



Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: String Quartets in E flat major (Op. 12), in A minor (Op. 13) & in E flat major (1823)

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It was inevitable that a work of such prodigal mastery and youthful exuberance as Mendelssohn's Octet, Op. 20 would cast a lengthy shadow over most of the composer's remaining chamber works. Nowhere is that more obviously the case than with Mendelssohn's oft-neglected string quartets, none of which has ever topped the Octet's popularity, and which still find comparatively few outlets in either the recital room or recording studio.

It's gratifying, then, to be able to give an enthusiastic welcome to the first instalment in what should, based on this evidence, comprise a first-rate traversal of Mendelssohn's complete chamber music for strings, played by the Mandelring Quartett on Audite . It already has a critically acclaimed survey of the 15 Shostakovich Quartets to its credit on this label and is more than equal to the task. Having listened again recently to its gauntly implacable, emotionally draining performance of Shostakovich's Eighth String Quartet (reviewed in October 2007), I felt it was interesting to assess its response to Mendelssohn's unimaginably different soundworld, with its associated economies of scale, style and musical vocabulary.

The survey opens with the early Quartet in E flat major, written in 1823, the composer's fourteenth year, and thus pre-dating the Octet by some two years. Issued posthumously in 1879, it was therefore never ascribed an opus number. Though essentially a student exercise, albeit one displaying remarkable technical competence, it is inferior to the other works heard here, the Op. 12 Quartet (in the same key) and the A minor Quartet, Op. 13, both of which occasionally eclipse their Classical models in their maturity and conviction. The Mandelring Quartett's captivating account of this early essay is well played throughout, though, with tightly sprung rhythms and an easy carefree manner which evinces the youthful buoyancy of the music to pleasing effect. There are some engaging touches in the lightly handled, plaintive Adagio, with the concluding Fugue also brought to life vividly and affirmatively.

The A minor Quartet is perhaps even more extraordinary than the Octet, for its unexpected seriousness and depth reveals the young Mendelssohn's creative maturity and also reveals that at 18, he had already acquired a working appreciation of Beethoven's late quartets. Writing in 1827, the year of Beethoven's death, and shortly after the publication of the late quartets (1826), Mendelssohn did not, to quote Michael Struck-Schloen's insert note, 'feel paralysed but inspired by this paragon ... his quartet in A minor is one of the first ever creative reactions to Beethoven's later style'.

This is a severe, impulsive and impassioned performance, immaculate in phrasing, ensemble and unanimity of purpose, and certainly among the best I've yet

encountered on disc. Both outer movements, with their unsettled and stormy faster sections, are instantly suggestive of Beethoven, notably in the first violin's tremolo-accompanied recitative at the start of the finale, though it should be remembered, too, that much as the finale of Beethoven's Op. 135 attempted to resolve the question 'Muss es sein?' ('Must it be?'), so Mendelssohn also integrates into Op. 13 a fragment from his earlier song 'Ist es wahr?' ('Is it true?'), Op. 9 No. 1. The Mandelring Quartett plays the A minor Quartet with unconstrained Beethovenian grandeur and severity, at once darker, stormier and more furiously insistent than the rival Emerson Quartet account, always so beautifully nuanced and fresh-minted that one felt it would be hard to beat, though in all save the puckish third-movement Intermezzo, it is the Mandelring's more palpably urgent approach that wins hands down.

No less assured and convincing, however, in Op. 13 is the excellent Henschel Quartet, which plays with equally committed intensity in the outer movements and gives a memorably eloquent performance of the heart-easing Adagio, too. However, Arte Nova's unflattering recording sounds congested and closely focused beside the spaciousness, clinical clarity and wider dynamic range of Audite's new SACD engineering. The performance of the Quartet in E flat, Op. 12 completes this new release in similarly assured and vigorous style, with the finale (a typically Mendelssohnian fleet-of-foot Allegro vivace) played with striking élan and brilliance.