



Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: String Quintets in A major (Op. 18 No. 1) & in B flat major (Op. 87 No. 2) & Four Pieces for String Quartet (Op. 81)

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Haydn, the “father of the string quartet”, never wrote a quintet for strings; nor did many classical composers (but Mozart did). As stated in the notes for this release, it was felt that the four instruments could achieve perfect harmony, and a “fifth person” did not add to the conversation. In the romantic era, adding richness to the inner parts was sometimes desired. The greatest quintet, Schubert’s in C, uses two cellos, but the two-violin format, as in Beethoven, Brahms, and Dvorak, is somewhat more common. Mendelssohn’s use two violas.

Quintet 1 bears the opus number 18, though it was in fact composed after Mendelssohn’s great Octet, Op. 20. This quintet is rarely performed, possibly because it is eclipsed by the monumental Octet, but I would not call it a minor work. It is mature, yet youthful in its exuberance. As the notes tell us, Mendelssohn here is “paying tribute to Mozart in tone-color, but thinking harmonically in romantic directions”. Quintet 2 was composed almost 20 years later, and it is full-blown romanticism. It opens with a heroic theme over tremolos, and almost never loses steam. Even III, Adagio, takes full advantage of the five instruments to produce a full-bodied, broad sound. IV sounds almost orchestral. The Pieces for Quartet, Op. 81 are charming minor works discovered and published after the composer’s death. This is Volume IV in Mandelring’s cycle of Mendelssohn’s complete chamber music for strings. I had the pleasure of reviewing Volume III (Octet, Quartet 5, and Pieces 1+2—May/June 2014), and this volume is also a delight. The Mandelring Quartet has a reputation for a homogeneous tone, and this quality is maintained when the ensemble is augmented (or doubled!). Perfect engineering, good notes. A must-have for lovers of chamber music for strings.