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## MENDELSSOHN String Quartets Nos 2 & 4. 4 Pieces. Frage

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'He had the smallest modicum possible of the phlegmatic, and the maximum of the opposite quality.' Goethe's characterisation of the teenage Mendelssohn kept coming to mind when I was listening to the Arod Quartet's mercurial, nerve-end playing. The A major-minor, Op 13 – one of those early Mendelssohn works where self-conscious precocity and blinding inspiration blur – has become something of a calling card for this gifted French group, formed four years ago and currently BBC New Generation Artists; and you can hear why in a performance of youthful ardour that catches the music on the wing.

Both outer movements combine a surging impetus with expressive flexibility and delicacy of detail. With their keen ear for balance and harmonic flux, the Arod keep Mendelssohn's often dense textures lucid, ever alert to his characteristic shafts of dark viola tone. They use vibrato discriminatingly and colour imaginatively – say, in their exquisite floating *pianissimo* just before the first movement's recapitulation. The *Andante*, with its tortuous chromatic fugatos, looks back through Beethoven to JS Bach; yet, with their wide range of colour and dynamics (including a blanched, haunted *pianissimo*), the Arod never let us forget that Mendelssohn's was an early-Romantic sensibility. Like many quartets, they make the opening of the third movement wistfully hesitant, which seems rather at odds with Mendelssohn's *Allegretto con moto* marking. But the Scherzo at the movement's centre has all the windblown lightness one could wish. For mingled passion and eloquence, plus (in the finale) a desperate, no-holds-barred intensity, the Arod rival the Leipzig and Elias Quartets. Why, though, is the touching song 'Frage', from which the whole work grows, placed as an add-on at the end of disc rather than as a preface to the quartet?

The Arod throw themselves with comparable abandon into the E minor Quartet from Op 44, composed on Mendelssohn's honeymoon, though you'd never guess it, especially in a performance as combustible as this. Their basic tempo for the first movement is *Allegro assai appassionato* with a vengeance: dangerous, sometimes bordering on the frenetic, yet undeniably exciting. The Leipzig and Elias are hardly less impassioned without sacrificing poise. But no complaints about the precision and bite of the Arod's Scherzo, leavened by shards of viola lyricism, or their chastely expressive *Andante*, heeding Mendelssohn's warning that the music should on no account be dragged. The disparate set of pieces published as Op 81 make a welcome bonus, with a delicious airborne quality to the Scherzo – truly *leggiero*, as Mendelssohn requests – and a nervous volatility in the Capriccio that allies it with Op 13. In sum, an auspicious debut disc from a quartet I look forward to hearing in the flesh.

<https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/mendelssohn-string-quartets-nos-2-4-4-pieces-frage>