

## BOULOGNE

### ***String Quartet in G minor, Op.1 No. 3***

Allegro  
Rondeau

## MENDELSSOHN

### ***Octet in E-flat Major, Op.20***

Allegro moderato ma con fuoco  
Andante  
Scherzo (Allegro leggierissimo)  
Presto

### ***String Quartet in G minor, Op.1 No. 3***

#### **Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges**

(b. Bailiff, Guadeloupe, 1745 / d. Paris, 1799)

Published: 1773

Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges certainly sounds like a lofty and noble enough title, but for Joseph Boulogne (also spelled Bologne), it was merely the best he could hope for. The son of a French nobleman and his 16-year-old slave, Boulogne was born, out of wedlock, on the island where his father owned plantations. Georges de Bologne Saint-Georges was a member of the King's Chamber, and he recognized his child as his; but while that gave Joseph his father's name, both his race and illegitimacy kept him from ever attaining his father's noble status.

At the age of seven, the child was brought to Paris, where he quickly excelled in any number of "gentlemanly" pursuits, including fencing, horsemanship, and music. He was also, anecdotes state, a fine dancer. The promise of equality, one of the pillars of the French Revolution, made Boulogne a champion of the cause, and the all-black legion of the French army to which he enlisted became known as the *Légion St-Georges* because of his leadership. Boulogne died in 1799, and with the collapse of the revolutionary government and the rise of Napoleon (and the re-institution of slavery) shortly after, much of his music was destroyed or lost – a shameful legacy to leave such a renowned and talented figure.

In 1773, Boulogne would become concertmaster of François-Joseph Gossec's orchestra Le Concert des Amateurs, and it was with this orchestra that several of his works, including his violin concertos, were first presented. But his string quartets were also much admired. Many are brief, two-movement works – and such is the case with all six quartets published as his Opus 1. The third of the set, in G minor, opens with an intriguing Allegro in which the main melodic line is as often shared in harmony with other instruments as it is played by the first violin. The brief, French-style Rondeau that follows it, offers some surprising harmonies in the sections which intersperse with the main, repeated theme.

***Octet in E-flat Major, Op.20***

**Felix Mendelssohn**

(b. Hamburg, 1809 / d. Leipzig, 1847)

First performed: January 30, 1836 in Leipzig

There have been many child prodigies in music. But how many of them have their youthful works as standard pieces in the active repertoire? The answer is virtually none, and one of the rare exceptions is the octet for strings written by Felix Mendelssohn at only 16 years old.

But then again, few young artists had the ideal environment in which to let their early genius flower as did Mendelssohn. The son of a successful businessman and grandson of a revered Talmudic scholar, young Felix's talent was apparent early on (as was that of his talented sister Fanny), but rather than exploit it as had been the case with young Wolfgang Mozart, it was nurtured carefully. His early works were presented to private audiences, so that it could be honed and readied for a larger public when the time was right.

The *Octet* is scored for, essentially, a doubled string quartet complement (i.e., four violins, two violas, and two cellos). But having already tried his hand at writing string symphonies, Mendelssohn's intent was on a larger scale than a chamber piece. He wrote on the score: "The Octet must be played in the style of a symphony in all parts; the pianos and fortes must be precisely differentiated and be more sharply accentuated than is ordinarily done in pieces of this type."

As a construct, this octet is without precedent. There had been "double string quartets" before, notably those of Louis Spohr (1784-1859), but Mendelssohn's use of each individual instrument and the myriad ways in which they combine is unique. The opening movement's Sonata form layout shows the keen student, but the clever Recapitulation, in which thematic ideas are brought back in a different order from their original exposition, demonstrates a fertile imagination and cleverness. The heart-breaking Andante shifts to minor keys, searching through them as though trying to find a place upon which to alight. The second theme is more dramatic, building a tension released by the return of the first.

The Scherzo third movement has a singular tempo marking: *Allegro leggierissimo* ("very light" would be a close match), a sound at which Mendelssohn excelled – one thinks of the gossamer elfin world he brought to life at age 17 with his *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* – his very next opus number. The music does indeed seem lighter than air, though it is still full of expression. The final movement, *Presto*, begins in a mad scramble on the lower strings, soon taken up by the ensemble, and somehow takes on the manner of a fugue. There are sly references here: the fugal element recalls Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony finale, while a line from Handel's "Hallelujah" Chorus ("And He shall reign for ever and ever") is quoted. This would be a triumph for a composer of any age, and even Mendelssohn seemed especially pleased with this bit of precocious genius, referring to it as one of his favourite compositions.