6 255 Combinations

Mendelssohn's Octet in E flat, Op. 20

1 Allegro moderato ma con fuoco 2 Andante
3 Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo 4 Presto

The Octet has been too often thought of as a miracle which came from nowhere. This is not so. Mendelssohn was lucky enough to have been born into a sympathetic family with a privileged background who encouraged his exceptional talents: he had five years of composing experience behind him when he wrote the piece. His first work with an opus number was a Piano Quartet in C minor, written in 1821 when he was 13. He wrote two operettas and started a third in the following year. Eight symphonies for strings date from 1821-22, and four more followed in 1823. These works, only published late on in the twentieth century, have come into the repertoire within the last 30 years: the best of them show an amazing maturity. They were followed in 1824 by the splendid Symphony for full orchestra in D minor, Op. 11. From 1824 too comes a D major Sextet for piano and strings (the Octet's immediate precursor), the Rondo Capriccioso for piano, two concertos for two pianos, and a third piano quartet, in B minor, completed in 1825.

All this fluent and often inspired composition was going on against the background of a strict classical education: firstly with his tutor Karl Heyse, then from 1825 at the University of Berlin, listening (not altogether seriously) to the lectures of Hegel. At home he moved in a circle of great intellectual distinction. In the summer of 1825 the Mendelssohns had moved to a new house with grounds just outside Berlin; there they formed a salon. The young Felix would meet the distinguished scientist Alexander von Humboldt, the philosopher Hegel himself, a diplomat-to-be, an orientalist, a theologian, a philologist. He also met the actor Eduard Devrient, a close friend with whom four years later he was to collaborate on putting on the St. Matthew Passion. And of course there were musicians. Amongst them was the young violinist Eduard Rietz for whom this Octet was written: it is dedicated to him, and the holograph score which once belonged to him is now in the Library of Congress.

Towering over all this intellectual array was the young Mendelssohn's friendship with the old Goethe. Goethe's friend and Mendelssohn's teacher, Zelter, took the boy to see the master, then 72, at Weimar in November 1821: Mendelssohn paid five visits between 1821 and 1830. Mendelssohn would play Bach to him, and Goethe was enraptured; later, he tried Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and Goethe didn't like it at all. The Scherzo of the Octet (according to Fanny Mendelssohn) came from a reading of the *Walpurgisnachtstraum* scene from *Faust, Part One*, and in particular the closing lines:

Wolkenzug und Nebelflor
Erhellen sich von oben.
Luft im Laub und Wind im Rohr –
Und alles ist zerstoben.

Floating cloud and trailing mist
Are illuminated from above.
Breeze in the foliage and wind in the reeds –
And all is turned to dust.

The Octet created by itself a new, hybrid genre. Tovey, as always, puts it best:

> Octets for strings show signs of clotting into an orchestral style. Spohr hit upon the device of dividing the eight into antiphonal quartets: and his four double quartets are much nearer to the true style of chamber music than his string quartets … Mendelssohn, in the wonderful Octet that he wrote at the age of 16, does not find Spohr's simple antiphonal scheme worth the trouble of specially grouping the players when he can use 255 different combinations of the eight without enquiring how they are seated.

Spohr's first double quartet was written before Mendelssohn's Octet, in 1823: the other three were after it, in 1827, 1832-33, and 1847. Years later, Spohr wrote in his autobiography that, whereas his four double quartets 'remain the only ones of their kind' (he was writing some 80 years before Milhaud!) the Mendelssohn Octet 'belongs to quite another kind of art'. It is in fact a genre half-way between chamber and orchestral music: Mendelssohn writes in a sometimes orchestral way for a chamber group. The octet is the true and glorious culmination of those dozen string symphonies that immediately preceded it. Another possible source is more intriguing. We think of the peculiarly fairy-music quality of the Mendelssohnian scherzo as very much his own creation. John Horton, though, has found a precursor in Cherubini's E♭ quartet of 1809: he suggests that it was the French violinist Baillot who drew Mendelssohn's attention to it while he was visiting Paris earlier in 1825 (and being treated with great condescension by sour old Cherubini).

