



PROGRAM NOTES

Felix Mendelssohn: *Piano Trio in C minor, Op. 66*

It is difficult to pin down exactly what makes Mendelssohn so wonderful to play, and that's probably for the best. He wrote with an uncanny sense not only of harmonic and compositional possibility, but also of what makes the instruments so completely full, rich, and unfettered by gravity. This quality is as strong for fantastical and quick works (such as the *Midsummer Night's Dream* music or the *Octet for strings*) as it is for lyric and melodic ones (such as the *Violin Concerto in E minor* or the *Songs Without Words*).

The *Piano Trio in C minor* a beautiful work of each type in its inner movements. The second movement, *Andante*, is an extraordinary song without words, and the *Scherzo* is a fleeting, ghostly, fantastic work of virtuosity. Mendelssohn's sense of how to get mere instruments to create these atmospheres seems never to miss.

The *C Minor* trio is not so much played as his first trio, in *D Major*. This is perhaps due to a seriousness-of-purpose in the later trio's outer movements — Mendelssohn's skill for the fantastic is so large that it can make his sense of the serious seem a bit pale in comparison. In particular, the inclusion of a religious chorale in the last movement (far from an unusual practice, and a medium-regular feature in works of Schumann), can seem equal parts glorious and forced. And the strict formality of the first movement can sometimes seem to restrain Mendelssohn's lighter possibilities. . . .

But how great they do sound, in any case! The psychology of the relationship between the serious-religious and light-fantastic in Mendelssohn can remain a source for serious speculation and discussion. There are political overtones; there are religious overtones; there are historical overtones. But the sound of their being played is undeniably that of instruments doing what instruments do best.

Tim Summers

Paul Schoenfield: *Café Music*

The next time you're out to dinner, and there's a piano player providing live "background music," you might want to put an extra tip in the jar. You never know if that piano player is the next Paul Schoenfield.

As Schoenfield explains the genesis of his best known work:

The idea to compose *Café Music* first came to me in 1985 after sitting in one night for the pianist at Murray's Restaurant in Minneapolis. Murray's employs a house trio which plays entertaining dinner music in a wide variety of styles. My intention was to write a kind of high-class dinner music — music which could be played at a restaurant, but might also (just barely) find its way into a concert hall. The work draws on many of the types of music played by the trio at Murray's. For example, early 20th century American, Viennese, light classical, gypsy, and Broadway styles are all represented. A paraphrase of a beautiful Chassidic melody is incorporated in the second movement.





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It would be nearly impossible to describe Schoenfield's approach to life and music any better than Schoenfield himself has done. The following lines are from a "micro-documentary" produced by the Pro Arte Quartet. It's revealing and often shows, beneath it all, the sense of timing of a born comedian – with unexpected twists and a slight touch of irony.

I think the connection between math and music is pure aesthetics. The chill you get from seeing a beautiful proof of a theorem is like a beautiful piece of music. I was torn between the two until I was in my early twenties – twenty, twenty-one. And I think what pushed me into music is I would get more applause. I'm serious. I had an unusual family history. I never met my father.... I left home at sixteen. So I guess those positive strokes mean something to me.

To me, form is the most important part of a piece. I actually write more like a carpenter making a kitchen, a beautiful kitchen. And he has the measurements beforehand. And he wants to make everything fit, but as beautiful as possible also.

I've just found in general that [in composing] I have to do a lot of preparations – things to throw out before the right thing comes. Like Edison said about the light bulb, "I feel disappointed. I've found a thousand things that don't work."

I was originally going to play. [Schoenfield studied with Rudolf Serkin, among others.] And I had this accident, and I can't really play anymore. Reminds me of that famous Yiddish expression, "Man makes plans and God laughs." ... I think it was Isaac [Bashevis] Singer that said he believes in God's intelligence but not in God's mercy.

While Schoenfield's music is always recognizable, it is very difficult to categorize, mainly because of the diversity of influences. In the end, in the small space available here, how is it possible to delve more deeply into a composer who recently wrote a piano quartet with a movement entitled "Metamorphoses on 'Get A Job'" and successfully makes it briefly sound like Shostakovich. We'll leave it with the words of Juilliard's Joel Sachs:

[Paul Schoenfield] is among those all-too-rare composers whose work combines exuberance and seriousness, familiarity and originality, lightness and depth. His work is inspired by the whole range of musical experience, popular styles both American and foreign, vernacular and folk traditions, and the 'normal' historical traditions of cultivated music making, often treated with sly twists. Above all, he has achieved the rare fusion of an extremely complex and rigorous compositional mind with an instinct for accessibility and a reveling in sound that sometimes borders on the manic.

Stephen Soderberg



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Franz Schubert: *String Quartet No. 14 in d minor, 'Death and the Maiden'*

With a name like 'Death and the Maiden', a piece would have to be serious, and Franz Schubert's string quartet by that name is indeed rather more serious than one might dare imagine. It is no fairy tale. The background was this: Schubert was a sort-of-successful composer in Vienna, insofar as he was known, but his career, realistically speaking, was a struggle. And by 1824 Schubert, aged 27, came to know that he was profoundly, and in all likelihood fatally, ill with syphilis. His letters of the time show near-complete darkness.

Such was the context from which Schubert revived the voice of Death from one of his old songs (an 1817 setting of Matthias Claudius' 'Death and the Maiden') for a new string quartet. He set the tune of Death's song in a variation movement (over and over, that is to say) at its heart, in its slow movement. The words from the song are explicitly apt to his own condition:

Der Tod:

Gib deine Hand, du schön und zart Gebild!
Bin Freund, und komme nicht, zu strafen.
Sei gutes Muts! ich bin nicht wild,
Sollst sanft in meinen Armen schlafen!

Death:

Give me your hand, you beautiful and tender form!
I am a friend, and come not to punish.
Be of good cheer! I am not fierce,
Softly shall you sleep in my arms

It is fair to imagine that the musical struggles of the string quartet reflect Schubert's own difficulty. All the rash changes, the terrors, the dances of death of all the movements can be tied to this central mortal struggle — to the subject of text Schubert, just a few years before, had casually set to music. He managed to compose some 140 or so more works before his death at age 31. But in the end, it did come, and rather too early.

Tim Summers