Sunday 13 October 2019, 3pm, Chorleywood Memorial Hall

**Peter Nall directs the début performance of the**

**18-17 ENSEMBLE**

15 expert string players from Peter’s wide range

of professional colleagues in the surrounding district

The programme includes

**Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)**

**String Octet in E flat, op.20**

***1. Allegro moderato, ma con fuoco***

***2. Andante***

***3. Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo.***

***4. Presto***

Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg, on 3 February 1809, the son of Leah Salomon and Abraham Mendelssohn, a wealthy banker, and the grandson of the Jewish rabbi and philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn. Being born in a family of well-to-do intellectuals certainly had its advantages, providing the ideal cultural environment for the artistic and precocious young Felix and his enormously talented elder sister, Fanny, and their father held regular soirées every fortnight in the family circle, where new compositions could be tried out. In addition to receiving a good education, Felix and his family travelled around Europe. In 1812, they moved from French-occupied Hamburg to Berlin, and converted to the Lutheran faith.

The move to Berlin proved to be beneficial for young Felix, (who had received prior musical instruction from his mother in 1815, then from Fanny), as it was there he studied the piano under Ludwig Berger and composition with Karl. F. Zelter, from 1817. Visiting friends of the family were also a positive influence on the Mendelssohn children, as most of them were intellectuals who were involved in the arts and other cultural activities. From a young age, Felix Mendelssohn showed the true talent of a prodigy, playing both the piano and the violin, painting, and being gifted in languages, poetry, painting and sport. His first public appearance was on October 1818. Felix travelled to Paris with Fanny to study under Marie Bigot the works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Johann Sebastian Bach. They impressed audiences and artists alike with their precocious talent. From the age of 11, music poured from him and, by the age of 12, Felix had completed 12 string symphonies, five operas, and many other pieces for the piano. Many of his most famous works – the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* music, *Fingal’s Cav*e Overture and today’s Octet – were written before 1827 when he was only 18 years old. As a final biographical aside, note that, from 1826 to 1829, Mendelssohn studied at Berlin University. It was then he decided on music as his chosen profession. His uncle, Jacob Bartholdy, who had fought against Napoleon and become Consul General in Rome in 1815, presumably disapproved, as he had written to Felix’s father in about 1825:

*“A professional musician is something I cannot bring myself to accept. That is no career, no life, no goal. A musician is as well off at the beginning as at the end and knows it; indeed, as a rule, better off. Let the boy study in an orderly manner, then finish a law degree at the University, and then make a career as a civil servant.”* What follows in this concert must make us happy this advice was ignored.

The Octet was composed in 1825 when Mendelssohn was only 16 and is one of the most amazing works of a prodigy ever composed in any age. For a start, it was innovative, being one of the first works of its kind, and featuring an ingenious interplay between two distinct string quartets. It also shows an astonishing mastery of counterpoint. One might also note it requires a first violin of virtuoso abilities so shows the standard of playing achieved by the young man. Dedicated to Eduard Rietz, his close friend.

(i)The first movement *Allegro moderato, ma con fuoco* (‘moderately fast, but with fire’) is in conventional sonata form with happily contrasting first and second subjects. In its simplest manifestation, “sonata” form can be the formal basis of any extended piece, and contains an Exposition, a Development and a Recapitulation (+ Coda). The Exposition contains a First Subject which leads to a (contrasting) Second Subject. These and their elements are examined, transformed, combined etc. in a range of keys to form the Development section. This returns the piece to its original key where the Exposition is more or less repeated and the piece is finished with a Coda (lit. Tail) to draw the work to a conclusion. There is a tiny anticipatory reference by the first violin to his later Violin Concerto of 1844. One of the movement’s highlights is the reintroduction of the recapitulation which sweeps up all the players into an intoxicating unison.

The second movement, *Andante* (‘at a walking pace’) shows the influence of Beethoven. It is again in sonata form with a first subject being a grave, descending figure, and the second based on a rising figure.

