

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847): Octet in E flat major, Op. 20 (1825)

Allegro moderato ma con fuoco

Andante

Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo

Presto

Felix Mendelssohn (Bartholdy was added by his father when Felix was 7) was born into an intellectual and affluent household: his grandfather Moses was the pre-eminent Jewish philosopher of the Enlightenment, and both his father and mother's families were bankers. Felix and his sister Fanny were outstandingly precocious and were driven hard by their parents – their day started at 5 am at the latest. In 1818 the 9-year old Felix publicly performed a Dussek piano concerto from memory, and his first datable composition was performed in Berlin the same year. His copious early compositions outshone even those of Mozart. When Mendelssohn was 12 he played for Goethe who had also heard the young Mozart. Goethe was impressed: "...what [Mendelssohn] already accomplishes bears the same relation to the Mozart of that time as the cultivated talk of a grown-up person bears to the prattle of a child." At the age of 16 he produced his first undoubted masterpiece, his String Octet Op 20, incidentally at the same time as a metrically accurate German translation of a comedy by Terence which was published by his tutor the following year!

The Octet was intended as a birthday present for Eduard Rietz, Mendelssohn's violin teacher. Like the D minor Violin Concerto, it is dedicated to Rietz and the first violin part written for him; Mendelssohn himself occasionally played the second viola part. The work is orchestral in its scope and writing. Mendelssohn exhorts the players as follows: "*Note: This Octet must be played by all the instruments in a symphonic orchestral style. Pianos and fortes must be strictly observed and more strongly emphasized than is usual in pieces of this genre.*" Without such discipline, important individual parts can be lost against the seven others.

The Octet opens with rising arpeggios on the first violin above a tensely expectant accompaniment. The arpeggios move to the cello and then are transformed into a questioning semi-quaver figure, reassuringly answered by falling crotchets. New material is introduced by the fourth violin and first viola in sixths (*illustrated*), and these ideas form the basis for an exhilarating and masterfully scored sonata form movement.

Allegro moderato ma con fuoco

Violin 1



Violin 4



Viola 1



The lower strings open the second movement with dark foreboding, which gives way to a serene melody from the violins. Tension ebbs and flows with triplet semiquavers, dissolving, in a moment of genius, into an ecstatic *pianissimo* of cascading scales (*illustrated*). The uneasy triplets return, dispelled again by the cascading scales, and the triplets of Mendelssohn's second viola, now calmed, have the last word.

Violin 2



Violin 4



Viola 1



Viola 2



The *Scherzo* presages Mendelssohn's renowned overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which he wrote immediately after the Octet. The movement is *pianissimo* and *staccato* throughout, reinforced again by an admonition from the composer. According to the composer's sister Fanny, it was inspired by lines from Goethe's *Faust*, the Walpurgis Night Dream, '*Clouds and mist pass / it grows bright above. / Air in the bushes and wind in the reeds / - and all is dispersed*' Rietz's first violin part emerges briefly in the middle section with a tricky, trill-laden, more *legato* passage, but the *staccato* returns and the movement ends with a rising arpeggio vanishing *pp diminuendo* in a puff of air.

The *Presto* finale is definitely more muscular; the second cello growls out the quavers of the energetic fugal subject which passes quickly all the way up the octet. The quavers continue to carry the movement along almost without interruption in a celebration of teenage energy and exuberant genius.