

STEREO

ARABESQUE
RECORDINGS
8017

MENDELSSOHN
Octet in E flat major, Op. 20

SPOHR
DOUBLE QUARTET IN D MINOR, Op. 65
THE MELOS ENSEMBLE



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ARABESQUE
RECORDINGS
8017Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)
OCTET IN E FLAT MAJOR, Op. 20

Side 1	
Band 1: 1st Movement: Allegro moderato, ma con fuoco	14:40
Band 2: 2nd Movement: Andante	7:22
Band 3: 3rd Movement: Scherzo (Allegro leggerissimo)	4:28
Side 2	
Band 1: 4th Movement: Presto	6:11

(Emanuel Hurwitz, Kenneth Sillito, Ivor McMahon, Iona Brown—violins;
Cecil Aronowitz, Kenneth Essex—violas; Terence Weil, Keith Harvey—cellos)Ludwig Spohr (1784-1859)
DOUBLE QUARTET IN D MINOR, Op. 65

Band 2: 1st Movement: Allegro	7:17
Band 3: 2nd Movement: Scherzo (Vivace)	4:45
Band 4: 3rd Movement: Larghetto	3:49
Band 5: 4th Movement: Finale (Allegretto molto)	4:31

1st Quartet: Emanuel Hurwitz, Ivor McMahon—violins; Cecil Aronowitz—viola;
Terence Weil—cello
2nd Quartet: Iona Brown, Kenneth Sillito—violins; Kenneth Essex—viola;
Keith Harvey—cello

More than half a century ago the late Thomas F. Dunhill wrote, "Even commonplaces must be repeated sometimes, lest they lose their reputation as commonplaces and are regarded eventually with mistrust—as obvious pieces of wisdom, not staled by age and assaulted by vulgar usage invariably are!" This is my excuse for repeating yet again the dictum of John Horton relating to Mendelssohn's Octet, which has been quoted, misquoted and paraphrased countless times, that "Not even Mozart or Schubert accomplished at the age of 16 anything quite so astonishing as this major work of chamber music."

It is not an isolated example of youthful precocity although it is probably the best. Mendelssohn had already written the well-known *Rondo capriccioso* for piano, three piano quartets, a sextet for piano and strings, the *Symphony in C minor* for full orchestra and dedicated to the London Philharmonic Society, and twelve symphonies for strings, with anything from one to four movements. The latter were written for use in the family circle and were not published until after the composer's death, but in recent years have come to be recognised as original music to be enjoyed in its own right. He had also completed an opera which was produced two years later, when he was 18. Such an array suggests that Mendelssohn advanced straight from childhood to near maturity, virtually omitting the years of adolescence.

Although the *Octet in E flat* was completed in 1825, the parts were not published until 1832 and the full score was not printed until 1848. Octets for wind instruments had long been popular; Haydn, for example, had written several, and, we shall see later, Spohr had written several double string quartets, which are not quite the same thing. Mendelssohn's Octet was the first of its kind. The precise date of composition does not seem to be known, but early in November 1825 Carl Friedrich Zelter wrote to Goethe that his pupil had "just completed an octet for eight obligato instruments, which is full of life", so we may assume that it was completed during the autumn of that year. It was dedicated to Eduard Rietz, a young Berlin violinist who died at the age of 29 and so never acquired an international reputation, but whom Mendelssohn considered the supreme interpreter of his string music.

The first that London knew of the Octet was when for some unexplained reason Mendelssohn substituted an orchestral version of its scherzo for the original minuet and trio of the *Symphony in C minor* already referred to, for a performance which he directed in the Argyll Rooms on May 25, 1829. Mendelssohn himself left an account of four performances of the complete Octet, public and private, given in Paris in 1832, within a period of ten days. The last of them was, very oddly, "in a church, at a funeral mass in commemoration of Beethoven", who had died five years earlier. Mendelssohn's manuscript directs "The Octet must be played by all the instruments in symphonic orchestral style. Pianos and fortes must be strictly observed and more strongly emphasised than is usual in pieces of this character." The opening bars leave no doubt as to the composer's orchestral outlook, or indeed, as John Horton has pointed out, as to Mendelssohn's great admiration for the brilliance of the dedicatee, Eduard Rietz.

The first movement, *Allegro moderato, ma con fuoco*, is notable for the manifold variety of the instrumental groupings. The *Andante* which follows is richly colored and exploits unexpected but sensitively calculated key relationships. Then follows the *scherzo*, directed to be played *sempre pp e staccato*, a movement which set a standard of phantom delicacy that has never been equalled, save by Mendelssohn himself.

