

THE MENDELSSOHN QUARTET

MIRIAM FRIED, VIOLIN
NICHOLAS MANN, VIOLIN
DANIEL PANNER, VIOLA
MARCY ROSEN, CELLO

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2006

- PROGRAM -

Andante and Scherzo, Op. 81
FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 1 (Metamorphoses nocturnes)

GYÖRGY LIGETI (1923-)

Allegro grazioso

Vivace capriccioso

Adagio mesto

Presto

Andante tranquillo

Tempo di valse – Moderato – Con eleganza – Un poco capriccioso

Allegretto, un poco giovale

Prestissimo

- INTERMISSION -

String Quartet in E Minor

GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813-1901)

Allegro

Andantino

Prestissimo

Scherzo Fuga. Allegro assai mosso

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)
Andante and Scherzo, Op. 81 (1847)

The Mendelssohn quartet on tonight's program is made up of movements written a few months before his premature death at age 38 from a brain hemorrhage. They were planned as part of his next string quartet.

There was a time, extending from the latter decades of the 19th Century through the first decades of the 20th, when Mendelssohn was condescendingly viewed as a light-weight, a precocious boy whose genius, never tested by trials of poverty, failure or illness, failed to mature. Nothing, in fact, could be further from the truth. Although raised in a privileged household, he was himself and came from, hard-working people who never had reason to forget that only two generations before, their famous ancestor, Moses son of Mendel, had, at age 14, walked 80 miles to Berlin from his impoverished Jewish ghetto in Dessau in search of an education. Throughout his childhood, Felix, grandson of that famous philosopher, was awakened by his father every morning at 5 A.M. to begin his studies. Before the age of 20 he was not only a widely-acknowledged musical genius but an accomplished linguist (entry to the University of Berlin was granted on the basis of his translations from the Greek) and a fine graphic artist. Since the end of World War II there has been a reassessment of the scope and depth of his music, as well as a better understanding of appropriate, more restrained, performance practices. We will hear tonight a lovely work which, because it was left incomplete, is not often played.

Mendelssohn was born in Germany the year that Josef Haydn died. Beethoven dominated the music scene but pedagogues focused on Classical forms and concepts. Such was the training Felix received from his private tutors, while the winds of Romanticism - its preoccupation with meaning and emotion - were blowing over Europe. The two movements on tonight's program bear the unmistakable flavor of Mendelssohn's merging of the Classicism and Romanticism in which he was steeped, producing the clarity, energy, mastery of form and beautiful melodies which make his style so recognizable. The opening Theme and Variations is subtle and inviting, and crystal clear in its construction. The Scherzo replays the delicious, transparent magic of a *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

These pieces are hardly child's play and deserve the all-too-rare hearing they are receiving tonight.

Program notes © by Nora Avins Klein, October, 2005

GYÖRGY LIGETI (1923-)

String Quartet No. 1 "Métamorphoses nocturnes" (1954)

György Ligeti is one of the most eminent and best-known living composers. He was born in 1923 into a Jewish-Hungarian family in a city in Transylvania that was part of Hungary before World War I but then became part of Romania. Ligeti's great-uncle was Leopold Auer, a highly successful violinist. During World War II, Ligeti was sent into forced labor. His father and younger brother died in concentration camps, but his mother survived Auschwitz. After the war, Ligeti studied at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, where his teachers were Ferenc Farkas and Sándor Varess. In 1956, to escape the Russian forces that were suppressing the Hungarian uprising, Ligeti fled to Vienna. He became an Austrian citizen in 1967, but since 1973, he has lived in Hamburg. During the late-1950s until the mid-1970s, Ligeti became a central figure in the European avant-garde. He even achieved some popular notoriety when his music was used as part of the score for Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Prior to that time, however, Ligeti pursued a strong interest in Hungarian and Romanian folksong. Not surprisingly, his early compositions were influenced heavily by the works of Bartók and Kodály.

The String Quartet No. 1 was composed during 1953 and 1954. In his book on Ligeti, musicologist Richard Toop argues that the String Quartet was an important step in Ligeti's attempt to free himself from the influence of Bartók: "Even in trying to move beyond Bartók, Ligeti naturally took the older composer's quartets as a standard—especially the third and fourth quartets, of which he had seen the scores, even though they were banned from performance. Yet, here, even if there are many passages which are clearly influenced by his models, there is also considerable evidence of the desire to do something different. This is already apparent in the work's subtitle, *Métamorphoses nocturnes*; if the 'nocturnal' aspect pays homage to the 'night musics' which are a recurrent feature of Bartók's work, the 'metamorphoses' signal a departure from the sonata structures and arch forms typical of Bartók. Here Ligeti sets out to compose a music which has no overt themes: only tiny motives which are gradually transformed, 'discursively' on a small scale, and by expansion of intervals on the larger scale."

