

Masterclass

Mendelssohn's String Quartet in F minor op.80: fourth movement

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One of the problems in the last movement is the fast oscillating figures, particularly for the cello and viola, but also the violins. You have to play very quickly across the string. It starts in the very first bar. This was a favourite figure of Brahms, so I guess this is where he got it from – for example in his Cello Sonata in F major. I don't think anyone is capable of playing it precisely, but you can practise it almost like a double-stop. Swing the bow from one end of the double-stop to the other to give it the correct effect. It's too fast to play each note separately – this is a two-string effect with an oscillation.

The Peters edition suggests a hooked bowing for the first theme, which is very practical – it gives an incredible sense of direction. Have in mind the articulation that the crotchet has an end to it, so move with a quick bow but articulate the end of the crotchet and lightly hook in the next quaver – and similarly in the next bar. You then have a very good progression in the theme.

Mendelssohn uses the device of dovetailing bars, where he splits eight semiquavers between, for example, the two violins. You have to play these bars without accent and hand them over to each other. You can practise these slowly as four even notes, handing over to the next player. It's as if Mendelssohn is making it easy for the players, because if he'd asked one of the violinists to play the sequence on our own we'd be undone – it's very difficult. But with two, if you do it well, it sounds spectacular. When a string player such as Mendelssohn does something like this, it works; when a non-string player tries, it doesn't. Some composers think they're helping by dividing it but they do it in the wrong place so they make it much more difficult.

In the finale you have to let the sound go out of the white notes and even sometimes the crotchets. For example at figure A, you have the theme, but in the third and fourth bars, while you have minims, you're being answered by your colleagues, and if you play in a sustained way it thickens the texture and ruins the balance. This is a good example of how to get out of the way when you have long notes. Invariably in great music, when there is a white note, the composer will write something that is moving within that in one of the other parts and unless you let them through, you cover them. Then they play more, and the other players play more, and you get a traffic jam of sound. Transparency is necessary in this last movement: you have to get out the way. Look like you're playing, but let your colleagues through.

Leading up to the fortissimo at figure C there should be no hint of crescendo. The violins are having fun, like butterflies, and suddenly there's this knife at C, where the viola comes in as the heavy mob. Practise it to make sure there's no hint that the fortissimo is coming in. Try playing the fortissimo continuing the pianissimo. Get it into your mind that you've never seen the fortissimo before. However many times you play the piece you should act like you've not seen it coming. This is very like Beethoven, but it's also very Mendelssohn: it's his nature to be Beethoven-like when he wants to be. It's very important to get the calmness at speed. Do

it three or four times like that. Then get your muscles ready so you can practise the fortissimo on its own, to see what sort of attack and sonority you need. Then go back and put it together. It should be shocking. The effect repeats 16 bars later, which should be equally shocking, even though the audience has just heard it.

The movement is marked 'allegro molto', but there is a point where Mendelssohn gets shipwrecked in C major, which is normally an optimistic peaceful calm key, twelve bars before E. All the energy goes out of the music: it's a remarkable piece of writing. The music almost stops at that point. Then a new, mysterious colour comes in, marked pianissimo too, in D flat major: C major goes up a minor second and you're totally disorientated (this is straight from Beethoven's op.95). The ground shifts from below you. This passage needs a very special sound. It's not sustained, it's not fluffy – it's exactly between the two. It's sustained on the fingerboard, which we're not officially allowed to do. It's like when Debussy and Ravel write *sul tasto espressivo* and you wonder what they mean. How can you play *espressivo*, because there's no sound on the fingerboard? But it is possible.

This is not to do with the left hand: sound comes from the bow. Everything has to come from the bow. Vibrato has become a disease now. It's on the level of an epidemic, because people seriously believe that they can make a sound with vibrato. You must sort out your sound and then add your vibrato – with taste. Of course this section needs vibrato, but the special sound is produced by being *sul tasto*, which means you can't play too sustained. There are grace notes – a B double flat – which give you a signal about the otherworldly sound. The sound comes from a little bit of first finger pressure in the right hand and very little vibrato. Figure E has a similar pianissimo but is slightly nearer to normal tonality. The first one is completely away from where we are, E flat major, which is much warmer, and so I would nurture that pianissimo slightly. They're both pianissimo but they have to sound different.

The passage after E is extraordinary because Mendelssohn is trying to give the illusion that the first violin is playing a four-bar phrase with white notes, and below it their colleagues are each playing one bar of semiquavers. Because he wants it to pass it round the instruments, the first violin gets to play the fourth bar. You should almost feel that you're playing four bars and doing your turn with the semiquavers. I try to imagine that I have a fourth bar with my minims, and yet I am joining my colleagues with my contribution; and then I have four more bars. It's like a conjuring trick – a wonderful piece of writing.

There's a tricky passage for the second violin when the recapitulation of the tunes comes back, completely rescored, between E and F. For the first time in the movement the first violin has a triplet descant which goes very high, and then it turns into a cadenza which the first violin and cello play. But below it the second violin has to be careful to play fast enough with the normal theme. The tendency I've found is that the triplets move quicker than the duplets which are the theme, so the theme has to keep going. This problem is compounded into disastrous proportions if the players aren't aware of it, particularly at H, which is the beginning of the grandstand finale, with the first violin going completely mad. It's marked *con fuoco*. This is virtuoso writing. Below, the other three are having fun playing the theme in all sorts of contrary motion and voicing. The danger is that because it's marked fortissimo at H it's too loud and too slow – you're going for volume and laying into it and this is where the shipwreck happens. Within a couple of bars the first violin is at least half a bar ahead, so they pull up, and sound very ordinary because they're not allowed to play a virtuoso configuration. Meanwhile the others are wondering why it's like mud. The answer is to remember that this is Mendelssohn and that quite often in his faster movements, although he writes fortissimo this has a fast spirit – it's not heavy. It's a light fortissimo, the sort of thing

that happens a lot in the last movement of his Octet, which should be played mezzoforte but with lots of vigour.

The fortissimo also has to be phrased, which is a word that people sometimes forget when they're playing loudly. The lower three instruments have to work out a plan of where they're going to phrase: four-bar phrases, eight-bar phrases – the longer they can do, the better. Then the first violinist can fly above.

From about 20 bars before the end there's a built-in accelerando. There are some crotchets after figure I in the lower three parts, and they should just lift and go. The piece should end on an acceleration, so that there's no loss of energy. It's as if there's more music after the end. But the accompaniment has to follow the tune – in other words, the first violin has to follow the others. But beware of the needs of the first violin to deliver something really brilliant. Figures H and I are places where the lower three players are almost guaranteed to play too slowly. There's an illusion there, in that they sometimes feel that they're playing too fast and so they slow up even more, in my experience. The lower three should trust that it should be the same speed as the beginning. Because all three are playing and there are lots of string-crossings and inversions, they're trying to do all sorts of things, the last thing on their mind is to keep the allegro molto feeling through fortissimo. It's the opposite of what you should do in a Brahms fortissimo, where it should get fatter – Brahms would never have written anything like this, apart from in a Scherzo. This is very much Beethoven and Mendelssohn territory. You just need to have the courage to say, 'Come on guys, just play quicker and keep going. If you're ahead of me I'll scream soon enough, or I'll come off the rails.' But I don't think this has ever happened.