

Wednesday, July 21, 2010

Notable 6

Dolphin Bay

String Quartet in E minor, op. 44, no. 2 (1837)

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

Allegro assai appassionato

Scherzo: Allegro di molto

Andante

Presto agitato

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)—*String Quartet in E minor*, op. 44, no. 2 (1837)

Eyebrows are usually raised upon learning that Mendelssohn's *String Quartet in E minor* was composed during his honeymoon. What we must remember, however, is that many nineteenth-century wedding trips were no fleeting "five days, four nights" excursions to Cancún; instead, a honeymoon journey might last more than a month, as was the case for Mendelssohn and his new bride Cécile: they left for the Black Forest in March and didn't return to Frankfurt until May. Moreover, the quartet was not completed until they had been home for several weeks.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting the circumstances that gave rise to the quartet, since Mendelssohn's marriage seems to have been especially happy—not always the case for composers! It is easy to persuade ourselves that the quartet reflects that contentment, despite its use of the minor mode. Analysts can demonstrate that Mendelssohn employs an ambitious sonata-form architecture in all movements, but listeners will probably choose to focus on how the first movement's sonata form ushers in two flowing themes after an upward skyrocket at the opening. The skittering drive of the "Scherzo" with its rhythmic twists and cascades of notes is simply exhilarating; it is hard not to chuckle at the quiet ending after such a galloping romp. Mendelssohn refuses to let the players drag during the "Andante," and the movement reminds us that this is the same composer who had already written many "Songs Without Words." Then, as if the "Presto agitato" wasn't brilliant enough, he requires the quartet to play "con fuoco" (with fire) near the end.

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