



Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston
Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2020-2021 chamber music season

rewind 1: remembering joy

Saturday, November 14 through Saturday, November 21, 2020

Program:

Francis Poulenc, Sextet in C Major for piano & winds, FP 100
Felix Mendelssohn, Octet in E-flat Major, Op. 20

Program notes by Gabriel Langfur Rice

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) came from a wealthy Parisian family of pharmaceutical manufacturers. His mother was an excellent pianist, and he began learning to play under her instruction at age 5. Her brother, known affectionately as “Oncle Papoum,” introduced him to Parisian theatrical life, and by the age of 14 he was sophisticated enough to be fully aware of the revolutionary consequences of the première of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Poulenc had little formal compositional training until he began study with Koechlin in 1921, working with him for four years to master the art of counterpoint. He was a member of the loosely confederated group of composers known as *Les Six* (Poulenc, Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, Georges Auric, Germaine Tailleferre and Louis Durey), who placed themselves in opposition to both Germanic influence and the “vagueness” of impressionism. Erik Satie was their adopted guru, and none of the group more than Poulenc embraced Satie’s belief in the value of cheerful wit – and even downright silliness – in concert music. A re-adoption of his Catholic faith in 1935 turned his attention towards sacred music, and any questions by the musical establishment of the seriousness of his compositional intent were ended. From 1945 until his sudden death in 1963 from a heart attack, Poulenc split his time between Paris and his spacious country house, Le Grand Coteau, in the village of Noizay in Touraine, where he had to fend off attempts by the villagers to make him mayor.

Poulenc wrote of his own work: “I know perfectly well that I’m not one of those composers who have made harmonic innovations like Igor, Ravel, or Debussy, but I think there’s room for ‘New’ music which doesn’t mind using other people’s chords. Wasn’t that the case with Mozart-Schubert?” The Sextuor for piano and winds, composed in 1932 and revised extensively in 1939, is one of his most often played works – and deservedly so, as it finds the composer at the height of his powers. Melodies worthy of his heroes Mozart and Schubert, a wry, capricious rhythmic sense, and moments of sublime, ravishing beauty combine in a perfect balance of Poulenc’s compositional strengths. He had a predilection for composing for winds and an uncanny ability

to bring forth their individualistic beauty, and he called the Sextuor “an homage to the wind instruments which I have loved from the moment I began composing.” In fact, in the entirety of his chamber music output, only three are for strings: two violin sonatas and a cello sonata.

The first movement is in a clear sonata form with a short coda. The second movement *Divertissement* also has a 3 part structure, this time slow-fast-slow with a clever homage to Mozart’s famous C Major Piano Sonata at the very beginning. The third movement is a rapid-pace Classical rondo with touches of both Stravinsky and Parisian dance halls. This is music that provides gratifying, unadulterated pleasure for everyone involved, from the performers to the audience, and, clearly, the composer.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) was born in Hamburg, Germany to an exceptionally cultured and affluent family. His grandfather Moses Mendelssohn was a prominent Enlightenment philosopher, and his intellectual influence was strong in the household. Of Jewish descent, the family converted to Christianity while Felix was a child – not so much to avoid prejudice as to better match their religious beliefs with their philosophical leanings. Felix received an outstanding general education in addition to musical tutelage, and his broad and cultured background was surely an impetus for his many varied contributions to musical culture. He essentially defined the role of the modern conductor while raising the standards of orchestral performance throughout Europe, and was single-handedly responsible for the reintroduction of the music of J.S. Bach in the 19th century. In 1843, he founded the Leipzig Conservatory, forming the model for the modern conservatory as well. He organized the faculty into specialized departments and sought out the most outstanding scholars and performing artists to teach their instruments and other subjects, including Robert and Clara Schumann for composition, score-reading and piano. All the while, Mendelssohn composed steadily, in his personal style, particularly disciplined on Classical models of form, harmony and counterpoint. He maintained a Classical elegance at a time of extreme Romantic excess (he had a particular distaste for the music of Berlioz), but his music has never sounded archaic or unoriginal. He died of a brain hemorrhage just three months before his 39th birthday, in a state of acute mourning for the tragic death of his beloved sister Fanny.

The Octet, Op. 20, composed when Mendelssohn was only sixteen, is a masterpiece on every level. Not even Mozart so firmly established his mature style at such a young age. Not long before Mendelssohn’s untimely death he described it as “my favorite of all my compositions” and added, “I had a most wonderful time in the writing of it!” Composed for the 23rd birthday of violinist Eduard Rietz, a close family friend, the Octet was first performed at one of the weekly musical gatherings at the Mendelssohn house.

The double string quartet instrumentation was his innovation, and, recognizing the sonic possibilities, he instructed the players to perform “in symphonic orchestral style. Pianos and fortes must be strictly observed and more strongly emphasized than is usual in pieces of this character.” The scope and vitality of the Octet is established immediately with the soaring opening lines of the expansive first movement (it takes up nearly half the total length of the work), and then the *Andante con moto tranquillo* balances with thoughtful intimacy. The third movement foreshadows the Scherzo from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* composed several years

later, and, according to his sister Fanny was inspired by the same characters, albeit via Goethe rather than Shakespeare. In the finale, a thrilling fugue, Mendelssohn audaciously uses just enough of a theme from Handel's *Messiah* to be unmistakable.

As Stravinsky reputedly said, "Good composers borrow; great ones steal." Not only did Mendelssohn establish himself as a great composer with this youthful yet masterful work, he set the course for his career and his legacy: a forward-thinking, freely innovative artist who always paid homage to the best practices of his forebears.

- *Gabriel Langfur Rice*

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