

## Notes on the program

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. MICHAEL FINK  
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### Mendelssohn, String Quartet in E-flat, Op. 12

*“Mendelssohn is the Mozart of the 19th century, the most illuminating of musicians, who sees more clearly than others through the contradictions of our era and is the first to reconcile them.”*

Those words represent Robert Schumann's perception of Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847). Despite the hyperbole, this quotation goes a long way toward explaining Mendelssohn's interest in chamber music. Certainly, this composer's string octet and piano trios have attracted the most attention in the chamber domain, but his string quartets have their place as well.

Mendelssohn began composing string quartets early. As a 14-year-old, he wrote his first quartet in 1823, but it was not published until many years after his death. Again, in 1827, Mendelssohn turned to quartet writing and produced the precocious and progressive A minor Quartet published as Opus 13. Within two years, he had written a companion piece, the E-Flat Quartet, Op. 12. These two works, modelled a bit on Beethoven's late quartets of the same keys (Opp. 132 and 127), would be Mendelssohn's final statements in the medium until 1837-38, the years of Opus 41.

The opening Adagio of Opus 12's first movement is important, for it returns in the finale. The main body of the movement concentrates on a “Song Without Words”-like theme in the major mode. In turn, this generates a related theme in minor as a counterbalance. The suaveness of these themes gives the movement an ingratiating, lyrical unity.

Marked Canzonetta, the second movement is actually more a dance. Its quick-march outer sections frame a swift, virtuosic middle section in which upper strings fly over a slow drone in the cello.

The Andante is an unpretentious essay written in an unconventional formal scheme. Where we might expect song-like themes, Mendelssohn gives us only amorphous motives and recitative-like passages that never resolve into substantial material. In a way, this is a large-scale introduction to the final movement, which proceeds from the Andante without pause.

In the finale, the home key proves not to be E-flat but c minor! The swirling rhythms and breakneck speed are a foretaste of the Italian Symphony. Toward the end, the composer brings back the Adagio and main theme from the first movement. In the words of analyst John Horton, “The coda of this finale is one of Mendelssohn’s purest and most radiant passages of quartet writing, leaving the listener with a wonderful sense of contentment.”

## **Krenek, String Quartet No. 7, Op. 96**

The music of Ernst Krenek (1900-1991) is considered cerebral and complicated, and, indeed, most of his later works certainly are. He did not start out that way, however. Instructed in Vienna by Hans Schreker, Krenek’s early style was post-Romantic. During the 1920s, he became fascinated with American jazz and composed a “jazz opera” in 1926: *Jonny spielt auf!* (Johnny strikes up [the band!]). This is still his best known work. From there, he soon embraced the 12-tone method of composition, which dominated his music for rest of his life and the remainder of his 240+ opus numbers.

From 1930 to 1933, Krenek was also involved in journalism, writing for the Arts section of a Frankfurt newspaper. That suddenly came to an end with the rise of Nazi power, as did performances of his music. He was branded “radical” and “degenerate” and was forced to

emigrate. After the Nazis annexed Austria, Krenek moved to America in 1938, where he became a naturalized citizen a few years later.

He thrived in the United States, where he found a welcome home at Hamline University (St. Paul, Minnesota) first as head of the Music Department (1939) and later as Dean of Fine Arts (1942). Krenek retired in 1947 and moved to Southern California, where he lived the rest of his life.

The Seventh String Quartet was completed in 1944, placing it squarely in the Hamline years. Biographer John Lincoln Stewart and Krenek himself offer the most insightful commentary on this music:

*...The discerning listener should have no doubt about Krenek's String Quartet no. 7, op. 96.... It sounds like a major work, and is one — as he well knew, for he regarded it as his most important work of this period.... A true masterpiece, it is the culmination of Krenek's loosening of the twelve-tone row. "The manipulation of the row," Krenek later observed, "had reached a point at which little of the original tenets of the twelve-tone technique was retained. Nevertheless, the design of the whole was definitely base on the series, and the spirit of the technique governed every detail of the piece.... I feel that the Seventh Quartet strikes that balance of logical construction and flexibility, of accuracy of design and warmth of expression, to which I have aspired throughout my career as a composer."*

## **Janáček, String Quartet No. 2 ("Intimate Letters")**

The last completed work by Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) was his String Quartet No. 2. Although this was the music of an aged, failing creator, its passion and vibrancy would scarcely give that impression. The quartet's subtitle, "Intimate Letters," might better be translated "Love Letters," for it is a programmatic documentation of Janáček's longtime May-and-December affair with Kamila Stösslova. In fact, the composer originally had planned to use a literal symbol within the quartet — a viola d'amore — but he finally chose the modern viola instead.

The work is a record of events and feelings connected with the affair, much in the manner of Berlioz's young musician afflicted with *vague de passions* in the *Symphonie fantastique*. And the analogy to Berlioz's work can be taken even further: Janáček's quartet uses an *idée fixe*, a musical "motto" or thematic symbol of the loved one, which occurs in each movement, often transformed or disguised. In Janáček's case, the *idée fixe* grows out of the main theme of the first movement. His most noteworthy use of the motto is as the theme to the middle section of the third movement. This movement forms the work's emotional climax, and upon its completion, the composer wrote to Kamila, "Today I have written my sweetest longings. . . . Today I have succeeded in writing a piece in which the earth begins to tremble. This will be my best. . . . Here, I can find a place for my most beautiful melodies."

And so it was. The "Intimate Letters" Quartet is perhaps the quintessence of Janáček's artistic development. In this impassioned, non-classical chamber work there is a confluence of the elements of Janáček's superb style: the vocal origin of his melodies, the nationalist vernacular, the naturalistic, and the simply human.