

TUESDAY EVENING CONCERT SERIES PRESENTS

Jerusalem Quartet

25 April, 2023

Program Notes by Laurie Shulman © 2022

**Quartet in E minor, Op. 44, No. 2
Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)**

Because Mendelssohn is associated so strongly with two masterpieces from his teenage years (the overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Octet, Op.20) and a limited number of audience favorites (the "Italian" Symphony and the violin concerto), we tend to forget how prolific and how skilled he was. Like Mozart, he was an instrumental virtuoso from childhood; he played piano, violin, and viola. Well before he turned 21, he had already achieved considerable renown as a composer. Critics hold that he burned out his talent in his youth, arguing that few of his mature compositions merit performance and study. While some of his mature works are inconsistent, many are exceedingly fine pieces and certainly do not deserve the neglect and even disfavor into which they have sometimes fallen. And audiences *love* his music, with its delicious melodies, transparent textures, and emotional pull within a classical framework.

Chamber music appealed to Mendelssohn from the inception of his youthful career as a composer. Several early piano quartets and a string quintet survive. His first published string quartets were composed during his late 'teens: Op.12 in E-flat (1829) and Op. 13 in A (1827) are both fine works. He did not return to the string quartet until almost a decade later, with the three quartets of Op. 44. By then, his career as a conductor had blossomed. Mendelssohn continued to produce major chamber works for the rest of his brief life. Collectively, his chamber works may be considered the most significant contribution between Schubert and Brahms.

The E minor quartet, though numbered second, was the first of the three Op. 44 quartets to be composed. Mendelssohn wrote it on his honeymoon. In March, 1837 he married Cecile Jeanrenaud, a young woman of Swiss-French parentage living in Frankfurt with her mother and older sister. They met during the summer of 1836 and announced their engagement in September. It was a love match, and Felix's obvious happiness found one of its outlets in composition. While touring the Rhineland with his bride, he composed three organ preludes; the Psalm Op. 42 for chorus, soloists, and orchestra; a volume of *Songs Without Words*, the Piano Concerto in D minor, Op. 40, and the E minor quartet!

The opening movement of the quartet bears a strong resemblance to the violin concerto, with which it shares both tonality and melodic shape. Ultimately it lacks the electricity of the larger work; still, it is a firmly unified movement with much textural variety. A noteworthy detail is the second theme, in G, which derives from the main theme. This technique – called monothematicism – was highly characteristic of Haydn. Mendelssohn's adoption of it is one among many indications of his classic spirit.

Mendelssohn's finest scherzi are unrivalled in the entire literature. This one is a gem: sparkling,

with impeccable scoring and a lightness that does not preclude musical substance. Subliminal energy keeps this movement dancing nonstop, but we never hear the feet of the dancers touch the floor. The slow movement, in sonata form (as are all four movements in this quartet) is recognizably cast in the mold of a song without words. The composer shows himself to be a master of melody and sustaining melodic line – not the same thing! – successfully treading the fine line between tender and sentimental. The finale's restless agitation recalls the internal energy of the Scherzo. The opening measures contrast beautifully with a lyrical second theme, indelibly Mendelssohnian and eminently singable. For his ending, the composer lets out all the stops to display the virtuosic brilliance of the performers. It is splendid string writing.

Langsamer Satz

Anton von Webern (1883-1945)

Few of us know Webern's music. Not to be confused with the German 19th-century romantic Carl Maria von Weber, the Viennese native Anton Webern was a disciple and star pupil of Arnold Schoenberg, inventor of the twelve-tone system. Webern became a master of compression and expressivity, writing twelve-tone pieces of utmost brevity. His complete published works fit on three compact discs – and that includes his orchestrations of music by Bach and Schubert.

After his death, however, a cache of unpublished manuscripts was discovered among his effects. He composed them between 1899 and 1908; nearly all date from before he met Schoenberg in autumn 1904. These early compositions, including *Langsamer Satz*, show how firmly anchored Webern was in the Viennese tradition. Their post-romantic harmonic language reveals the influence of Wagner, Strauss, and Brahms.

