

PROGRAM NOTES

Partita for String Octet

SALLY BEAMISH

b. August 26, 1956, London

Premiere

October 4, 2019, Columbus, Georgia, USA

Performance Time

12 minutes (TBC)



For the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, and dedicated to PFT

This piece is inspired by my experience of the Carl Nielsen Violin Competition, where I was a juror in March 2019. I heard many superb performances of the Bach solo sonatas and partitas, and for 10 days, my head was filled with Bach.

Felix Mendelssohn was strongly influenced by Bach and Handel, and this is evident in his brilliant octet. I have taken the idea of a partita, which is traditionally a suite for a solo instrument. A string octet could be seen as a single entity – almost like a bowed keyboard – as well as being an ensemble of soloists.

The Prelude takes a fragment from the prelude to Bach's D Minor Sonata for solo violin, and weaves it into an ostinato, initially on first viola. This begins to fragment and break apart, reaching a climax which converges onto a single note.

The Fugue is based on the Handel quote (from the Messiah) which forms a fugato in the last movement of Mendelssohn's Octet. I have used it as a slow theme. The fugue is in eight parts.

The Chaconne takes a famous Mendelssohn theme, which is heavily disguised. After a fanfare-like opening, stated on lower strings, there are eight chaconne variations, each featuring a different member of the octet. The solos range from wistful to playful – the last soloist being the first viola, with an attempt to reveal the identity of the hidden theme.

Partita was commissioned by the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields. It formed part of the residency which also produced *Hover* for chamber orchestra.

Partita was commissioned by the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, who gave its premiere at the River Centre for the Performing Arts in Columbus, Georgia, United States, on October 4, 2019.

— Sally Beamish, 2019

PROGRAM NOTES

String Sextet in D Major, Op. 10

ERICH WOLFGANG KORNGOLD

b. May 29, 1897, Brünn, Austria-Hungary

d. November 29, 1957, Los Angeles

Premiere

May 2, 1917, Vienna

Performance Time

35 minutes



“More corn than gold,” was the cruel put-down of the American critic Irving Kolodin after hearing the première of the opulent Violin Concerto by Erich Wolfgang Korngold, played by Heifetz. Korngold was 50 and his life had already mirrored some of the major political and social upheavals of the 20th century. “Fifty is old for a child prodigy,” he said, wryly looking back on the unpredictable and, to him, ultimately unsatisfying course that his life and music had taken.

Success came early – well before his 1934 relocation to Hollywood and the 17 major film scores that followed, two of them Academy Award winners. At 10, Mahler declared the child prodigy a genius. Operas and symphonic works flowed from his pen before he was 20. His music was taken up by the likes of Kreisler and Flesch, Schnabel and Cortot, Tauber and Lehmann, Weingartner and Walter. It was crowned by *Die Tote Stadt*, which became one of the most performed operas of the 1920s, reaching more than 80 stages worldwide. Korngold’s accomplishment was defined by his operas and his operatic writing came to define his own musical style, including that of the early chamber works. He began to write the String Sextet when he was 17, immediately before the First World War, at the same time as his opera *Violanta*. It was completed in 1916 and is generally regarded as his finest chamber work. The first performance had to wait until May 2, 1917, in Vienna, led by Arnold Rosé, concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic.

The first of its four movements opens with an expansive theme that is rich in potential for development and culminates in a fugato towards the end. The music casts a glance back at the two Brahms Sextets while pushing at and stretching the frontiers of tonal music. Though Korngold’s musical language was to become increasingly complex and dense in the next decade, he always kept his feet firmly planted in tonality – to the point where, when he died, Korngold was widely viewed as having gasped the last breath of old Vienna. The second theme is shimmering and reflective and the music evolves through multiple changes of key signature. The beautiful slow movement is ultra-romantic and shares something of the heady intensity of Schoenberg’s earlier string sextet *Transfigured Night*. The charmingly nostalgic *Intermezzo* is a musical homage to Korngold’s home city of Vienna and as Viennese as *Sachertorte* with whipped cream. The finale both looks back on themes heard earlier and drives purposefully forward in exuberant high spirits. In the richness of its inspiration and the technical skill of its string writing, Korngold’s String Sextet has few equals; many listeners have been reminded of the Octet that Mendelssohn wrote at a similarly precocious age.

— Program notes © 2019 Keith Horner

Octet for Strings in E-flat Major, Op. 20

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

b. February 3, 1809, Hamburg

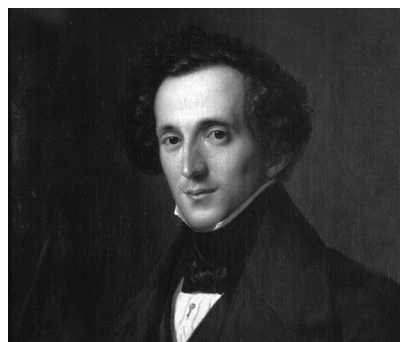
d. November 4, 1847, Leipzig

Premiere

January 30, 1836, Leipzig

Performance Time

30 minutes



With this Octet, the 16-year-old Mendelssohn earned a place in the line of great composers in the Western classical tradition. He had started daily composition at the age of 11. By 16, he could look back on a catalog of four operas, three piano quartets, a virtuoso sextet, and, most significantly, a dozen string symphonies. These were the apprentice works that allowed the precocious young man to appear to burst forth as a fully mature and, indeed original, composer at the age of 16. Everything came together to favor early development. His family was rich and highly cultivated, with weekly Sunday musicales in the family's magnificent Leipzigerstrasse estate in Berlin. Later, the philosopher Friedrich Hegel, a family friend, taught Mendelssohn at the University of Berlin. Even as an adolescent, Mendelssohn was a gifted all-rounder. He painted, he fenced, he wrote verse as well as a copious quantity of letters. As a musician, he was an accomplished pianist and played both violin and viola tolerably well.

In the Octet, Mendelssohn reveals a palette of eight essentially equal instruments and paints in myriad instrumental colors, ranging from the hushed monochrome unison at the end of the Scherzo to the burst of multi-colored hues in the eight-part fugal exuberance that follows. Mendelssohn also pinpoints the sort of chamber-scale orchestral sound he wants: "This Octet must be played by all instruments in symphonic orchestral style," he writes in the preface to the score. "*Pianos* and *fortes* must be strictly observed and more sharply emphasized than is usual in pieces of this character." Throughout, the young Mendelssohn eagerly explores a sparkling variety of textures, often in strikingly original ways. The first two movements alternate between polished ensemble playing and, as in the soaring opening, the style of a violin concerto. The scherzo, a meeting point for both absolute and program music, has always been the favorite movement of the Octet, inspired by the *Walpurgis* night dream section of Goethe's *Faust*, with its vivid insect and small animal imagery. The mood of the Octet's finale is hard to put into words. The opening, which is played low down on scrubbing cellos, seems humorous and the countermelody which soon evolves is less than reverentially lifted from the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah* at the words: "And He shall reign for ever and ever." In fact, the entire movement seems to evolve as a light-hearted treatment of the academic form of the fugue. It is youthful in its exuberance, tongue-in-cheek at times, effortlessly modulating from one key to another, joyous and assured. It represents a perfect rapport between form and content, the likes of which Mendelssohn was to achieve only infrequently again.

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