

FELIX MENDELSSOHN
PIANO TRIOS

FOURNIER TRIO



RES10161

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Piano Trios, Opp. 49 & 66

Fournier Trio

Sulki Yu *violin*

Pei-Jee Ng *'cello*

Chiao-Ying Chang *piano*

About Fournier Trio:

*'[...] awesome but restrained technical ability
and chamber-music antennae'*
Classical Source

'The fine Fournier Piano Trio'
The Times

Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor, Op. 49 (1839)

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------|
| 1. Molto allegro agitato | [10:04] |
| 2. Andante con moto tranquillo | [6:12] |
| 3. Scherzo: Leggiero e vivace | [4:06] |
| 4. Finale: Allegro assai appassionato | [9:04] |

Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor, Op. 66 (1846)

- | | |
|--|---------|
| 5. Allegro energico e con fuoco | [11:11] |
| 6. Andante espressivo | [6:16] |
| 7. Scherzo: Molto allegro quasi presto | [3:53] |
| 8. Finale: Allegro appassionato | [8:33] |

Total playing time [59:25]



Felix Mendelssohn: Piano Trios, Opp. 49 & 66

Felix Mendelssohn started work on the D minor Trio in February 1839. By this time he was firmly established as music director ('Gewandhauskapellmeister') of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. He was also married (to Cécile Jeanrenaud in 1837), and a father. The years of being a brilliantly gifted prodigy were long behind him and Mendelssohn was now recognized by contemporaries as one of the leading composers of his time – a reputation that was only enhanced by the D minor Trio. When Robert Schumann published a review of the score in 1840, he hailed the work as 'the master trio of the present day, as in their day were those of Beethoven in B flat ['Archduke'] and D ['Ghost']. In the same review, he described Mendelssohn as 'the Mozart of the nineteenth century, the most brilliant musician'. For Schumann, the qualities of refinement, balance and elegance that were so abundantly present in Mendelssohn's music made him the great classicist of the early Romantic period – in contrast to the iconoclastic Berlioz and Liszt, or the more intimate musical worlds of Chopin, or of Schumann himself. For Schumann, this work provided 'a new proof of its creator's artistic power, which now appears to have reached its fullest bloom.'

But there's an intriguing remark in Schumann's review. He describes Mendelssohn as the composer 'who looks most clearly through the contradictions of the present, and who for the first time reconciles them.' Schumann says nothing more about what was being reconciled, but presumably he is referring to the stylistic disparity between Mendelssohn and the more overt virtuosity of Liszt, or the poetry of Chopin. Schumann almost certainly knew something of the composition history of the trio, since this was a period when they were particularly close. (In March 1839, Mendelssohn conducted the premiere of Schubert's 'Great' C major Symphony, which Schumann had unearthed a few months earlier at the Vienna home of Schubert's brother.)

From May to July 1839, Mendelssohn and his family were in Frankfurt and it was during this idyllic stay that the D minor Trio took shape. It was finished back in Leipzig on 23 September. Since Mendelssohn was an outstanding pianist, it comes as something of a surprise that he asked Ferdinand Hiller for advice about the piano writing in his new work. Hiller (1811-1885) and Mendelssohn had known each other since childhood and they remained close friends until 1843 (when they fell out over the conductorship of the Gewandhaus Orchestra). In *Mendelssohn: Letters and Recollections*

(which the author dedicated to Queen Victoria), Hiller writes about his involvement in the revision of the trio:

Mendelssohn had just finished his great D minor trio, and played it to me. I was tremendously impressed by the fire and spirit, the flow, and, in short, the masterly character of the whole thing. But I had one small misgiving. Certain pianoforte passages in it, constructed on broken chords, seemed to me – to speak candidly – somewhat old-fashioned. I had lived many years in Paris, seeing Liszt frequently, and Chopin every day, so that I was thoroughly accustomed to the richness of passages which marked the new pianoforte school. I made some observations to Mendelssohn on this point, suggesting certain alterations, but at first he would not listen to me. [...] We discussed it and tried it on the piano over and over again, and I enjoyed the small triumph of at last getting Mendelssohn over to my view. With his usual conscientious earnestness when once he had made up his mind about a thing, he now undertook the lengthy, not to say wearisome, task of rewriting the whole pianoforte part. One day, when I found him working at it, he played me a bit which he had worked out exactly as I had suggested to him on the piano, and called out to me, 'That is to remain as a remembrance of you.' Afterwards, when he had been playing it at a chamber concert with all his wonderful fire, and had carried

away the whole audience, he said, 'I really enjoy that piece; it is honest music after all, and the players will like it, because they can show off with it.' And so it proved.

(Hiller: *Mendelssohn: Letters and Recollections*, 1874, pp. 154–5).

The Mendelssohn scholar R. Larry Todd has examined the two versions of the work, and he provides a telling musical example showing the first and revised versions of one passage in the first movement (see *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music*, New York, 2003, p. 378). In its original form, Mendelssohn's piano writing has the tune in octaves in the right hand, accompanied by triplets in the left hand, a texture that is reminiscent of Beethoven. In the revision, the right hand has tumbling arpeggios, supported by thicker, syncopated chords. There's undoubtedly more energy in the rewritten version, and the piano writing is closer in style to the 'new' school referred to by Hiller.

