Mendelssohn: *String Quartet No. 1 in E-flat Major, Op. 12* (1829)

Just two years after the death of Ludwig van Beethoven and two decades after that of Franz Joseph Haydn, two great trailblazers of the string quartet genre, another young German composer found himself in the storied streets of London. Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847), but twenty years old, was already well regarded as a talented musician and composer, a prodigy of the sonic arts. In the city where the string quartet first became a public concert genre, Mendelssohn made his first public foray into writing quartets, completing his *String Quartet No. 1 in E-flat Major, Op. 12* in the late summer months of 1829. The work unfolds across four movements, in classic sonata-allegro style, though Mendelssohn owes a great intellectual debt to Beethoven's *String Quartet No. 10 in E-flat Major, Op. 74 "Harp"* for his own breakthrough quartet. In key, form, and motivic inspiration, Mendelssohn draws directly from Beethoven's *Harp Quartet,* paying homage through musical citation.

The first movement begins *Adagio non troppo*, with an opening motif that recalls the opening gesture of Beethoven's quartet (half note, followed by a dotted quarter, eighth, and quarter in a sighing gesture). Though this might count as Mendelssohn's own "London" quartet, it adopts a much more pensive mood than those written by Haydn, whose opening gestures were meant to draw the audience's attention to the performers on stage. By 1829, Londoners had learned not to be too chatty during concerts (though we are still a far cry from the silent and dark theaters ushered in by Richard Wagner). In the era immediately succeeding Beethoven, the quartet stage (and that of chamber music more widely) had finally taken on an air of gravitas, such that composers including the illustrious Brahms felt too afraid to publish their own experiments with the genre until much later in their careers for fear of falling short of the mark.

Young Mendelssohn, however, was far less affected by such pretentions to humility, and the precocious twenty-year old was happy to let the London public hear his first official foray into the genre soon after its completion in 1829. In fact, this was not his first string quartet; he had composed one in 1823 at the age of fourteen, but this earlier quartet was only published posthumously. After the drama-filled and inward-gazing opening, the movement picks up immediately with a Romantically lyrical *Allegro non tardante*, with the first violin often poking above the group as the primary melodic voice. Although the other three instruments almost always play the roles of the continuo, their parts are no less vivacious. The second violin, viola, and cello all push along the momentum as each player dips in and out of the action, sometimes doubling the top voice, sometimes providing a countermelody, and at others blending into the harmonic progression of the bass line. Through much of the movement, the viola enjoys an especially active role as the contrapuntal foil to the first violin. The second violin takes turns playing as an inner voice with the viola and melting into the cello's bass line.

The celebrated *Canzonetta: Allegretto* movement takes inspiration from the use of pizzicato in the opening movement of Beethoven's *Harp Quartet* (composed 1809, the same year that Mendelssohn was born), in a gesture reminiscent of a harp (hence the epithet). After the quartet's

introductory gesture in G minor to introduce the primary theme, the violins erupt into a leggiero dance in G major that foreshadows the sprightly orchestration of a certain infamous *scherzo*: Mendelssohn's incidental music for Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1842, Op. 61). The viola and cello then follow suit as they switch places with the violins in the dance. The trio comes to an end as both parties show off their dexterity and we return to the opening G minor theme, replete with its quirky dialogue between pizzicato and spiccato.

Moving to the relative major key, B-flat, Mendelssohn lets the quartet sing forth a rhapsodic display of artistry. Once again, the first violin takes pride of place as the primary melodic voice in this *Andante espressivo*, just like the composers of the last generation. In all things related to form and structure, Mendelssohn did not seek to reinvent the wheel. Instead, he derived his artistic pleasure from expanding the color palette available to the quartet, experimenting with a range of rhythms, articulations, and combinations thereof to spark some life into the score.

Finishing off in the relative minor of the opening movement (C minor), this movement begins with a lively burst of energy across all four instruments. Pausing only slightly to catch their breath with a series of unison chords, they dive back into the fray with an energetic *moto perpetuo* that takes us through a series of harmonic progressions to lead us into the next variation on this movement's primary theme. This time, the second violin takes center stage. Each of these variations is punctuated by a dramatic return to rhythmic unison, as all four instruments sing out together for a few brief moments before returning to the energetic texture of the movement. The quartet finally ends with a return to the thoughtful mood that characterized the opening bars of the piece.

