



**Juilliard String Quartet
with Michelle Cann, piano**

May 20, 2023

PROGRAM NOTES

Support for the program notes is generously provided by Roberta Viviano.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

(HAMBURG, 1809–LEIPZIG, 1847)

String Quartet No. 6 in F minor, Op. 80 (1847)

Felix Mendelssohn's Sixth String Quartet, his final large-scale composition, stands apart from his previous five quartets and is generally viewed as a response to the death of his dear sister, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel. As children, Felix and Fanny were likened to the Mozart siblings, and Fanny was equipped with musical training that was equivalent to Felix's. However, when she became of a marriageable age, Fanny's father informed her that she must confine her musical activities to sponsoring a Berlin salon, where she performed her works alongside those of her brother. It was not socially acceptable for wealthy European women to pursue serious careers or travel around as touring virtuosi. Fanny died suddenly in May 1847, aged 41, from a stroke while Felix was on tour conducting in England, and he did not learn of her death until he returned to Germany. He was shocked and went into a period of intense mourning, traveling with his brother to Switzerland, where he drafted the Sixth Quartet. Sadly, Felix died just months after his sister from complications ensuing from a series of strokes.

Mendelssohn's despairing mood is heard immediately as tragic gestures, like sighing descents and harsh tremolos, permeate the first movement, which never strays far from the key of F minor. The second movement opens with a scherzo section that that is a whirling *danse macabre*, which only subsides in the trio as an ominous chromatic melody appears in the depths of the viola and cello and lurks uncomfortably in the background, like a ghost haunting someone. The slow movement is a

peaceful respite in the key of A-flat major, but descending melodies and dissonant harmonies persist to express the overall feeling of grief. Although the finale reiterates the tremolos and piercing chromaticism of the opening movement, it is perhaps a more philosophical meditation on the inevitability of death. A graceful motive in the first violin tries to evade Death encroaching through agility and harmonic elusiveness, but falters in the end.

TYSON GHOLSTON DAVIS

(b. 2000)

String Quartet No. 2, “Amorphous Figures” (2022)

Tyson Gholston Davis is a 2023 graduate of The Juilliard School where he earned a degree in composition. His undergraduate career is defined by the staggering number of commissions that he has received from prestigious ensembles, including the Juilliard String Quartet, the Albany Symphony, Eighth Blackbird, and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. Davis has spoken openly about his experiences as the only Black student in the composition department at Juilliard and confirmed that social justice movements, like Black Lives Matter, have shaped his early output and the direction his work is taking. His musical reflection on the current historical moment is powerful, and he hopes to facilitate tangible opportunities for classical music to speak to a younger, more racially diverse audience. *Amorphous Figures* was commissioned by Da Camera Society of Houston, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and Chamber Music of Cincinnati for the Juilliard String Quartet. The composer writes:

Amorphous Figures (String Quartet No. 2) (2022) is a work written in response to *Jacob's Ladder* (1957), a painting by the American abstract expressionist Helen Frankenthaler. I first discovered this work in 2019 when I had been taking frequent visits to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Frankenthaler's color palette and her sublime sense of space and movement immediately drew me to the canvas. I began to see musical characteristics of her abstraction. The hues dance around one another in a way that they begin to morph into one another subtly. The soft edges of these oil paints thinned with turpentine aid this quality of variations I found. With these themes in mind, musical elements such as motivic development and developing variation allowed me to begin my sketches of this work. *Amorphous Figures* consist of continuous variations that gradually expand on the melodic and gestural content of the work. The variations are interrupted by scherzo-like sections “Bursts I and II”. These contrasting sections are distinctive due to their pitch content and seemingly spontaneous, violent gestures. “Bursts I and II” influence the structural material of the variations that follow them until they begin to synthesize into an amorphous collage in the same fashion as Frankenthaler's masterpiece.

ROBERT SCHUMANN

(ZWICKAU, 1810–ENDENICH, 1856)

Piano Quintet in E-flat major, Op. 44 (1842)

In 1842, Robert Schumann undertook serious study of Classical string quartets by Haydn and Mozart as preparation for shifting his compositional efforts to chamber music, having previously focused on the genre of song symphony. He had already devoted months to studying Beethoven's late string quartets in 1839 and wrote that "the late string quartets seem to me to be on the extreme boundaries of human art and imagination thus far attained." In his essays and reviews, Schumann states that string quartets by Romantic composers must honor the Viennese Classical tradition but strive to introduce new effects and structural qualities. After quickly completing his first three string quartets by the summer of 1842, Schumann chose to expand the instrumentation in his next work to include a part for his wife, piano virtuoso Clara Wieck Schumann. Much to Clara's delight, he composed the Piano Quintet in September and October of 1842, but Clara was pregnant and feeling unwell on the occasion of the private premiere in December. Felix Mendelssohn proved an excellent replacement for Clara, who then performed the public premiere at the Leipzig Gewandhaus in January 1843.

Like Franz Schubert, in many of his song cycles and instrumental works Schumann experimented with different ways to achieve large-scale structural unification. In the Quintet he reintroduces the opening thematic material of the first movement in the finale, creating a double fugue that intertwines melodies from the first and fourth movements. Schumann's opening melody is also crafted to sound quintessentially Romantic, as opposed to Classical, with vast leaps and chromatic passing tones. Scholars categorize the Quintet's first movement as one of Schumann's compositions that presents the contrasting personalities of his alter egos, Florestan, who is feisty and heroic, and Eusebius, a contemplative poet. Conceived similarly to the opening movement of Beethoven's Third Symphony (*Eroica*) Schumann's hero, Florestan, is stalled by Eusebius's lyrical musings and then confronts a tempest of Beethovenian *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) in the development section, with continuous agitated arpeggiations in the piano part. Florestan prevails in the coda, as the opening melody becomes even more propulsive and climbs to its highest register.

The second movement begins as a funeral march, another overt reference to Beethoven's *Eroica*, but this opening section is followed by a rather sudden shift to C major and an ethereal 3 against 2 polyrhythm. It is a mysterious and lengthy movement, featuring recurrences of the funeral march that collide with music that possibly evokes heaven and hell. The third movement, a scherzo, illustrates Schumann's penchant for metric

displacement (hemiola) and flowing polyrhythmic dreaminess, both representative of Schumann's pioneering contributions to the rhythmic sophistication of Romantic music. The finale has many unique qualities; a gruff opening in C minor is followed by a wide range of melodic styles, voicings, and textures, some of which are unusually heavy for a closing movement. This overabundance proves tactical, as it makes the coda all the more surprising as the texture drops to nothing and the piano restates the composition's opening melody as a fugal subject. The second violin enters with a complimentary subject, the melody from the opening of the finale, now in the key of E-flat major, and a double fugue ensues. Schumann pays homage to exquisite contrapuntal passages heard in Classical chamber works and symphonies, but here the art of fugue is not confined to the realm of absolute music (music for music's sake). Rather, it emerges as central to Schumann's enlarged emotional trajectory and portrayal of his hero.

Program Notes © Dr. Jessica Payette, Professor of Music, Oakland University.

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