PROGRAM NOTES
Mendelssohn the Prodigy
April 28 – May 1, 2019

St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble

At A Glance
"As far as mere technical execution goes, musical prodigies are probably not so rare any more, but what this young fellow can improvise and play at sight borders on the miraculous," wrote Johann Wolfgang von Goethe about Felix Mendelssohn in November 1821, after hearing Mendelssohn perform his Piano Quartet in D Minor. Mendelssohn was three months shy of his thirteenth birthday, but he was already being proclaimed Mozart's successor for his prodigious talents as a violinist, pianist, and composer.

"Prodigy" often connotes a sense of phenomenon, as if the early blossoming of talent is predestined by divine decree or mere chance. Mendelssohn displayed his unusual musical gifts early, but they were expertly cultivated by his parents. By the time he was a pre-teen, Mendelssohn had been studying piano, violin, and composition for several years, had studied the music of J.S. Bach extensively, and was devoted to the works of Ovid, Cicero, and Shakespeare. If Mendelssohn was indeed born with an innate musicality, it was the fortunate circumstances of his birth (right time, right place, right parents) that catapulted him into the exclusive circle of child prodigies.

Mendelssohn's earliest compositions date from 1819, when he was ten years old. Within four years, he would compose four Singspiels, twelve string symphonies, piano trios and quartets, a violin sonata, and various chamber and vocal works. Many of these pieces were first performed in the Mendelssohn home, or in private residences in Berlin. One such work is the Concerto for Violin and String Orchestra in D Minor, composed in 1822 and then forgotten for nearly 130 years. Mendelssohn's first published work was the Piano Sonata in C Minor, published in 1823, but it wasn't until his Octet in E-flat Major, written in 1825 and published in 1832, that he began to receive wider recognition for his talents. The Octet, considered to be his first masterpiece, launched Mendelssohn on the journey from child prodigy to one of the most widely-respected and beloved composers of his time.

Concerto for Violin and String Orchestra in D Minor (1822)
Mendelssohn wrote the Concerto for Violin and String Orchestra in D Minor in 1822. The work was first performed in May 1823 at the Mendelssohn family home in Berlin with Mendelssohn playing the piano and his friend and violin instructor Eduard Rietz playing the florid and virtuosic solo violin. As with many of Mendelssohn's earliest works, his first violin concerto was never published during his lifetime. After Mendelssohn's premature death in 1847, his widow Cécile Mendelssohn presented the manuscript to violinist Ferdinand David, who had given the premiere of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor in 1844.

The manuscript remained in private hands for over a century, eventually making its way back to a member of the Mendelssohn family, who presented it to violinist Yehudi Menuhin in 1951. On February 4, 1952, the Concerto for Violin and String Orchestra in D Minor received its first public performance in well over a century at Carnegie Hall, with Yehudi Menuhin conducting and playing the solo violin part. Menuhin recorded the work shortly after this premiere and frequently played it in recital, but the concerto remains a rare treat, despite the breathtaking virtuosity of

the solo violin and the young Mendelssohn's ceaseless ingenuity in balancing tradition and innovation.

The Concerto for Violin and String Orchestra in D Minor is written in the traditional three-movement concerto form. Within this conventional structure, Mendelssohn conducts subtle experiments in modulation and form, obeying the laws but rewriting the rules to fit his budding artistic expression. The first Allegro movement is full of tension and contrast, shifting from brooding and angst-ridden to playful, lyrical, and tender. The drama of the first movement softens into the eloquent nobility of the second Andante movement, before the solo violin electrifies the Presto finale with its dizzying and feverish pyrotechnics.

Octet in E-flat Major, Op. 20 (1825)
The Octet in E-flat Major is one of Mendelssohn's most admired and frequently performed works. As with his early violin concerto, Mendelssohn dedicated the Octet to Eduard Rietz and presented it to him as a gift for the violinist's 23rd birthday in 1825. In writing for eight string players, Mendelssohn broke from tradition by scoring the work as if it were a symphony, allowing him to explore a wider range of orchestral colors within the intimacy of chamber music. The Octet is yet another example of the young composer expressing his individual voice within the traditions he revered.

Throughout the Octet, Mendelssohn experiments with different combinations of instruments that paint an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of colors. This is especially true of the extended first Allegro moderato movement, comprised of almost 15 minutes of mesmerizing variations in instrumentation, themes, and form, all while maintaining a pristine Classical symmetry. The second Andante movement is a soulful contemplation hovering anxiously around its home key of C Minor. According to Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, Mendelssohn's sister and a child prodigy in her own right, the third Scherzo movement is a setting of a stanza from the first part of Goethe's *Faust*, one of the most influential works of the 19th century. The movement depicts Faust's Walpurgis Night dream sequence, with the fantastical imagery of the Witches' Dance reflected in the tremolos, trills, and the restless momentum of the first violin, and is considered a precursor to Mendelssohn's famous Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

If the Scherzo movement shows Goethe's influence on Mendelssohn, then the final Presto movement is a testament to the influence of J.S. Bach and Handel on the young composer. Mendelssohn is credited with reviving interest in J.S. Bach's music when the twenty-year old conducted a performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* in Berlin in 1829, the first time work had been performed in its entirety outside of Bach's hometown of Leipzig. Bach's influence can be heard in the eight part fugue that opens the Octet's final Presto movement, and in the intricate counterpoint at the climax of the piece. At this moment, Mendelssohn quotes the "Hallelujah" chorus from Handel's *Messiah,* transforming it through a brilliant contrapuntal back-and-forth that unleashes a final burst of energy to bring the Octet to a brilliant and heart racing conclusion.