of its playing on Volume 1 (8.570001) and hailed for 'what promises to be an outstanding set' (Vol. 2, 8.570002), the New Zealand String Quartet here completes its recording of all the Mendelssohn Quartets. The composer's first essay in the form, a strikingly accomplished work by a fourteenyear-old, is presented alongside his personal favourite, the D major, Op. 44, No. 1. This last of the three Op. 44 Quartets to be written is notable for its suave Minuet and a particularly expressive Andante. In the Op. 81 Theme and Variations and Scherzo from the last year of his life melancholy and magic meet in typical Mendelssohnian manner.

Felix MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 3 in D major, Op. 44, No. 1

String Quartets • 3

3 Andante espressivo con moto	5:49
4 Presto con brio	7:03
5 Tema con variazioni, Op. 81, No. 1	6:12
6 Scherzo, Op. 81, No. 2	3:54
String Quartet in E flat major, Op. '0'	26:50
7 Allegro moderato	9:43

8 Adagio ma non troppo 9 Minuetto

1 Molto allegro vivace

2 Menuetto: Un poco allegretto

10 Fuga



New Zealand String Quartet Helene Pohl, Violin I • Douglas Beilman, Violin II Gillian Ansell, Viola • Rolf Gjelsten, Cello



31:44

12:50

5:44

6:25

6:36

3:59

Recorded at St Anne's Church, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 16-19 July 2008 Producers: Bonnie Silver & Norbert Kraft • Engineer: Norbert Kraft • Editor: Bonnie Silver Editions: G. Henle Verlag (tracks 1-4), Dover / Complete Works Edition (5, 6), Ries & Erler, Berlin (7-10) Booklet notes: Keith Anderson • Cover photo © Solarseven / Dreamstime.com

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MENDELSSOHN:

String

Quartets



Playing Time 68:53



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