

SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY CHAMBER MUSIC RECITAL

November 17, 2009
Irwin M. Jacobs Qualcomm Hall

POULENC

Sextet for Piano and Woodwind Quintet

Allegro vivace

Divertissement

Finale: Prestissimo

MENDELSSOHN

String Quartet in E-flat Major, Opus 12

Adagio non troppo; Allegro non tardante

Canzonetta: Allegretto

Andante espressivo

Molto allegro e vivace

Sextet for Piano and Woodwind Quintet

FRANCIS POULENC

Born January 7, 1899, Paris

Died January 30, 1963, Paris

Poulenc wrote the Sextet for Piano and Woodwind Quintet in 1932 but was dissatisfied and withdrew it. He revised the work in 1939, and in this final version it was first performed on December 9, 1940. Poulenc described his sextet as “chamber music of the most straightforward kind: an homage to the wind instruments I have loved from the moment I began composing.” Full of superb writing for woodwinds as well as clever thematic interrelationships between movements and some surprising harmonies, the Sextet is bubbling and refreshing, like cold champagne on a hot summer day.

The *Allegro vivace*—which Poulenc specifies should be “Very quick and passionate”—is in ternary form. The opening section offers brightly-chattering winds, and a bassoon solo leads to the slow middle section, which Poulenc asks to have played at half the opening tempo. After the piano’s lovely opening melody, this center section is filled with Poulenc’s precise instructions for the players—“intense,” “very gentle,” “expressive”—before the return of the opening material.

The second movement is also in ternary form, but now the outer sections are slow, the inner part fast. The oboe has the haunting first theme (“very gentle and expressive”), but the tempo doubles in the lively middle section. Again, Poulenc’s instructions to the players are quite specific—he wants this music to sound “very merry,” but he also cautions “dry” and “gentle” as the music makes its way back to the opening section.

The finale—a rondo marked *Prestissimo*—sails along on the sound of busy winds and staccato piano. The rondo theme is interrupted by lyric episodes, and at the coda the tempo suddenly becomes very slow and an oboe melody (“very sweet and melancholy”) leads to the noble close.

String Quartet in E-flat Major, Opus 12

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born February 3, 1809, Hamburg

Died November 4, 1847, Leipzig

One can hardly say that the year 1829 was uneventful for Mendelssohn. In April, he led the first performances of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* in a century, performances credited with

helping launch the Bach revival in the early nineteenth century. He immediately left Berlin for an extended visit to London, where he played his own music, astonished audiences by performing Beethoven's *Emperor* Concerto from memory, and was hailed as a "player of almost transcendent talent." In July and August he made a walking tour of Scotland that inspired his *Hebrides* Overture and *Scottish* Symphony. He returned to London in September and was thrown from a carriage in an accident, injuring his knee. The injury forced him to miss the wedding of his sister Fanny in Germany, and Mendelssohn used the time to complete an operetta he was writing for the celebration of his parents' silver anniversary that fall. Returning to Berlin in December, the composer set to work on his "*Reformation*" Symphony. Taken all around, it was a pretty spectacular year for a twenty-year-old.

Mendelssohn must have been planning the String Quartet in E-flat Major while walking across the wilds of Scotland, for he completed it on September 14, 1829, just a few days after his return to London. Though the tour of Scotland led directly to two major works, this quartet appears to have had no specific inspiration or outside reference. Melodic, well-crafted, and agreeable, it is one of those pieces that charm on first acquaintance. Some critics have detected the influence of Beethoven's *Harp* Quartet on the first movement, and it is true that Mendelssohn writes in the same key (E-flat major) and uses the same motto that opened Beethoven's quartet (though Mendelssohn inverts it). The relation with Beethoven appears to end there, however—while some of the material may seem derived from Beethoven, this music is pure Mendelssohn.

The slow introduction quickly gives way to the *Allegro non tardante* ("Fast, without delay"), based on a flowing, comfortable main idea. The second theme arrives in much the same spirit: this sonata-form movement will not be built on conflict in the Beethovenian manner but on an appealing lyricism. It sings all the way through, even in some darker subsidiary material along the way. The two middle movements are relatively brief. The *Canzonetta* is in ABA form, with a perky outer section that features unison writing and a bustling center full of quicksilver motion. The *Andante espressivo* is aptly-named: songful and heartfelt, it grows impassioned (it has a particularly impressive part for the first violin) before subsiding to the quiet close.

The finale is the most unusual movement in the quartet. It explodes to life on two sharp cracks of sound and plunges energetically into its first theme, which rushes along on a restless 12/8 meter. There is a somewhat conventional second idea, chorale-like in its square phrases,

and one expects Mendelssohn to make do with these (entirely serviceable) ideas. But suddenly the music comes to what seems a sudden climax, and out of the quiet Mendelssohn brings back fragments of the earlier movements: the “darker” material from the opening movement, lyric ideas from the third, the bustling theme from the middle section of the *Canzonetta*, the “Beethoven” motto from the beginning, and others. Gone now is the restless spirit of the opening of the finale, and on these reminiscences Mendelssohn brings the quartet to a very quiet close, a conclusion that manages to be both very pleasing and very enigmatic.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger