Mendelssohn

Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor op. 49
Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor op. 66

The Florestan Trio: Anthony Marwood *vn*, Richard Lester *vc*, Susan Tomes *pf*

Hyperion CDA67485 (54 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

Among the most welcome additions to the growing, critically acclaimed discography of the Florestan Trio is the 2005 release on the Hyperion label of Mendelssohn's two piano trios. This recording offers superb ensemble playing, thoroughly attuned to the spirit of the music and its emotional depth and variety. The ensemble vividly brings to life a range of musical characters and moods – the quiet, syncopated agitation at the beginning of op. 49, the brooding, murky opening of op. 66 with its layered sonorities, the unaffected lyricism of the slow movements, quicksilver quirkiness of the scherzi, and culminating dramas of the finales. There are deft touches that keep the music fresh and unpredictable – for instance, the restrained pedalling in bars 19–23 of op. 49/I, yielding translucent piano arpeggiations, and the playful cross-rhythms in the strings in bars 45–47 of op. 49/III that momentarily agitate against the 6/8 metre. There are also breathtaking tempi: if the scherzo of op. 49 adds a few seconds to the ever so brisk pace of the 1950 recording by Rubinstein, Heifetz and Piatigorsky, the Florestan's scherzo of op. 66, dispatched in only 3:34, trims several seconds off the 1979 rendition of the Stern-Istomin-Rose Trio, as does the finale of op. 66 (7:17). And yet, reigning over the whole production is an overarching sense of balance and proportion that is ultimately Mendelssohnian, and underscores the composer's classicist convictions.

Mendelssohn came to the piano trio in 1820 at the unusually young age of eleven, when, under the supervision of his teacher C.F. Zelter, he wrote a trio for piano, viola and cello in C minor. The use of the viola shows that he was aware of Mozart's 'Kegelstadt' Trio K. 498, and his boyhood effort reveals other debts to the eighteenth century, including a slow movement constructed upon a baroque *basso ostinato* figure, a nod, no doubt, to Zelter's conservative tastes. Not until 1839 did Mendelssohn return to the genre of the trio, when, established as the municipal music director in Leipzig, where he presided over the Gewandhaus, he published the Piano Trio in D minor op. 49. This was the work that impelled Robert Schumann in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* to label Mendelssohn the Mozart of the nineteenth century. In the intervening years, Mendelssohn had remained active as a chamber musician, and clearly knew intimately the leading German exponents of the genre, including the trios of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Then, in 1836, at a soirée hosted by Robert Schumann's advocate Henriette Voigt, Mendelssohn read at sight Schubert's Piano Trio in B♭ major,[1] and his discovery of this work – outside Vienna, Schubert's music was still relatively unknown; Mendelssohn's landmark premiere of the 'Great' Symphony occurred in 1839

[1] Robert Schumann, *Tagebücher I (1827–1838)*, ed. Georg Eismann (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1971): 27.

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– may have encouraged him to write a new trio. But a letter to the composer Ferdinand Hiller of 17 August 1838 suggests too that Mendelssohn desired to resuscitate a genre he believed in jeopardy of falling into oblivion: '… a very important branch of pianoforte music which I am particularly fond of – trios, quartets and other things with accompaniment – is quite forgotten now, and I greatly feel the want of something new in that line. I should like to do a little towards this.'[2]

As it happened, Ferdinand Hiller played an unusual role in the creation of op. 49. When Mendelssohn read through the manuscript of the new trio, Hiller found the piano part too traditional for his tastes:

> Certain pianoforte passages in it, constructed on broken chords, seemed to me – to speak candidly – somewhat old-fashioned. I had lived many years in Paris, seeing Liszt frequently, and Chopin every day, so that I was thoroughly accustomed to the richness of passages which marked the new pianoforte school. I made some observations to Mendelssohn on this point, suggesting certain alterations, but at first he would not listen to me. 'Do you think that that would make the thing any better?' He said, 'The piece would be the same, and so it may remain as it is.' 'But,' I answered, 'you have often told me … that the smallest touch of the brush, which might conduce to the perfection of the whole, must not be despised. An unusual form of arpeggio may not improve the harmony, but neither does it spoil it – and it becomes more interesting to the player.' We discussed it and tried it on the piano over and over again, and I enjoyed the small triumph of at last getting Mendelssohn over to my view.[3]

At Hiller's bidding, Mendelssohn recast the piano part, without altering the thematic contents and formal proportions of the music, and in the process modified the passagework so as to lessen its dependence on an earlier age of piano technique. Bars 66ff. of the first movement – the explosive, *fortissimo* second statement of the opening theme – provide one instructive example. In the original version Mendelssohn set the theme, doubled by the cello, in octaves in the bass of the piano, against which the violin executed tremolo quaver chords, and the treble of the piano fairly conventional, descending arpeggiations in triplets.[4] As conceived, the passage could easily have been written by the young Beethoven, if not Mozart. In revising the passage, Mendelssohn thickened the piano arpeggiations by augmenting them with an additional voice, and abandoned the violin tremolo chords in favour of detached ascending arpeggiations. The result was a dramatic intensification of the passage and its wash of cascading harmonies – and, in the case of the piano part, something distinctly more 'modern'.

Though one of the great virtuosi of the age, Mendelssohn remained ever suspicious of virtuosity for mere show, and on more than one occasion expressed his distaste for the athletic wares of virtuosi then becoming fashionable in concert halls. Even Liszt, whose staggering technique Mendelssohn certainly admired, did not escape criticism for his 'lack' of truly 'original' musical ideas. Much of the piano music of the 1830s Mendelssohn found 'desperately empty and poor', so that, as he admitted to Ignaz Moscheles, he tired of it on the very first page.[5] If

[2] Ferdinand Hiller, *Mendelssohn: Letters and Recollections*, trans. M.E. von Glehn, (New York: Vienna House, 1972): 131.

[3] Ibid., 154–5.

[4] *Mendelssohn Nachlass* (Cracow: Biblioteka Jagiellońska): 31.

[5] *Letters of Felix Mendelssohn to Ignaz and Charlotte Moscheles*, ed. F. Moscheles (Boston: Ticknor, 1888): 156.

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the garish glare of virtuosity posed a serious threat to the very integrity of music, chamber music, a relatively insulated, tradition-bound repertory, offered in 1839 an escape for Mendelssohn intent upon raising musical standards. Perhaps not by accident, then, did he dedicate his second piano trio, in C minor op. 66, to the violinist Louis Spohr, like Mendelssohn a composer who had devoted a significant portion of his output to chamber works.

Some mystery surrounds this composition, which Felix created relatively quickly between February and April 1845, and released early in 1846 through Breitkopf & Härtel. In November of that year, he presented the autograph to his sister Fanny Hensel on her birthday (in 1991 it finally came into public view through its acquisition by the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin).[6] Like op. 49, op. 66 offers two substantial end movements in sonata and sonata-rondo form that surround more intimate inner movements, a *Lied-ohne-Worte*-like (of the solo *and* duet varieties) slow movement and a skittish scherzo, this one in G minor and a 2/4 metre that occasionally brings to mind the scherzo of the Octet. But the *pièce de résistance* is the dramatic finale, with its enigmatic chorale that unexpectedly appears in bars 128ff.

It begins by quietly alluding nearly note for note to the opening phrase of *Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ*, a hymn melody that would have been familiar enough to the converted Lutheran Mendelssohn. But the remaining phrases of his chorale pursue their own path, so that the passage counts as a 'pseudo', imaginary chorale, like those encountered in several of his instrumental works, including the Fugue in E minor op. 35, no. 1, second movement of the *Lobgesang* Symphony, and slow movement of the Cello Sonata in D major op. 58. Why Mendelssohn brought the chorale into the domain of the piano trio is unknown, but it seems significant that he took the trouble to link the new chorale motivically to the first and second themes of his finale. Thus, the opening neighbour-note motif of the first theme, presented by the cello as the expressive ninth g–a♭′–g′, is transformed in the second theme to the whole-step b♭′–c″–b♭′ (bar 49), preparing, in turn, the initial whole step of the chorale: e♭′–e♭′–e♭′–f′–e♭′ (bar 128). Mendelssohn thus positioned the chorale as the thematic goal of the movement, the result of a thematic process that unfolds through the course of the sonata rondo. The technique was not lost on Brahms, who in the finale of his Piano Quartet No. 3 in C minor op. 60 (a movement that begins by referencing the first movement of Mendelssohn's op. 66) incorporated his own, newly designed chorale melody. As had Mendelssohn in 1845, so too Brahms in 1875 found chamber music relevant, and worthy of nurturing.

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[6] For a facsimile of the first page, see H.-G. Klein, *Das verborgene Band: Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy und seine Schwester Fanny Hensel* (Wiesbaden: L. Reichert, 1997): 225.

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