

Program notes by Brett Rutherford

## **FELIX MENDELSSOHN**

### **String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, Op 13 (1827)**

**Adagio – Allegro Vivace**

**Adagio non lento**

**Intermezzo (Allegretto con moto) – Allegro di molto**

**Presto – Adagio non lento**

Mendelssohn was in the bloom of his early period (in his case, his best one) when he encountered the late quartets of Beethoven. With the sheer nerve of youth, Felix simply put on Ludwig's shoes and wrote two brilliant quartets "in the manner" of his hero. It was 1827, Beethoven's last year on earth, and Mendelssohn's 18th year.

The Quartet in A Minor, which we hear tonight, was written in late summer 1827, closely modeled on the example of Beethoven's Op. 132. The companion quartet in Eb actually was not finished until 1829 even though it is called Op. 12, and the two works were published together in 1830.

Where Beethoven's quartet is inscribed with the unspoken words "Muss ist sein?" (Must it be?), visible only to the players or those following the score, Mendelssohn self-quotes in music from a song for voice and piano titled "Ist es wahr?" (Is it true?) This song from a poem by Johann Gustav Droyson, had been set earlier as the young composer's Op. 9 No. 1.

As befitting a man of tender years, the poem that he has chosen to quote in the quartet is not Beethoven's existential scream of "Must it be?" Mendelssohn's "Is it true?" is a love poem, plain and simple, and here are the words:

Is it true? Is it true that you walk daily on that leaf-strewn  
path, awaiting me beneath the grape arbor? That you consult the  
moonlight and all those little stars about me? Is it true? Speak!  
Only she knows what I feel — she feels it with me, faithful to  
me remaining, eternally faithful.

This self-consoling song opens and closes the quartet, but rest assured that the course of true love never runs true. There are agitation and storm aplenty in the Allegro vivace, once it commences, and all of Mendelssohn's Beethoven studies come into play. The first three notes of the song become a motive that plays many roles in the development of the movement, and, indeed, throughout the quartet. The viola introduces the main theme, and the cello is given the honor of presenting the second subject. The development is rich in counterpoint, and leads to a rip-roaring coda. The infectious assuredness of the music seems to say, "I am eighteen. I can do anything!"

The passionate Adagio opens and closes with a paraphrase of the "Is it true?" theme, framing a complex section of fugal work, showing that Mendelssohn, like Beethoven, knew his counterpoint and had studied his Bach.

Next comes the Intermezzo, in which the violin gets to sing out over pizzicato (plucked) accompaniment. If the middle section of the Intermezzo reminds listeners of the music from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, bear in mind that Mendelssohn had already written much of that music, at the ripe old age of sixteen!

The violin, over tremolo chords from the other players, runs through a cadenza-like passage to introduce the final Presto movement, a masterful finale with a brilliant, cyclic ending: the Adagio is recalled, and then the quartet ends with a return to the self-assured love song with which it began. Mendelssohn wrote more quartets, but he never again achieved quite this level of inspiration. Thank the gods — Youth does not know limits.

## **LOWELL LIEBERMANN**

### **String Quartet No. 4, Op. 103 (2007)**

Does the thought of listening to a string quartet by a still-living composer give you the distinct urge to suddenly remember a pressing appointment and hurry home? Must a modern work make one think of a bad day at the dentist? I have happy news for you (and bad news for the 12-tone crowd): Lowell Liebermann writes music the old-fashioned way. And he writes lots of it, and it gets performed again and again and again. He was the Orion Quartet's unanimous pick when they decided to commission a new work. I have heard Liebermann's works on recordings, and I would venture to place him in the ranks of American Romantics like Corigliano and Rorem. He might even wind up as a latter-day American Benjamin Britten, if his successes with opera are any indicator.

Since we cannot hear a recording or see the score, we have to take a previous listener's word for it that this quartet will thrill and delight. Musicologist Roger Evans heard the work at Mannes College in February and called it "a work that kept me at least figuratively on the edge of my seat." He called it "Romantic without turning its back on Modernism." Evans was startled when the quartet, which begins with a serious slow movement and works its way into intense polyphony and the anticipated fugato, saying, "by that point there had been enough variety-with-integrity that I thought nothing would surprise me."

Suddenly the quartet veers off into a "bluesy slow swing in 4/4 meter" that the critic feared was a serious misjudgment. How would Liebermann incorporate something that sounded perhaps too popular into the working-out of the rest of the quartet? This is not as uncommon as Evans may have thought — the example comes to mind of John Corigliano quoting an Albeniz tango in his landmark First Symphony. Liebermann pulls it off to the critic's satisfaction; it becomes "a cohesive work of art that is finally serious indeed, in its totality." A grumpy critic in Cleveland expressed annoyance at having to hear this work while waiting for a Beethoven quartet. I think you will understand, and share, the Orion Quartet's enthusiasm for Liebermann's music.

## LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

### **String Quartet No. 14 in c# Minor, Op. 131**

**Adagio, ma non troppo e molto espressivo**

**Allegro molto vivace**

**Allegro moderato**

**Andante, ma non troppo e molto cantabile**

**Presto**

**Adagio quasi un poco andant**

**Finale (Allegro)**

Beethoven's late quartets form a Himalayan range in chamber music. Dense, complex, sometimes inscrutable, they are notoriously "difficult." Beethoven himself said to one of his contemporaries: "They are not for you — they are for the future." Yet they possess incredible beauty, rapturous melodies, driving rhythms, harmonic surprises, abrupt changes of tempo and key. Writing something meaningful about the C# Minor Quartet in a few hundred words is like trying to depict a Tyrannosaurus Rex on a paper napkin. Late Beethoven — my goodness! — seven movements! Will the players make it to the end? Can anyone follow what Beethoven is up to here?

This masterful quartet may be one thing to string players, another to the musicologist, and something else yet again for the listener. Gleaning some hints from formal musical analysis, can we draw a general blueprint of what this highly varied work contains and conveys? Let's try.

The opening Adagio is a fugue. What goes on here? Beethoven devoted much study to Bach and Handel in his last years, and his late works are full of counterpoint and fugues. But we are used to fugues at the end of something, not as an opener. A fugue is an intellectual play of multiple voices, a show-off of technical skill. Wagner claimed that this stately fugue contains "the most melancholy sentiment ever expressed in music." Modern listeners may not agree, but the choice of C-Sharp Minor does contribute to this impression. Beethoven used this key in only one other major work, his Moonlight Sonata, whose first movement is dreamy and melancholy indeed. Beethoven chooses to begin with a show of brains, a brilliant academic fugue, a gesture of age and maturity. Contrast this measured, tightly stitched construction with the loose introductions to works like the Fourth and Seventh Symphonies. This Adagio is an introduction to the work proper, in the least expected form and with extreme self-restraint in modulation.

Beethoven slides up a half-tone to D Major for the ensuing Allegro molto vivace, a modulation that makes the movement sound odd. The 6/8 dancing theme, sweetened by unexpected ritards here and there, and its second subject veers about and almost sneaks back into C#, but Beethoven modulates instead to a respectable A Major. A brilliant coda fades away mysteriously.

The Allegro moderato that ensues is less than a minute in duration and is really a bridge to the Andante ma non troppo, the longest and most complex movement in the

work. The A Major theme (we are still far from the opening key of C# Minor) is followed by six variations and a coda. You won't hear the main theme repeated in recognizable expansions, compressions and changes of tempo. The variations are based instead on the harmony under the melody, so all most listeners — especially first-time listeners without score in hand — can make of this is to relax and enjoy the astonishingly varied and unexpected twists and turns. Beethoven's inspiration here may have been Bach's Goldberg Variations, a work which likewise takes the bass line, not the theme, as the take-off point.

The Presto that follows is a Scherzo, in E Major, a key that shares the same scale as C-Sharp Minor, so Beethoven is slowly but surely bringing us "home." It is simple and direct, very reminiscent of the Scherzo and Trio of the Seventh Symphony.

Beethoven does not let his Scherzo end with a clear coda, however. Instead he follows the last notes with an unexpected G-Sharp interjection, and a viola theme that may be based on a archaic French folk song. But this Adagio is another "bridge" movement, leading us to the Allegro finale. Although we are indeed back "home" in C# Minor, the high-art melancholia of the opening fugue is now a distant dream. This is earthy, foot-stomping, Thor-throwing-his-hammer Beethoven. The "all brains" fugue gives way to an "all heart" finale. Even though Beethoven introduces four notes from the opening fugue as part of the movement, only a critic would take notice of it. Beethoven also slides in a passage in the illegal key of D Major (the key of the second movement) in what Tovey calls a "shuddering cadential passage that breaks in upon the height of the passion."

So what do we make of this seven-movement monster? It's simpler than it looks if we take the fugue as a long introduction to the "first" movement. Discounting the "bridge movements" as modulating preludes, we have the beautiful set of variations as a "second" movement, a scherzo "third" movement, and a thunder-hurling finale, passionate but not happy. It really is a quartet-symphony, then, with a fugue as unorthodox introduction.

Is there a metaphoric or impressionistic arc to this quartet, something you can attach to it the way we attach "Fate" to the Fifth Symphony or "The Hero" to the Third Symphony? I think there is an arc to this work above and beyond its harmonic working-out. This quartet begins with Apollo, all brains, and ends with Dionysius, all human passion. Critic J.W.N. Sullivan confirms this by writing thus: "a return from those heights on which no man may permanently live to this less real but more insistent world in which we are plunged in the last movement, a world where as heroism which is also pathetic marches to its end attended by yearning and pain."