

**Felix Mendelssohn** (b. Hamburg, 1809; d. Leipzig, 1847)

**Piano Trio in D minor, Op. 49 (1839)**

*program notes by Jeffrey Sykes, Ph.D.*

Felix Mendelssohn was likely the most precociously gifted musician the world has ever known. No one in the history of music—not even Mozart—produced such mature masterpieces so young: the third Piano Quartet and the *Rondo capriccioso* at age 15, the Octet at age 16, the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at age 17. These are all core works in the musical canon. Not until Mozart reached the relatively old age of twenty did he produce music of such sophistication and power. A double prodigy on the piano and the violin, Mendelssohn grew up with every advantage one could have—supportive, wealthy parents, an incredibly diverse education guided by some of the greatest minds of the day, and a sister, Fanny, who was every bit the musical genius her brother was. Mendelssohn's family arranged for performances of his works with their private orchestra in their home in Berlin. The intellectual and cultural elite of the city were regular guests at these salons, so Mendelssohn had the opportunity every young composer hopes for: the opportunity to try out new works for a discerning, sophisticated, knowledgeable, yet kindly disposed audience.



A charmed life, you might say, and, indeed, Mendelssohn's music, while always beautiful and passionate, only rarely shows signs of the profound inner torment typical of a Romantic artist. Mendelssohn's two piano trios, the first in D minor, Op. 49, and the second in C minor, Op. 66, are a pair of works that display the contrasting and complementary aspects of his art. The first trio has always been the more popular of the two, and indeed is one of the most popular chamber works in the repertoire. Written in Frankfurt am Main in the summer of 1839, the work was first performed in Leipzig in 1840 with Mendelssohn at the piano. Melodious, elegiac, and full of fiery passagework, Robert Schumann declared that the work was "the most brilliant trio of the present day—it will still give pleasure to our grandchildren and great-grandchildren." The first movement begins with a long, arching melody in the cello that is irresistibly propelled forward by an undercurrent of rhythmic agitation in the piano. The excitement of the music is so great that one can scarcely breathe. The second movement, reminiscent of Mendelssohn's famous *Songs Without Words*, is charming and wistful. The brilliant scherzo transports us to the world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—a world of elves, fairies, dragonflies, and magic spells. Throughout his life, Mendelssohn had a special talent for writing scherzos in this character, and this is one of his finest examples. (Perhaps his lighter-than-air writing is a reflection of his childhood interest in insects. According to Mendelssohn's friend Julius Schubring, passages in

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* were inspired by the buzzing of a fly.) The finale is an impassioned, brilliant dance, full of virtuosic display. The work as a whole displays Mendelssohn's effortless compositional mastery, and it well deserves its place in the musical canon.

### **Piano Trio in C minor, Op. 66 (1844-45)**

Mendelssohn started the second trio in C minor in the winter of 1844, completed it the next spring, and premiered it in Leipzig on December 20, 1845. Though both trios are written in minor keys and are full of instrumental brilliance, the works are strongly contrasting. The first trio entices us with charm—brilliant, fiery, masterful charm—and gives clear answers to all the questions it poses. The second trio, on the other hand, plumbs the depths of human experience and poses questions that are ultimately unanswerable. Mendelssohn had already begun composing his great oratorio *Elijah* as he wrote this trio, and we hear in Op. 66 a comparable seriousness of purpose and depth of feeling. The first movement is dark, questioning, and almost symphonic in scope. The slow movement is full of a restless, though heartfelt passion. The scherzo is one Mendelssohn's famously elfin confections, chattering merrily along but for a hint of foreboding provided by its minor key. The entire trio is clearly weighted toward its finale, a turbulent and agitated movement that begins distressingly with a leap of a minor ninth in the solo cello. But soon the clouds part, the agitation lifts,

and we hear a solemn chorale theme: *Vor Deinen Thron (Before Your Throne)*, taken from the Geneva Psalter of 1562 and used famously by Bach in his Cantata BWV 130. Robert Schumann said of Mendelssohn, “[He] is the Mozart of the 19th century; the brightest of our composers, he has the clearest understanding of the inconsistencies of our time, and is best able to reconcile them with one another.” Nowhere is this more apparent than in this great masterpiece.

