

About the works

Felix Mendelssohn wrote the **Octet** op. 20 in E-flat major when he was 16 with the rather unusual instrumentation of two string quartets - four violins, two violas and two celli. This piece is one of the most extraordinary and exceptional compositions in the chamber music repertoire.

All four movements of this octet are absolute masterpieces. The first movement (*Allegro moderato ma con fuoco*) affects the listener immediately with its robust and uplifting main theme in the soprano, sonorous tremolos in the middle voices and a descending bass. After the cantabile second theme is introduced, it is assimilated with the main theme. The development then leads into a phase of quiet contemplation that uses the second theme exclusively and brings the musical flow to a near standstill. Unexpectedly, the tempo picks up again with virtuoso parallel runs in all voices and leads into a dramatic climax in the recapitulation with the return of the main theme.

The second movement (*Andante*) is in C minor and begins with a lyrical theme that is repeated several times, interrupted by triplets that later develop into an original second theme. The main theme appears again only at the end of the movement. In between we have a wonderfully polyphonic fabric interwoven with repeating suspensions, reminding us of the counterpoint found in late Mozart.

The third movement is an alluring Scherzo (*Allegro leggiero*) that was so popular with Mendelssohn's contemporaries that at performances it often had to be repeated. His sister Fanny described the piece vividly as follows: "The whole piece is to be played staccato and pianissimo, the individual tremolos coming in here and there, the trills passing away with the quickness of lightning; everything is new, strange, and yet so insinuating and pleasing. One feels so near the world of spirits, lightly carried up into the air, one would like to take up a broomstick and follow the aerial procession."

The fourth movement (*Presto*) is a masterful combination of melodic song and counterpoint. It begins with a fugato theme that starts in the bass and develops into a six-part choral. It is immediately followed by a cantabile second theme consisting of a series of three fanfare-like leaps of fourths, which Handel had used earlier for his majestic fugato in the 'Halleluja' of his *Messiah*. This fanfare theme dominates the course of the finale, which ends with a furious stretto.

Even though we think of the original string version of the *Octet* as the epitome of chamber music when it comes to integration of all the different instruments, the version for piano four hands is equal in musical qualities to the string version. It is amazing that Mendelssohn was able to integrate all the voices

without overloading the piano transcription. For example, the Scherzo of the piano version captivates with great transparency and levity. Mendelssohn's instructions in this regard: *Si deve suonare questo Scherzo sempre pp e staccato* (This Scherzo needs to be constantly played pianissimo and staccato).

Undoubtedly, Mendelssohn had a personal and practical reason in taking on this transcription, as he would later play this version for piano four hands with Sophy Horsley and Ignaz Moscheles.

The correspondence between Mendelssohn and his publisher gives us an interesting perspective of his enthusiasm for the transcription and shows that this version for piano four hands was intended as an equal musical version and a labor of love that was dear to Mendelssohn's heart. He suggested to the editor of Breitkopf & Härtel publishing company: "I wish to arrange the Octet (Ottett) for piano duet and have it published at the same time, which would be quite opportune." Mendelssohn was actively involved in the proofreading and printing and was very pleased with the result: "The make-up is so exemplarily beautiful that this leaves nothing to be desired, I am thoroughly delighted with your gift."

During a trip to Scotland in 1829, Mendelssohn got the inspiration for his Scottish Symphony and for a concert overture for orchestra that he originally called The Lonely Island but then published under the name Fingal's Cave (die Fingalshöhle). He would revise the overture two more times before it appeared in Rome in 1830 as the **Hebrides Overture** op. 26 in B minor. The first performance of the final version, which Mendelssohn conducted, took place in 1833 in Berlin.

While in Scotland Mendelssohn wrote home, heading his letter 'On one of the Hebrides'. This letter contained the phrase: "In order to make you understand how extraordinarily the Hebrides have affected me, I have written down the following which came into my mind," followed by the first 20 bars of the Overture.

Along with the orchestral version of the Hebrides Overture Mendelssohn also composed – as in the case of the octet – a version for piano four hands that was completed just one day before the orchestra score and bears the date 'London, 19 June [18]32'. This work is one of Mendelssohn's most famous compositions and was highly appreciated and praised by Mendelssohn's contemporaries, including Wagner. Brahms remarked with admiration: "I would gladly give all my works if I had succeeded in composing a piece like the Hebrides Overture."

The **Sonata movement for two pianos** in G minor (without title or tempo marking) is a work of the young Mendelssohn, which he wrote at the age of eleven years. He also wrote another sonata for two pianos in D major with three

movements. Some historians suggest that he wrote both of these virtuoso pieces for himself and his sister Fanny, who was also an outstanding pianist. Even though the manuscript had apparent notational mistakes it was preserved by the Mendelssohn family, most likely because they were Mendelssohn's first compositions.

The **Songs Without Words** (Lieder ohne Worte) for solo piano belong to Mendelssohn's most popular and most performed works. It is not well known, however, that Mendelssohn transcribed and published at the same time several of these pieces for piano four hands. Undoubtedly, the Song Without Words op. 67 No. 1 in E-flat major is one of the most beautiful. A calmly flowing Andante cantabile, he dedicated the work to Queen Victoria with the following words: "Your Royal Highness allowed me to arrange my fifth Volume of the Songs without Words for 4 hands. Therefore, I venture to lay the enclosed at Your Majesty the Queen's and Royal Highness's feet [...] Might your Royal Highness every now and then play some of it and view it as a token of my profound gratitude for your gracious hospitality and for the experience of the memorable hours I was allowed to enjoy during my renewed stay last week!"