Langsamer Satz means 'slow movement.' Webern's original is a single movement for string quartet. He wrote it on the heels of an idyllic holiday with his cousin Wilhelmine Mörtl. They had fallen in love in 1902 and would marry in 1911. In spring 1905 during the Pentecost holiday, the pair took a trip Waldwinkel, a lovely area of countryside about 60 miles west of Vienna. Webern, who adored the outdoors almost as much as his cousin, was twenty-one and head over heels in love. His diaries are filled with extravagant descriptions, even on rainy days.

My heart was jubilant. I spent wonderful hours during the afternoon. When night fell, the skies shed bitter tears, but I wandered with her along a road. A coat protected the two of us. Our love rose to infinite heights and filled the universe! Two souls were enraptured.

Then, the next day:

We wandered through forests. It was a fairyland! High tree trunks all around us, a green luminescence in between, and here and there floods of gold on the green moss. The forest symphony resounded.

He composed *Langsamer Satz* in June. It is, quite simply, love music: love of nature, love of

Wilhelmine. It is also the work of a 21-year-old composer still finding his way. Writer James Beale calls it “disarmingly conventional . . . almost sugary.” Biographer Hans Moldenhauer is more generous: “The music is pervaded by a sweet poignancy; serene happiness rises to triumphant ecstasy in the coda.” Most striking are the textural ideas. Webern was a lifelong contrapuntalist and the independence of his voices adds to the interest of this movement.

String Quartet No. 1 in D, Op. 11 (1871) Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Music-lovers know that Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* originated as the slow movement of his First String Quartet. Apart from chamber music devotees, however, few listeners actually know the complete Barber Quartet. Their acquaintance with the *Adagio* is limited to the popular transcription for string orchestra.

Tchaikovsky’s First Quartet has a similar history. From the first performances, listeners adored the slow movement, which was promptly excerpted from its context and arranged for all manner of instrumental combinations. We know it as the *Andante cantabile*.

In fact, Tchaikovsky’s Quartet was the first major Russian string quartet. It is surely his most successful effort in chamber music, a genre in which he admittedly did not excel. Perhaps wisely, he eschewed the medium. Other than three quartets, the piano trio, the string sextet *Souvenir de Florence* and a few pieces for violin and piano, there is nothing but juvenilia in his chamber catalogue.

Why did he write this piece? The answer is finances. He needed cash, and wanted to raise money via a concert of his works. An orchestra concert was too expensive, so he planned an evening of chamber music. The young composer hurriedly penned a string quartet to flesh out his slender catalogue of chamber works, then prevailed upon some colleagues at the Moscow Conservatory, led by violinist Ferdinand Laub, to perform it. The quartet’s cellist, Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, would later play the premiere of Tchaikovsky’s “Rococo” Variations, and received that work’s dedication. The new quartet was an immediate success, largely because of the slow movement.

No doubt the conservatism of the opening *Moderato e semplice* helped, for Tchaikovsky’s modulations and structure are both classical. Little of the adventuresome spirit displayed in *Romeo and Juliet* just two years before surfaces in this piece. The harmonies are simple, embroidered with simple counterpoint, much in keeping with the fledgling Russian nationalist approach to folk song treatment.

The *Andante cantabile* is as beloved as a folk tune. The composer actually based the first theme on a folk song he had heard at Kamenka, his family’s summer home in the country. Tchaikovsky sometimes resented the fact that this movement became so fashionable at the expense of compositions he considered superior, which were overlooked or criticized. He grew to be very

proud of it, however. In an 1886 diary entry, the composer wrote of sitting with Leo Tolstoy at a concert where the great author was moved to tears by a performance of the *Andante cantabile*. Tchaikovsky himself scored it for cello solo and orchestra in the late 1880s. He also sanctioned the performance of the *Andante cantabile* as a separate work for string orchestra. The version we hear this evening is, however, the original, and in its complete, intended context.

The quartet is rounded out by a Schubertian *Scherzo/Trio* in D minor, whose scherzo section plays sophisticated rhythmic games with two against three, and a foursquare finale in sonata/rondo form. The attempt at fugue shows that the weight of conservatory training still lay heavily on Tchaikovsky's shoulders, and that he still sought an individual voice.