As so often, none of the usual sources give the date, place or circumstance of the first performance of the Octet: but it would almost certainly have been a private one. (Tragically, the dedicatee Eduard Rietz was to die very young, in 1832.) We know that the work was well-known in Paris during the 1830s. Schumann mentions performances at Leipzig during Ferdinand David's *Abendunterhaltungen* in the season 1839-40. In 1848 Schumann's friend and colleague Niels Gade paid the Octet the sincerest form of flattery by writing one himself. After that, its influence went in two directions: one of them the interest

of the later nineteenth century in pieces for string orchestra by Grieg, Dvořák and Elgar. There are also string octets by Enescu (1900) and Shostakovich (1924, his Op. 11).

The richness and variety of the virtuosic manipulation of many of Tovey's 255 instrumental combinations runs throughout the work: it should be stressed in detail, or not at all. Mendelssohn altogether avoids any touch of Spohr: only rarely is there any passage in which one quartet plays against the other. Mendelssohnian energy informs three out of the four movements. The beginning is orchestral. The comparatively concise development of 89 bars in the first movement allows for brief, but poignant calm in the middle, leading into a meditative statement of the secondary theme in F minor, sinking to E♭ and then a more complete peace before building towards the return. The thoroughly re-written recapitulation has an even more magical moment of calm in ♭VII, that is, D♭.

The slow movement begins by being tonally ambiguous. Violas and cellos start in C minor. But after three bars the upper instruments respond with a prolonged passage in the Neapolitan key (D♭) ending on A♭. It takes another 12 bars to affirm C minor as the home key, and then the music is almost immediately off again, making a slow journey towards the relative major. The melting series of suspensions (rising layer on layer over the downwards-floating scale of the other part) that makes up the second idea, has the ravishing, transcendent beauty that one encounters in the Bach Cantatas, re-cast here in nineteenth-century terms. When this passage returns at the end of the movement it is of course in the tonic major, C. But there is still a surprise: the music turns breathtakingly aside through an interrupted cadence into A♭, before the head of the primary theme comes back as a coda with its original C minor/D♭ antiphony.

It is difficult to find words that could possibly enhance enjoyment of the Scherzo. At once a perfect and sufficient piece of abstract music and the most vivid tone-painting of wind-swept, cloud-wracked Nature, it is all gossamer, filigree, fugitive enchantment. The development, after the sparest of faery beginnings – pinpricks with which the movement will end – has imitations at one beat's interval circling dizzily down through seven of the eight instruments and an intricate passage featuring trills for solo violin, which must have taken all of Rietz's skills to master for the first time.

The finale is more unbridled and brusquer in its energy than the first movement. It carries on the grand tradition in which polyphony and homophony are ideally mated and played off against each other, as in other finales such as Mozart's K. 387 and his Jupiter Symphony. The cello sets off the initial fugal exposition at a tremendous lick (determining the fortunes of all the other players throughout the movement). A counter-melody in minims of falling sixths is followed immediately by brusque stamping unisons in all instruments. After the fugal theme has reappeared homophonically treated in the first violin, this falling-sixths melody becomes one strand in a two-part counterpoint, the

other being in quavers. Amid all this busy-ness, legato chordal passages are interposed (rather as they are in the finale of Mozart's K. 464 quartet or in the first movement of Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata) and, with the music firmly in the dominant, the falling-sixth theme is treated in this calmer way.

A solo passage for the first violin brings back the original fugal exposition, this time with a triadic counter-melody in longer values. Into the succeeding polyphony, and after much modulation, there are a number of insertions of the Scherzo's main theme: they end up in the Scherzo's original key of G minor. The battering unisons return and the energy is quite unabated as the first violin has some 40 bars of continuous quavers amidst the cadencing of other instruments at the close.

Source: Programme book for a concert given by the Endellion and Chiligirian String Quartets on 16 June 1992 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London. The other items in the programme were Strauss's String Sextet from *Capriccio* and Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* (see above).