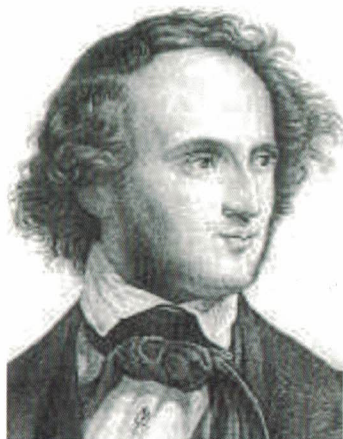


# Programme Notes



The year 2009 marks the centenary of Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847). Despite the fact that Mendelssohn remains one of the greatest composers of all times, his works are ironically by comparison underrated which deserve even more attention. The reason for his works being overshadowed is multi-folded. Mendelssohn has often been called a "romantic classicist", as his compositions were greatly influenced by earlier masters such as Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. Though a very prolific and versatile composer, unlike Haydn, Mendelssohn was not a pioneer of any musical genre. Mozart's fame as a child prodigy was so distinguished throughout Europe that Mendelssohn's genius did not come surprising anymore. Though romantic in style, Mendelssohn's music is relatively simple and melodious. It lacks the revolutionary nature of Beethoven's music that shook up the musical world. These contribute to the seemingly ordinary Mendelssohn, and his music seems

less than remarkable. Moreover, illnesses, poverty and tragic episodes that were shared by many of his seniors and contemporaries were missing in Mendelssohn's life. Up until his premature death at the age of 38, like his name "Felix" which means "successful" or "lucky" in Latin, Mendelssohn was leading a happy and successful life. Without the embellishment of tragedies and dramatic turning points in life, his biography may become less legendary and notable, which is also reflected in his music that is generally hopeful, high-spirited and delightful.

But in fact, Mendelssohn's achievement as a composer is nothing but remarkable. His musical talent as a child prodigy, which is comparable to that of Mozart, is unsurpassed by any later composers. He produced 12 String Symphonies when he was between 12 and 14 years old; and a full-scale symphony at the age of 15. In the realm of chamber music, he had composed a number of masterpieces and some of his best works came from his early period. The two works featured on today's programme are evidence of Mendelssohn's musical precociousness.

## String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 13

Apart from a juvenile work written in 1823 which did not get published until 1879 and did not receive any opus number, Mendelssohn published six string quartets during his lifetime. Among them, the A Minor Quartet was the first one written (1827) although it was the second to be published. Despite the fact that no 19th-century composers who had written string quartet could evade the influence of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, this mature work of Mendelssohn, written at the age of 18, is a highly dramatic masterpiece with such level of originality that was hardly surpassed by his later works. The most distinguished feature is the incorporation of musical material from his *Lied "Frage"*, which he had written a



few months earlier in 1827. Direct quotes from the song are heard in the introductory *Adagio* of the 1st movement, as well as in the *Adagio* ending of the last movement. Such recurring motto gives the work a cyclic nature and provides memorable uniformity for the listeners. Unlike what Schubert did to his "Trout" Quintet and "Death and the Maiden" String Quartet, Mendelssohn did not use this "recycled" material as an extra element and develop it into a set of theme and variations; but rather, the song material permeates the piece and becomes an integral part of it, and therefore no longer sounds "borrowed".

The principal section of the 1st movement is an energetic *Allegro vivace* that comprises much drama and contrasting melodic elements. The 2nd movement *Adagio non lento* is another eclectic work. It begins with a lyrical melody in the manner of a *Lied*, which is then followed by a thick-textured fugal section. The music intensifies to reach a climactic point, after which a violin solo leads us back to the opening material. The 3rd movement is a very witty, light-hearted scherzo sandwiched between two sections marked *Intermezzo*, which feature a troubadour-like folk melody played by the 1st violin, with the rest playing pizzicato like a lute as an accompaniment. The Finale commences with a violin recitative, which is an operatic design. The movement is charged with drive and momentum. Mendelssohn ingeniously introduces a violin solo fantasia as a bridge that leads to a brief reoccurrence of the fugal theme from the 2nd movement. The "*Frage*" theme finally reappears and concludes the whole work in a melancholic mood.

## String Octet in E-flat Major, Op.20

Two years before he wrote the A Minor String Quartet, at the age of 16, Mendelssohn had written a monumental piece which, when published later in 1832 as Op.20, established him as a mature and recognized composer - String Octet in E-flat major. This Octet was dedicated to Eduard Rietz (or Ritz) as a birthday gift on October 17. Rietz was a very close friend of the Mendelssohn family and was then Felix's violin teacher. He was also the dedicatee of the composer's Concerto for violin and string orchestra in D minor, written when the composer was around 13 years old. In his correspondences to his family and publishers, Mendelssohn indicated his fondness of this Octet and his great desire to share this work with the public. Evidently he was proud of it and was aware of what he had achieved in this composition. Indeed, with his Octet Mendelssohn had opened up a new horizon no one else had reached hitherto. Few later composers have ventured in the same genre and certainly no one has surpassed Mendelssohn. The Double String Quartet written by Ludwig Spohr (1784-1859) in 1823 - a genre which Spohr might have invented - could have been an inspiration for this Octet, which Mendelssohn occasionally referred to as a double quartet as well. But the immediate success received by the Octet proved that Mendelssohn had outshined the older master. Despite Robert Schumann was mistaken that Mendelssohn wrote the Octet at the age of 15, his remark about the work provides a clear insight: "No master of the past can boast such consummate perfection at such early age."

Mendelssohn initially marked the first movement as *Allegro molto e vivace*. He subsequently asked the copyist to cut the note value in half, i.e. quarter note instead of half note, eighth note instead of quartet note; and revised the tempo marking to *Allegro moderato ma con fuoco*. The movement is filled with passion and it was tailored to showcase the technical brilliance of its dedicatee. The triadic main theme is uplifting and heroic, while the accompaniment provides a driving force. This movement has gone beyond the scope of a chamber work and has attained the depth of a symphonic work. In fact, Mendelssohn insisted that the following remark be added in printing to all individual parts: "This Octet must be played in the style of a symphony in all the parts; the *pianos* (soft) and *fortes* (loud) must be very precisely and clearly executed, and more sharply stressed than other pieces of the same genre."

The second movement is a lyrical *Andante* with a distinct longing atmosphere. It is in 6/8 meter and has a resemblance of a *siciliana*. The movement does not have a striking feature in terms of formal structure. Nonetheless, the movement is tonally adventurous for its use of chromaticism and remote tonalities. Bearing the key signature of C minor, the movement concludes on a C major chord which serves as the dominant of F minor and hence giving the ending an unresolved ambience.

The *Scherzo* was undoubtedly Mendelssohn's favorite movement, as he had orchestrated it and reused it as a substitution for the third movement of his Symphony No.1. The whole movement is supposed to be played *staccato* and *pianissimo*. Mendelssohn described in his own words that "one feels so close to the world of spirits, swept up in the air. Indeed, one feels half inclined to snatch up a broomstick so as to follow the airy legion. At the end, the first violin soars upward, as light as a feather, and all is blown away."

It was customary for composers to write the final movement of a chamber work, particularly string quartet, with contrapuntal texture. The *Presto* finale of this Octet is a masterful display of the composer's contrapuntal technique, and it proves that Mendelssohn is just as great a master as Bach and Beethoven. In this fugal movement, all eight parts chase each other in a frenzied mood, representing "fugue" (literally means "flight") in the best sense of the word. The movement was so ingeniously written, the voices so perfectly knitted and structured that one not only has to listen, but also has to study the score in order to fully appreciate the composer's mastermind.