

String Quartet No. 6 in F minor, Op. 80 (1847)

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy
(1809-1847)

Allegro vivace assai
Allegro assai
Adagio
Finale: Allegro molto

Mendelssohn's *String Quartet No. 6 in F minor* contains some of the last notes and ideas he had before his premature death at the age of 38. This work is written by a very experienced and skilled Mendelssohn, and like Mozart, one would shudder to think of the quality and quantity of pieces we might have had from these composers had they lived a full life like Bach or Haydn. The maturity and high quality of composition shines throughout this quartet. It is also interesting to note that Mendelssohn had not written a quartet for almost 10 years before this work (Quartets Op, 44 no. 1-3 were written in 1837-8).

On May 12, 1847 Mendelssohn learned of the news of his sister Fanny's death. Because of his extreme fondness for his sister, the news came to him as a shattering blow, and he confessed that he "could not think of work, or even music, without feeling the most intense emptiness and barrenness in the mind and heart." He later did return to composing again in July, on this work, and the resulting composition surprised everyone who knew Mendelssohn in his usual lighter genial character. This quartet exploits some of Mendelssohn's most anguished tragic and intense emotions.

The turmoil and angst of the opening tremolos in the first movement reflect these intense feelings he must have been feeling after Fanny's death. This trembling, spookier first theme is contrasted by a more somber lyrical second theme; perhaps this is Mendelssohn trying to forget the tragedy of his sister for a few moments. But then later the intense trembling begins again, and the anguished spirit is never completely lost throughout the movement- but in fact is intensified by the quickening of the tempo at the end of the work that ultimately ends in despair with forceful minor chords struck in unison by the quartet.

The second movement is dark intense Scherzo in a 3 meter, which featured a violin melody in syncopation with the more stolid beat-marking lower 3 voices. The middle section, which begins with the viola and cello playing the melody in the lower register in octaves, has a ghostly, spooky quality. Mendelssohn was undoubtedly thinking about deathly images here, and perhaps contemplating his own death (which happened only a few months after he composed this work).

Some of Mendelssohn's most beautiful and lyrical writing appears in the third movement of this work *Adagio*. This songful peaceful work probably is Mendelssohn saying goodbye to his sister, for there are many moments of despair, and happiness, perhaps shedding light to the happy and painful times the two siblings had shared with each other in their lives.

The final movement utilizes a quick string crossing technique, often avoided by composers because it is not the most flattering way to write for string instruments, but here it seems to be very effective, as it adds to the deathly quality this work possesses. Even though this work as a whole has such dark characters exploited, Mendelssohn cannot help himself but to allow the charm in his personality to show when he gives us a lighter second theme to hear in this final movement. This movement is written virtuously in all parts, especially the first violin, and the work is extremely effective in closing in an upbeat fashion.

The opus numbers in the cataloguing of Mendelssohn's works have very little to do with the date at which he wrote the pieces, especially for his posthumous and later works. There is another quartet Op. 81, which is 4 works written at different times earlier in his life, and he has works that go up to Op. 118, but in fact this work remains to be his last completed work before his death that occurred after a short illness in November 1847.

Notes by Kenneth Martinson