The *Scherzo*. meaning literally a joke, is marked *Allegro leggierissimo* (‘quick and very light’) and bears a strong resemblance to the fairy music from his *Midsummer Night’s Dream* music, (the overture for which, op. 21, was written a year later) and also has a literary inspiration: the *Walpurgisnacht* episode from Part I of *Faust*.

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| *Wolkenflug und Nebelflor*  *Erhellen sich von oben,*  *Luft im Laub und Wind im Rohr*  *Und alles ist zerstoben.* | *Train of clouds and flow’ring mist*  *Illuminate the sky,*  *Reeds and leaves by wind are kissed*  *Then all must quickly fly.* |

The final movement is marked *Presto* (‘very fast’) and is an exhilarating *fugato* movement. At its most basic, fugue is a form in which the subject theme is announced completely and then is heard again by a second voice whilst the first delivers a counter-theme. Depending on the number of voices, the fugal subject is announced by each voice to complete the Exposition and then there are many ways of treating the subject or motifs thereof in subsequent episodes, often changing key. At the end, the subject and the whole work concludes in the original key. J.S. Bach was the absolute master of the form but it has been used as a form in much more modern eras, and Mendelssohn was a devotee of Bach.

In this movement, the fugal writing is astoundingly accomplished, perhaps the finest of all of Mendelssohn’s music. It is started by the second cello and the immediate sense of breathless *moto perpetuo* pervades the movement. There is a reference to the fugato passage on an identical theme in Handel’s *For he shall reign for ever and ever* from *Messiah* which is hinted at so brilliantly just before it arrives. The whole range of contrapuntal tricks contributes to tremendous energy and excitement that culminate in a long sustained *crescendo* (‘getting louder’) over a bass pedal that brings the work to a glorious conclusion.

**Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)**

**Serenade in C major for Strings, op.48**

***1. Pezzo in forma di sonatina: Andante non troppo - Allegro moderato;***

***2. Valse: Moderato - Tempo di valse***

***3. Élégie: Larghetto elegiaco;***

***4. Finale (Tema russo): Andante - Allegro con spirito***

This is one of several compositions in which the great exponent of 19th-century Romanticism in Russian music shows an attraction to the poise and elegance of the Classical period – his *Rococo Variations* for cello and orchestra is another. Tchaikovsky wrote this piece in 1880, not on commission or to fulfil a particular obligation but, as he told Nadezhda von Meck, his patron and confidant, “from inner compulsion. It is a heartfelt piece and so, I dare to think, not lacking in real qualities.” Tchaikovsky had not misplaced his confidence: its seemingly effortless flow of melody, coupled with an original and very beautiful handling of string sonorities, makes this one of the composer’s most successful works.

He began sketching on 21st September, thinking at first that this would be a symphony or a string quartet, later that it was a suite for string orchestra, and finally, before it was completed on 4th November, that he would call it a serenade.

The first of the serenade’s four movements - “in the form of a sonatina”, as the score indicates - is framed by passages presenting a broad theme, expressive yet dignified, in slow tempo. Between its recurrences comes a more animated *Allegro moderato* (moderately quick), the main body of the movement. Tchaikovsky told Madame von Meck that the movement was in deliberate imitation of Mozart’s style. Its assertive first subject contrasts with the scurrying second subject (accompanied by *pizzicato* cellos). The development is based on the second subject, with interjections of the first subject, before a conventional recapitulation returns.

The second movement of the work contains a waltz, every bit as good as that in *Eugene Onegin* or, for that matter, his wonderful Piano Trio. He weaves various melodic strands in wonderfully effective counterpoint.

We then hear a deeply expressive elegiac slow movement that begins with the same ascending scale that launched the waltz tune.

The *Finale*, by contrast, seems at once spirited and relaxed, and is indebted to two folk songs, one for the introduction, the other as the principal theme of the Allegro. It presents a succession of attractive themes, the principal one conveying a distinctly Russian character. At its conclusion, Tchaikovsky recalls the broad opening subject from the first movement, which accelerates into a brief but lively coda to close the work. This coda reveals that this exuberant folk melody and the broad and solemn theme that opened the serenade are, in fact, distant relatives.