

## Mendelssohn Quartet No 1 in Eb major, op.12

Born in Hamburg, February 3rd 1809, Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (known to the western world as Felix Mendelssohn) was a German composer, pianist, organist and conductor of the early Romantic period. Recognised early on in life as being a musical prodigy, he took up piano lessons with his mother at the age of 6, giving his first public recital just 3 years later as an accompanist for a horn duo. Whilst demonstrating highly developed maturity towards creating music as a performer, Mendelssohn became a prolific composer from an early age, usually having his works performed by a private orchestra to an elite group of his wealthy parent's associates. He wrote 12 string symphonies between the ages of 12 and 14, a full orchestra symphony at aged 15 and his string octet which was written aged just 16, the latter of which began to demonstrate his true genius as a musician.

Mendelssohn's style of composition was very different to that of his contemporaries such as Liszt, Berlioz and Schumann. Often labelled as the "Classical Romantic", as a composer, Mendelssohn's style was more comparable to the works of Beethoven than his contemporaries. Musicologist Edwin Evans states "Mendelssohn was born into the romantic era, but his aristocratic fastidiousness made him averse to the romantic excesses of his time, even when writing for the orchestra." This further supports the idea that even though Mendelssohn was living in a time where romantic composition was prominent, he stuck to his own style of composing.

Mendelssohn composed his Eb major String Quartet in 1829. Begun in Berlin, it was finished later that year (September 14<sup>th</sup>) during a visit to London. It is said the quartet was dedicated to a friend of his younger sister Rebecka, named Betty Pistor. Betty was the daughter of a Berlin astronomer, whose singing may have also been the inspiration behind the earlier A<sup>b</sup> minor string quartet Op. 13. Mendelssohn wrote a note to the violinist Ferdinand David along with the quartet itself asking for the dedication to be changed from "To B.P" to "To B.R", reflecting the fact that Betty was soon to marry a man named Adolf Rudorff.

At the time of composition, Mendelssohn had well established himself as a performer and conductor, previously that year arranging and conducting a staging of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" in Berlin (Mendelssohn was said to have been one of the key figures in the revival of JS Bach's music, this performance led Mendelssohn to widespread critical acclaim all by the young age of 20). Throughout this String Quartet, the influence of Beethoven on Mendelssohn's compositional style is evident. The adagio section bears great similarities with Beethoven's "Eb Harp Quartet Op.74". From the very first opening bar, beginning on the dominant seventh chord and resolving in the subdominant demonstrates such characteristics. Mendelssohn was aware of the influence Beethoven had over him, and in a fairly frank letter to his former teacher Carl Zelter, he explained that whilst he knew he could be led into imitation through his love for Beethoven, he was not duplicating, but merely continuing his work. Mendelssohn's fascination with counterpoint and fugal texture was sparked by the works of the baroque composer, JS Bach, whose influence is also apparent within this piece.

The Quartet consists of 4 movements. These are as follows:

1. Adagio non troppo – Allegro non tardante
2. Canzonetta: Allegretto - a beautifully graceful, light and wonderfully simple canzonetta, dance-like.
3. Andante espressivo - melodious third movement, described as a 'noble song of thanksgiving'.
4. Molto allegro e vivace - very spirited, impetuous and extremely brisk finale.

The aforementioned influence on Mendelssohn from Beethoven is immediately apparent in the first movement. The slow opening introduction is reminiscent of the beginning of Beethoven's 'Harp' String Quartet Op.74. Mendelssohn once again employs cyclical thematic techniques to join the score together, Mvt. 3 recalls a theme stated in the first movement. The introduction to the first movement also provides most of the musical material found within the same movement, again putting this idea of a cyclic composition into practice.

The simple two bar phrase that opens the first movement is a direct homage to Beethoven's 'Harp' Quartet. The dominant 7<sup>th</sup> would imply the piece is modulating immediately, however this is just a device Mendelssohn has set up called a leaning, where a new key is implied, but not fully used. In this case, he has set up a leaning towards the subdominant. In the following bar, he also makes use of another technique often used by Beethoven, three short notes in preparation for one long note. The purpose of this short phrase is to inform the listener that it has modulated back to Eb (lack of Db's). This second motif is also used as the melody for the contrapuntal texture set up in bar 6, where the 4 note melody is played amongst itself in the other voices. The

opening 17 bars of this piece not only make up the introduction, but also map out most of the melodic devices that Mendelssohn will use throughout the piece. In addition to subdominant leanings, suspensions and appoggiaturas provide a sense of unease and increasing tension, as well as one of the pathways through which composers are able to explore different keys. The final main feature of the introduction is this idea of melody dominated homophony, where the lead voice assumes a melody, whilst the other voices accompany it with chordal support.