Schumann's mention of Mendelssohn reconciling 'contradictions' in this trio may in part be an allusion to this, but his main aim is to emphasize the passion, turbulence and emotional directness of this music, by a composer who had sometimes been considered to be rather aloof and detached. It's worth remembering that Mendelssohn was one of the few pianists of his time to give regular performances of Mozart's D minor

Piano Concerto K466 (including one during his first Leipzig season that was a sensational success), and the brooding, highly-charged atmosphere of that work perhaps finds an echo in the D minor Trio, not least in the syncopated accompaniment right at the start. The first theme is introduced by the cello before being taken up by the violin, while the piano broods beneath. After a flamboyant climax, the second theme is an arching major-key tune which dominates quite a lot of the development that follows. The start of the recapitulation spring a masterly surprise in the form of a hushed new violin counter-melody played as a descant above the original cello theme. The slow movement begins with an elegant, song-like piano theme that is echoed by the strings. After a leisurely unfolding of this theme, Mendelssohn brings back the violin counter-melody from the first movement recapitulation – an inspired gesture that grows to a climax before the return of the opening idea. The 'Scherzo' is marked 'Leggiero e vivace', and it is a characteristic and very original mixture of lightness and rapidity with a delicious ending where the music seems to fly away. The start of the finale can seem rather formal and austere after this, but the presentation of the opening idea becomes richer and more flamboyant before the tempo eases and the cello introduces a lyrical new theme that

provides a radiant contrast. After both ideas are developed and reprised, the music modulates to D major for a triumphant close.

Mendelssohn completed the revisions before sending the score to Breitkopf & Härtel for publication, and before the work's first performance on 1 February 1840, at an evening of chamber music in the Leipzig Gewandhaus. The performers were Ferdinand David (a close friend of the composer and leader of the Gewandhaus Orchestra) and Carl Wittmann (the orchestra's principal cellist) with Mendelssohn himself at the piano.

The C minor Piano Trio was started in February 1845 and finished in Frankfurt on 30 April. Mendelssohn gave the manuscript to his sister Fanny on her birthday, 14 May, and the published score has a dedication to Louis Spohr. The first performance was given in the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 20 December 1845, performed by the same players – David, Wittmann and Mendelssohn – who had given the premiere of the D minor Trio. Mendelssohn's own view of the work was equivocal: he told Spohr that 'nothing seems good enough to me, and in fact neither does this trio.' But this is to underestimate the power and intensity of this work. While it may not have the melodic exuberance of its predecessor, it is dramatic and serious. The choice of key

reflects this: works in C minor that Mendelssohn knew well included Mozart's Piano Concerto K491 (for which composed a cadenza), and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, Third Piano Concerto (which he played in 1838) and Coriolan Overture (which the young Joseph Joachim heard Mendelssohn play on the piano 'in a most astonishing manner').

In the first movement, the darkly energetic opening theme on the piano accompanied by sustained strings sets the tone for much of what follows, and as a contrast it, Mendelssohn produces a gloriously ardent second theme in E flat major. It is this theme that provides most of the material for the development section which is a kind of extended meditation. Almost imperceptibly elements of the first subject steal back into the musical argument – combining with the second theme – until they coalesce for the start of the recapitulation which emerges as a natural outcome of what has preceded it. The close of the movement has a vehemence that seems to recall Beethoven. The slow movement is in a gently swaying rhythm, a kind of Barcarolle (a favourite Mendelssohn form in his solo piano works: there are several 'Venetian Gondola Songs' among his Songs without Words). The 'Scherzo' is one of Mendelssohn's

highly distinctive and very fast duple-time movements, similar in several ways to the scherzo in A Midsummer Night's Dream (composed in 1843), and the much earlier Octet. For the finale, Mendelssohn took his inspiration from a composer whose music he had done so much to revive: Johann Sebastian Bach. It begins as a kind of titanic Gigue, but it's at the centre of the movement that the Bachian allusion is most striking. Mendelssohn introduces a chorale-like idea on the piano, its second phrase resembling the second line of the melody known in English-speaking world as 'All people that on earth do dwell' ('Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice'). As a composer with thoroughly Romantic sensibilities, Mendelssohn uses this to drive towards an exultant climax in C major.

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The Fournier Trio

Formed in 2009, the internationally award-winning Fournier Trio has rapidly established itself as one of the leading young chamber ensembles. They were winners of the prestigious 2013 Parkhouse Award at Wigmore Hall, finalists at Hamburg in 2012 and were recipients of 2nd Prize and Audience Prize at the 6th Trondheim International Chamber Music Competition in 2011. The trio has made critically acclaimed debuts at both the Wigmore Hall and Purcell Room in London and in 2012 embarked on its first European Tour after their selection for 'New Masters on Tour' at the International Holland Music Sessions, culminating with their debut at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw.

Fournier Trio has given recitals at other major venues such as St John's Smith Square in London, St David's Hall in Cardiff and Manchester's Bridgewater Hall. Festival appearances including Bath International Music Festival, Newbury Spring Festival, Chichester Festivities, Dartington International Summer School, Trondheim International Music Festival (where they collaborated with Lawrence Power and Sir Peter Maxwell Davies), Brighton, Lamberhurst, and Devizes Festivals. The Trio toured Scotland extensively

as part of their Tunnell Trust Award, and made their debuts across the Far East in Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea. They have performed live on BBC Radio 3, RTHK (Hong Kong), NRK (Norway) and KBS (South Korea).

David Takeno has been a continuous influence on the Trio's development since the formation of the ensemble. During the Trio's founding years, they were Leverhulme Chamber Music Fellows at the Royal Academy of Music where they worked with renowned pedagogues Thomas Brandis, Christopher Elton, Michael Dussek and Sung-Won Yang, in addition to their duties as mentors to student chamber groups. Since 2011, the Trio has been Artist-in-Residence at Wolfson College, Oxford.

With a commitment to expand the piano trio repertoire, the Trio has premiered works by leading British composers such as Gary Carpenter, Hugh Wood, Timothy Salter and Daniel Kidane.

The Fournier Trio is grateful to Wolfson College Oxford University, Royal Academy of Music, Kirckman Concert Society, Park Lane Group and Philharmonia Orchestra MMSF for their generous support.

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