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## Form in Mendelssohn's Late Chamber Music: Thematic, Textural and Timbral Saliency in the Quartet Op. 80

### ABSTRACT

#### Background

This paper explores the formal design of the opening movement of Mendelssohn's final string quartet, viewed as part of a radical reconfiguration of the relationship between theme, texture and timbre in his music of the later 1840s.

Although the eighteen-thirties and eighteen-forties are a crucial period for the compositional and theoretical formulation of sonata form, this era has remained largely uncharted territory for the 'New Formenlehre', poised as it is between the Viennese classical orientation of the work of Caplin (1998) and Hepokoski and Darcy (2006) on the one hand, and late-Romantic deformational designs theorised by Hepokoski (e.g. 1993) on the other. Building on recent progress in Mendelssohn scholarship (see for instance Horton, Schmidt, Taylor, and Vande Moortele 2016) this paper seeks to extend contemporary knowledge of this crucial repertoire by looking at the final chamber work of this composer, a piece often considered as marking a decisive rejection of his earlier style and foreshadowing much later developments in quartet writing.

#### Aims and Repertoire Studied

Both the B-flat major Quintet Op. 87 (1845), and especially the F minor Quartet Op. 80 (1847), have been received as examples of a putative 'late style' (Krummacker 1978 and 1992) in their downplaying of the organic thematic interconnection familiar from the works of Mendelssohn's previous decade, violent juxtaposition of theme groups, and new focus on athematic figuration, texture, and sonority. Leaving to one side the customary biographical association of the latter piece with the deaths of the composer and his sister, my paper draws on the useful, if problematic, category of lateness to unpick the sense of deliberate formal disintegration and syntactic discontinuity at work in this music.

#### Methods

Focussing on the first movement of Op. 80, this paper examines the abrupt juxtaposition of thematic groups, the unmediated alternation of themes and figuration, the role of texture and timbre as formally articulatory device (or thematically 'salient' aspect), and how these elements are drawn into the strongly rotational tendencies of these movements (Hepokoski 1993; Taylor 2011).

In this, Mendelssohn is continuing both his own earlier techniques and Beethovenian precedent (e.g. Op. 57 and Op. 95), but differing quite substantially in his music's syntactical implications. In this quartet, the thematic material is often akin to figuration in its rhythmic uniformity, and its textural and sonorous presentation is as much part of its es-

sence as diastematic identity. The use of texture as one of the preeminent ways to signal structural boundaries is taken to a new extreme, while tonality and other parameters appear to be emptied of their customary power to articulate form. Likewise, the non-congruence of bass progression with thematic form is typical of Mendelssohn, but Op. 80 takes this principle much further: in the first movement, not only does the recapitulation occur over an active bass progression, but both the exposition and recapitulation are cut off before reaching any cadential close.

#### Implications

If syntactic radicality and parametric non-congruence lie under the ostensibly smooth surface of Mendelssohn's middle-period works, Op. 80 openly flaunts such discontinuities, albeit in the service of a larger teleology whereby the rotational cycling through a series of opposed thematic events attains a tragic telos. Ultimately I argue for the unique standing of this repertoire as grounded in a musical language irreducible either to Beethovenian precedent or its late-Romantic successors, and the urgent need for a thorough study of this period's music.

#### Keywords

Mendelssohn, Form, Syntax, Texture, Timbre.

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