“Allegro non tardante” (Bar 18) marks the official start to this piece (with regards to sonata form). This is therefore the exposition, presenting itself in a quite predictable key of the tonic, Eb major. His almost immediate use of an auxiliary note, alongside the long lyrical phrasing and contrasting dynamics would suggest a lean towards romanticism, and demonstrates him breaking out of the classical mould. Mendelssohn’s choice to modulate is usually facilitated by a sequence, and in this case it is no exception. B.45 initiates the sequence, where the violins playing in thirds travel to F minor, then repeat a tone higher to arrive in G minor.

The key of G minor that has now been established is to set up a means of modulating to the dominant (Bb major), via 4 bars incorporating sequential diminished chords (another modulation technique). Indeed, the second subject starts in the dominant, but was reached via the relative minor of the dominant. Another characteristic of Mendelssohn is his tendency to explore different keys before getting to where he wishes to be. On b.13 of the second subject, Mendelssohn adds more colour to the piece by modulating to Eb minor. This fairly outlandish modulation would not have been seen in the classical period, as Bb major and Eb minor are so unrelated (opposite sides on the circle of 5ths). The change in key is to set us up for the codetta, which is a brief return to the dominant key, Bb major, before moving into the development.

The development starts in Eb, something we would not expect of standard sonata form. This is Mendelssohn going against the rules that so closely governed sonata form from the earlier periods. The development opens with the same melody as the exposition, and the fact it is in the same key may fool the listener into thinking the piece is ‘returning home’. In fact, Mendelssohn now modulates F minor, introducing a haunting melody first played by the second violin. This melody becomes part of a sequential phrase, modulated to G minor, and then to A minor. Where the piece modulates to A minor shows contrapuntal texture, with the violin melody passing to the viola, and then to the cello. After this brief contrapuntal effect, Mendelssohn then brings back the melodic shape from the start of the exposition and sets up a fugue with it, passing the melody between the voices. This fascination with contrapuntal textures and fugue like figures came from Mendelssohn’s interest in the composer JS Bach, and is often evident throughout his pieces.

This fugue like passage leads into an intensely chromatic, cadential like figure. Again, the chromaticism provides as a means to modulate, this time with a cadence in G minor. B.179 is the start of the recapitulation, back to the tonic Eb major. This has a tertiary relationship to the previous key of G minor. Unsurprisingly, the recapitulation is very similar to the exposition, harmonised slightly differently. There are a few exceptions, however. Whereas in the exposition, the unrelated key he chose to use was Eb minor, this time the same figure is written but in Ab minor. Again, this adds colour, alongside the pianissimo dynamics almost implying sorrow. This builds up by crescendo and sequence to establish us back in the tonic. It is here we soon find a coda, where new material is added and the key of F minor is brought back. After 12 bars of chromatic modulation, the haunting melody that was heard earlier makes another appearance, however this time it does not move to G minor, or A minor, instead moves straight back to Eb. The main theme is sequenced here, leading up to the ending of the piece. The final few bars feel relatively restrained, and the pianissimo marking leaves the listener with a peaceful ending to the piece.

It is easy to see the huge impact Beethoven and Bach had on Mendelssohn’s life, with compositional devices from both of them used extensively by Mendelssohn throughout his compositions. His style of composition was much more restrained than others at his time, and some would argue subsequently much more refined, due to his refusal to “step out of the box”. Whereas composers like Schumann were exploring the extent to which they could take their music, Mendelssohn was happy to compose in a more mannered style, sticking so the classical guidelines, but managing to rise above the somewhat orthodox approach that seemed to govern the composition of classical music. Mendelssohn had supreme grasp of lyricism, he excelled in understatement and was able to provide colouristic orchestrations that provided his works with an undeniable freshness and brilliance.