

Sunday 27th June 2021, 3pm & 8pm

Festival Finale

Penarth Pier Pavilion

String Quartet in A minor, Op.13

Felix Mendelssohn (1810-1856)

Composed 1827

Published 1830

- I. *Allegro vivace assai—Presto*
- II. *Allegro assai*
- III. *Adagio*
- IV. *Finale: Allegro molto*

David Adams *violin*, Lesley Hatfield *violin*, Scott Dickinson *viola*, Kate Gould *cello*

The date of composition is what matters here, for the A minor Quartet, though his second published, is Mendelssohn's first attempt at quartet writing. Not even Beethoven, in his epoch-defining Op. 18 quartets, can claim a more auspicious debut in this most daunting of genres. This work, written by an 18-year-old, is no less impressive than those other more often played masterpieces from Mendelssohn's mid-to-late teenage years, the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 21 (composed the same summer as the Quartet), and the Octet, Op. 20.

A mystery surrounds the composition of this quartet, perhaps one that will never be solved. In many of its devices, from brief reminiscences to elements of large-scale form, the work would seem to be unmistakably built upon the foundations of Beethoven's monumental meditation on pain and transcendence, the Quartet in A minor, Op. 132. However, though written in the Spring of 1825, Beethoven's quartet was not published until September 1827, some two months *after* Mendelssohn had written much of his own quartet, and even completed the first movement. Nevertheless, the correspondences are so great that it is generally assumed Mendelssohn must have seen a copy of Beethoven's quartet. These correspondences occur throughout the work, though most strikingly in the sequence that begins with the second movement F major adagio, which is followed by a march that in turn leads directly to a recitative and the final anguished *Presto*, a sequence that holds a mirror to Beethoven's own procedure in the last three movements of his Op. 132.

If Beethoven has proven to be an extratextual lodestar for critics, the centrality of Mendelssohn's own song "Frage", Op. 9, No. 1, was made clear by the composer himself, who included it in the first publication of the Quartet, facing the title page and entitled "Thema." "Frage" is a song of youthful love, one that is quite sincere and quick to fade, as it seems happened with the ardour felt between Mendelssohn and a young woman whose name has been forgotten by history. "Is it true?" the lover asks, "That you wait there for me / In the arbour by the vineyard wall?" In the beginning of the Quartet, Mendelssohn uses only the question "Is it true?" (thus, also invoking the question animating Beethoven's Quartet, Op. 135, "Muß es sein?"). But at the very end of the final movement, the latter part of the song makes an appearance – "What I feel, can only be understood / By she who feels as I do, and is true / to me / Forever, remains forever true." Bookended by explicit references to the song and making organic use of the song's materials throughout the work, this is an astounding composition by one so young, displaying a remarkably prescient understanding of the intricacies of memory and desire. It has no equal.

But to have taken one of Beethoven's grandest statements, a work that, in the *Heiliger Dankgesang*, traverses heaven and earth and feels like heaven *on* earth, a work that looks straight at death and still asserts a hope in the humble blessings of Earth's diurnal course – to have taken *that* work and seen within it a shimmer of oneself, to have found within it a grammar that would allow one to commemorate not mortality and grace, but the brief love of a fleeting summer – perhaps that slightly self-obsessed gloss is the only aspect of this titanic masterpiece that marks it as the work...of a teenager.

String Quartet in A minor, Op.132

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Composed 1825

Published 1827

- I. *Assai sostenuto - Allegro*
- II. *Allegro ma non tanto*
- III. *Heilige Dankgesang eines Genesenden an die Gottheit, in der lyrischen Tonart: Molto Adagio - Neue kraft fühlend: Andante*
- IV. *Alla marcia, assai vivace - Più allegro*
- V. *Allegro appassionato - Presto*

Lesley Hatfield *violin*, David Adams *violin*, Scott Dickinson *viola*, Alice Neary *cello*

“Hymn of thanks from a convalescent to the deity, in the Lydian mode.” The famous title of the third movement of Beethoven’s late String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132, has, from first publication to the present day, set the bounds of interpretation. Beethoven was unwell, too sick to work; this sublime music was his response at coming through the illness. The use of an old Church mode contrasted with ebullient music in D major, labelled “feeling new strength” - the piece explains itself. This work has, from the first audiences to hear it (and those first audiences, contrary to popular belief, *did* get it) to those today, offered a vision of transcendence unparalleled in music – and nothing but chagrin to all those who have tried to match it in prose.

Why was Beethoven unwell? Simply put, in addition to anything unfortunate from which he was suffering – and Beethoven was unfortunate - he really hadn’t thought too much about what he was putting into himself for most of his adult life. So, in the Spring of 1825, genuinely deathly ill, Beethoven was set on a course of no coffee, no tea, no alcohol – in fact, the only decent thing he was allowed was hot chocolate. Otherwise, it was bland soup, and not much else. Asparagus. Beethoven wondered, surely I might be allowed white wine diluted with water? No, came the answer. Absolutely no white wine, diluted with water or not. And, added Doktor *Braunhofer*, eat your asparagus. Beethoven hated the diet so much that he claimed a Doctor Brown in England had evidence to the effect that this sort of abstinence was far worse for you than any ailment you could possibly have. Doktor Braunhofer did not recognise the merits of English medical science. And seriously, Dr *Brown*? Are you kidding me? Beethoven had no choice but to stick to the diet. Considering how bad off he was, and considering this wasn’t exactly cutting-edge medicine, even for 1825, he began to feel better rather surprisingly quickly - and of course immediately resumed his previous gastronomic practice. And he also returned to the composition of his A minor String Quartet, specifically the massive slow movement at its heart. So far as is known, no one else has ever responded to the successful completion of a detox diet by writing a *Heiliger Dankgesang*.

Many commentators pay tribute to the ethereal beauties of the Lydian hymn, and rightly so, but go on to claim that the “new strength” sections are idealised too – a strength wished for, never attained. But Beethoven *did* get back what he wanted – his appetite, and the ability to continue his work. He even wrote a joke canon on the *Heiliger Dankgesang*. In any case, his vision of heaven is more profound for its contrast with the humble joys of food, fellowship, and drink – we would do well to remember Beethoven’s own phlegmatic sense of humour.

As for the other movements, a universe is drawn with a minimum of strokes. The first movement changes style every few bars, shifting from mystery to march, from song to scream. The minuet shows off Beethoven’s contrapuntal learning, continuing a tradition of being subtly abstruse in a genre known for its wit and grace. If one prefers not to hear any irony at all in the title of the third movement, surely the fourth movement March brings that quality in abundance, simply through its juxtaposition with the staggering climax of the *Heiliger Dankgesang*, a summary cancellation of the vision of Elysium, before it too is swept away incomplete by a cadenza that launches a finale of anguish and frustration. The quartet ends in the major, but this is a major no longer coming from a place of strength, new or old. But a shining light it is – asserted in the teeth of encroaching darkness.

Mahler said that a symphony must be like the world. No symphony written by Mahler or anyone else, no matter how long, no matter how grand, no matter the size of the orchestra or the size of the chorus, has more world in it than does this quartet.

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