Fanny Mendelssohn said that when writing this movement her brother had in mind the lines from the Walpurgisnacht section of Goethe's "Faust": "Floating cloud, and trailing mist,
O'er us brightening hover:
The rushes shake, winds stir the brake:
Soon all their pomp is over!"

Fanny added that a broomstick is the only means by which a listener can really keep pace with the music. The composer was naturally loth to abandon the ghostly main theme of the scherzo. It steals in again towards the end of the final *Presto*, a movement which may well recall to some Handel here and Beethoven there, but remains nonetheless astonishingly personal and distinctive, especially for a youth of 16.

Spohr was born 25 years before Mendelssohn but outlived him by 12 years, and although Spohr's music is virtually unknown today there is plenty of evidence that Mendelssohn regarded it highly. He dedicated his *Piano Trio in C minor* to the older man and is known to have played a viola part in at least one of Spohr's double quartets. Even so, one must regard as heroes the audience at a concert in London which sat for five hours to hear three of the double quartets, two quintets, an octet and a nonet "without the least sign of weariness".

Born of musical parents in Brunswick, on 5th April 1784, Louis (or Ludwig) Spohr was able to sing duets with his mother at the age of 4, played the solo part in a violin concerto of his own composition at a school concert with such success that he was invited to repeat it with the Duke of Brunswick's orchestra, and was only 14 when he undertook his first, and unsuccessful, tour as a violin virtuoso. The Duke of Brunswick assumed responsibility for Spohr's later musical education. He became one of the great virtuosos of his day and also achieved fame as a conductor of opera. Despite these activities he was a voluminous composer of music in many forms, with 11 operas, 10 symphonies, 11 violin concertos, several oratorios and a vast quantity of chamber music to his credit. His music continued to be played regularly for many years after his death in 1859 but it fell from grace and favor in the twentieth century. Even so Spohr might well be one of the next in the list of composers due for reassessment and revival.

Above all else, Spohr must be remembered for his enquiring mind and experiments in new combinations of instruments and fresh styles of using them, as exemplified in a symphony for two orchestras, a quartet concerto and four double quartets in which the eight instruments are regarded as two units of four to be treated antiphonally. Spohr might almost have had stereo recording in mind when he wrote his double quartets!

The composer has left his own account of the composition of the *Double Quartet No. 1 in D minor* (1823) in his Autobiography, a highly interesting, but alas now scarce book. After giving the credit for the idea to Andrew Romberg, one of his quartet partners, Spohr continues, "I imagined to myself the manner in which he had also comprehended it, and how two quartet parties sitting close to each other, should be made to play one piece of music, and keep in reserve the eight-voice play for the chief parts of the composition only. According to this idea, I also wrote my first double quartet, began the theme of the first *allegro* with both quartets *unisono*, and *forte*, in order to impress it well upon the hearers, and then carried it concerted through both quartets in turn... I then with the assistance of my best pupils and of a second violin-celloist from the orchestra, gave the new double quartet to our circle to hear. I was greatly pleased to find that its effect was far greater than that of simple quartets and quintets, and as this kind of chamber music excited also a great sensation abroad, as was proved by its frequent performance, I expected nothing less than that the composers of the day would soon imitate it and make it general. But this was as little the case, as with some other extensions of the forms of art, which I have tried in later years... thus my four double quartets remain the only ones of their kind. An octet for stringed instruments by Mendelssohn-Bartholdy belongs to quite another kind of art, in which the two quartets do not concert and interchange in double choir, with each other, but all eight instruments work together."

This is not music which calls for detailed analysis. There is need to say no more than that the second movement, *Vivace*, is a high spirited scherzo in 6/4 time, the *Larghetto* is a romance somewhat in the style of an operatic aria and the final *Allegretto molto* is both spirited and sonorous. Structurally it is conventional but throughout the composer maintains something of the style of the old concerto grosso, with one quartet of soloists and the second allotted more of a *ripieno* role.

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The Melos Ensemble of London

The Melos Ensemble of London has established an international reputation as one of the world's leading chamber music groups. Formed in 1950, the Ensemble consists of twelve players—a string quintet and a wind quintet, with harp and piano—who can form and reform themselves into different shapes to meet the needs of the occasion. Apart from appearing regularly all over the British Isles, the Ensemble has taken part in many of the major festivals, and at the same time has toured America as well as abroad. Throughout its history, the Melos Ensemble has played works by contemporary composers and a large number of pieces have been especially written for the group.

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