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Felix Mendelssohn

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César Franck: *Quintet in F minor, Op. 14* (1879)

To (my good friend) Camille Saint-Saëns

Fifty years after Mendelssohn premiered his first string quartet, the Franco-Belgian composer César Franck published his first piano quintet, adding a piano to the mix. Born in Liège, Franck (1822-1890) moved to Paris as a teenager, and remained there for most of his adult life. He was a renowned organist and spent a good portion of his career as the primary organist for the Basilique Ste. Clotilde in Paris. In 1872, he was appointed as a professor at the Paris Conservatoire, where he coached a number of Paris's most well-known composers in the late nineteenth century, including Vincent d'Indy, Ernest Chausson, and Claude Debussy. Franck was also good friends with Camille Saint-Saëns, though the premiere of this quintet in early 1880 caused some friction in their relationship.

At the premiere, Saint-Saëns was at the piano alongside members of the Marsick Quartet. Franck had added a note to the piano score: *A mon bon ami Camille Saint-Saëns*. However at the end of the performance (which Saint-Saëns had allegedly sightread), he walked off the stage disgruntled, not bothering to close the score or the lid of the piano. In nineteenth-century Paris where social mores were so closely watched, Saint-Saëns's abrupt exit from the stage was cause for gossip. Was he unhappy with the aesthetic vision? Did he find the piano part insulting? Or was he, as some accounts alleged, jealous of the sensual portrayal of human lust hidden in the pages of the quintet score? There were rumors circulating that Franck had taken fancy to a student of his, Augusta Holmès, and that Saint-Saëns shared this infatuation. In any case, this slight was not gone unnoticed, and in the published version, Franck redacted the gushing tribute to read simply: *To Camille Saint-Saëns*.

So often described as fiery, emotional, even orchestral, the *Quintet's* modern reception tends to be much warmer than contemporary interest in the piece. Today, we have the benefit of hindsight, seeing the *Quintet* as a culmination of nearly a century's worth of musical Romanticism, the idea that human emotion could be rendered into musical idioms reaching its zenith in these final decades of the nineteenth century. As the *Belle époque* came to a close, this lush outpouring of musical feeling was wholesale replaced by the onslaught of modernity. Throughout the quintet, Franck plays with modulation, snaking through a series of chromatic progressions without settling on a single tonic base for an extended period of time. Did this harmonic instability reveal his unfulfilled longing for Holmès? Claims either way are based in rumors; there is no convincing evidence that Franck had an extra-marital affair, nor that Saint-Saëns was jealous of him.

The first movement, *Molto moderato quasi lento* begins with an impassioned cry, rendered all the more striking by the first violin's double-dotted rhythms. This is no "French overture," but

rather a plea to the heavens which then fades into the delicate soundworld of the piano. After a second, even more stricken cry, the piano moves relentlessly forward, while each of the strings takes a turn at calling out this opening motif. As the viola and cello fade away, the piano breaks out into a dazzling, quasi-improvisatory bridge, pushing us headfirst into the drama of the *Allegro*. Throughout this movement, Franck keeps the texture reduced to duets and trios, moving from one group to the next and saving the full power of the quintet for climactic events. Unlike the quartet of Mendelssohn, here each instrument trades off the primary melodic role. Sometimes it is the piano, at other times it is the cello, and at yet others it is the viola. There is no clear hierarchy between the roles of each instrument, in a clear eschewal of classical form. In fact, the viola plays a role akin to an operatic tenor, with numerous soloistic moments interwoven into the orchestration.

The dreamlike slow movement, marked *Lento con molto sentimento*, begins with piano and first violin engaged in a duet, occasionally punctuated by a chordal interruption from the other strings. The piano here lays down an active foundation over which the first violin layers a sentimental melody in 12/8 time. Where the first movement was appassionato, full of the vigor of human experience, the second movement finds its identity in its cool collectedness. This movement tells a true Parisian love story, a wistful back and forth between lovers, no one party ever fully giving into reckless abandonment, never once breaking their *sangfroid* temperament. Love may bubble deep beneath the surface, but it is ill-mannered to be blustery about it. We remain, at all times, aloof.

It is only in the final bars of the *Lento* that the strings break into a nearly orchestral texture, relentlessly repeating chords in unison and breaking the illusion of calm that all had enjoyed through the movement. In this final movement, *Allegro non troppo, ma con fuoco*, we are given the full fire of the quintet. Now the second violin begins the *Allegro* with a cyclical ostinato, driving us all to the edges of our seats. The quintet interrupts only to pass on this frenetic gesture to the first violin, who launches us into a *moto perpetuo* that is full of the heart's emotional fire. Just before a final burst of ecstatic brilliance, the quintet sinks to its lowest, softest, and most tragic affect, as if bemoaning Franck's own unrequited love.

—Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

César Franck

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