Ligeti himself wrote a note for his First Quartet:

The first word of the sub-title refers to the form. It is a kind of variation form, only there is no specific "theme" which is then

varied. It is, rather, that one and the same musical concept appears in constantly new forms—that is why “metamorphoses” is more appropriate than “variations.” The quartet can be considered as having just one movement or also as a sequence of many short movements that melt into one another without pause or which abruptly cut one another off. The basic concept which is always present in the intervals, but which is in a state of constant transformation, consists of two major seconds that succeed each other transposed by a semitone. In this First String Quartet there are certainly some characteristics of my later music, but the writing is totally different, “old-fashioned”; there are still melodic, rhythmic and harmonic patterns and bar structure. It is not tonal music, but it is not radically atonal, either. The piece still belongs to the Bartók tradition, yet despite the Bartók-like tone (especially in the rhythm) and despite some touches of Stravinsky and Alban Berg, I trust that the First String Quartet is still a personal work.

Because of the oppressive Communist political climate in Hungary during the mid-1950s, Ligeti did not compose the String Quartet No. 1 with any expectation of an immediate performance. The premiere of the work did not take place until 1958 in Vienna.

Program notes courtesy of Arts Management Group

GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813-1901)
String Quartet in E Minor (1873)

The great Italian operatic composer, Giuseppe Verdi, got off to a rather inauspicious beginning. His early training consisted primarily of music lessons given him by local church organists. When he applied for admission to the Milan Conservatory, he was rejected by the examiners for “faulty piano technique; a promising composer with ‘genuine imagination’ but in need of contrapuntal discipline.” Verdi continued his musical studies through other means and is known the world over for his great operas including *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, *La Forza del Destino*, and *Aida*—works unmatched by any composer with the possible exception of Mozart and Wagner. In his lifetime, Verdi composed twenty-six operas, eight choral works, many songs and one string quartet.

The fact that Verdi composed only one piece of chamber music is not due to a contempt or indifference to chamber music in general, as is often assumed. (In fact, it is said that in his later years Verdi kept pocket scores of Haydn’s, Mozart’s and Beethoven’s string quartets at his bedside.) However, Verdi’s artistic life came to fruition at a time when opera

had become the predominant medium of musical expression in Italy. It was inevitable that a man of his temperament should turn to song and drama.

The String Quartet in E minor was composed in Naples in 1873. Verdi was in Naples to supervise the rehearsals of his opera, *Aida*, and the rehearsals had been delayed due to the illness of the soprano heroine, Teresa Stolz. Verdi claimed that he wrote the quartet for his own diversion and for private use only. Three years later, however, he allowed it to be published.

The Allegro is in sonata form with the first theme appearing immediately in the second violin. The theme is restated by the first violin and accompanied by a figure in the cello that is used as a motif throughout the movement. A brief pause precedes the introduction of the second theme. The second movement is in rondo form, indicated to be played *con eleganza*, "with elegance". This movement has a feel of a Canzonetta or even a waltz, and the theme appears three times, alternating with contrasting ideas.

The third movement begins much as a Beethoven scherzo, but the trio is decidedly the work of an operatic composer. The cello sings a lyrical tenor aria while the other instruments strum a guitar accompaniment. The final movement gives testament to the fact that Verdi indeed mastered the art of writing a fugue. Boisterous and jolly, it is a constant motion of swirling staccato notes chasing each other.

Verdi's string quartet received its premier on April 1, 1873. The opera *Aida* had premiered on the previous day. In summing up the informal quartet performance, Verdi wrote, "I've written a Quartet in my leisure moments in Naples. I had it performed one evening in my house, without attaching the least importance to it and without inviting anyone in particular. Only the seven or eight persons who usually come to visit me were present. I don't know whether the Quartet is beautiful or ugly, but I do know that it's a Quartet!" Regardless of Verdi's nonchalant attitude, the quartet can be admired and enjoyed for the manner in which the composer so skillfully combined dramatic and melodic techniques with the structure of the traditional string quartet.

Program notes © by Margaret Bragg, October, 2005

The Mendelssohn Quartet

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The Mendelssohn String Quartet has established a reputation as one of the most imaginative, vital and exciting quartets of its generation. The Quartet tours annually throughout North America with regular trips to foreign destinations.

The Mendelssohn Quartet was for nine years the Blodgett Artists in Residence at Harvard University, and has performed at such distinguished venues as Carnegie Hall in New York City, Washington DC's Kennedy Center and Library of Congress, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Wigmore Hall in London, and the Tonhalle in Zurich. The resident quartet of the Eastern Shore Chamber Music Festival and formerly resident quartet of the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, the Mendelssohn Quartet has performed at the Caramoor Festival, the Festival Pablo Casals in Prades, France, and makes frequent appearances at New York's Mostly Mozart Festival as well as the Ravinia, Aspen, and Saratoga Music Festivals. They were the first American ensemble invited to appear at the International Dialogues Festival in Kiev, Ukraine. The Quartet is often heard across the United States on Minnesota Public Radio's *Saint Paul Sunday*.

The Mendelssohn String Quartet has a strong commitment to contemporary music and has given world premieres of works commissioned by and for them. During the past several seasons, the Quartet performed the world premieres of string quartets by Bernard Rands, Augusta Read Thomas, David Horne, and Scott Wheeler. The group has also performed the complete quartets of Arnold Schoenberg in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

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