Mendelssohn's understanding and reconciliation of the inconsistencies of his day owes much to his complicated and inconsistent religious upbringing. Born Jewish but baptized in the Lutheran church at age seven, Mendelssohn struggled throughout his life to find a compromise between his Jewish heritage and Christian faith. At first, while living with his father, he attempted to distance himself from Judaism; but, later in his life, he looked for ways to celebrate his Christian faith without denigrating Judaism in the process. His oratorio *Elijah* is a perfect example of this—a work cast in the traditional oratorio form and performed regularly in Christian churches, but centered around one of the great heroes of the Old Testament. Some commentators have proposed that the finale of the Piano Trio in C minor is another example of this. The main theme of the finale—with its very prominent minor ninth—is seen as being related to traditional Jewish music, and the “victorious” chorale theme is seen as representing Mendelssohn's

choice to live as a Lutheran. And indeed, in the coda of this movement, the chorale theme achieves a transcendental splendor as it is interwoven with the main theme of the movement. Judaism and Christianity live peacefully side-by-side—just as they did in Mendelssohn’s life.

### **Song Without Words, Op. 53, No. 2**

Among Mendelssohn’s most enduringly popular works are his eight volumes of *Songs Without Words*, lyrical piano miniatures intended for amateur pianists of all levels of ability. Mendelssohn invented the title “song without words” himself; and while many publishers attempted to make them literal songs by adding words to them, he himself was adamantly opposed to this practice. He wrote, “What the music I love expresses to me, is not thought too *indefinite* to put into words, but on the contrary, too *definite*.” (Mendelssohn’s italics are original.) The *Songs Without Words* have been arranged for many combinations of instruments. On this recording we hear Mendelssohn’s Op. 53, No. 2, as arranged for piano trio by the Bohemian violinist and composer Hans Sitt (1850-1922). Sitt was undoubtedly inspired by the slow movements of Mendelssohn’s own piano trios in making this arrangement; after all, the slow movements of the trios are songs without words in all but name.

## *The Artists*





## Stephanie Sant'Ambrogio violin

Praised as an "expressive and passionate chamber musician" by the *San Antonio Express-News*, Stephanie Sant'Ambrogio has enjoyed a varied performing and recording career as a soloist, chamber musician and orchestral leader. Currently Assistant Professor of Violin and Viola at the University of Nevada, Reno [www.unr.edu]

she is also Artistic Director of Cactus Pear Music Festival, which she founded in 1997 while serving as Concertmaster of the San Antonio Symphony. Cactus Pear Music Festival [www.cpmf.us] presents chamber music performances, Young People's Concerts, Kinder Konzerts, a full scholarship Young Artist Program, an Xtreme Composer Competition, American composer commissions and master classes in the South Texas region. Former First Assistant Principal Second Violin of The Cleveland Orchestra under Christoph von Dohnányi, she toured and recorded internationally with this ensemble for eight seasons. Ms. Sant'Ambrogio has performed as a soloist and chamber musician throughout the U.S. as well as in Canada, Estonia, Sweden, Ghana, Italy, Peru, Chile and Mexico.

In 2010, she won the Alan Bible Teaching Excellence Award at UNR and was also appointed Concertmaster of the Fresno Philharmonic Orchestra. She is a frequent guest artist at summer festivals in North America and Concertmaster of the Lancaster Festival Orchestra in Ohio. With a discography of over sixty orchestral and chamber music CDs, her recent releases include *Late Dates with Mozart: Three Late Sonatas for Piano and Violin* with James Winn, and *Going Solo: Unaccompanied Works for Violin & Viola*, both on the MSR Classics label. Ms. Sant'Ambrogio studied with and was the graduate assistant to Donald Weilerstein at The Eastman School of Music, where she received her Master of Music degree. Previously she received her Bachelor of Music degree with distinction from Indiana University as a scholarship student of Laurence Shapiro and James Oliver Buswell. Ms. Sant'Ambrogio plays a violin crafted in 1757 by J.B. Guadagnini of Milan. In the moments when her instrument is not nestled under her chin, she and her husband Gary Albright enjoy life with their daughters, Isabel and Gabrielle, who now also study music.



## Dmitri Atapine cello

Dmitri Atapine [www.atapine.com] has been described as "a splendid, elegant cellist" demonstrating "an astonishing showcase of virtuosity", and a "warm vividly coloristic touch on the cello and seemingly effortless command of any stylistic device." As a soloist and recitalist Dr. Atapine has appeared on some of the world's foremost stages, including Carnegie Hall (USA), Sapporo Kitara Hall (Japan),

Wigmore Hall (UK), National Auditorium of Spain, and Prince Philip Auditorium (Spain). He has performed as a soloist with such orchestras as the Asturias Symphony, León Symphony, and Yale Philharmonia. His frequent festival engagements include Music@Menlo (CA), Cactus Pear Music Festival (TX), Banff (Canada), Great Mountains (South Korea), Miguel Bernal Jiménez (Mexico), the French Academy (Italy), Aldeborough (UK), and the Pacific Music Festival (Japan). His performances are often broadcast on radio and television in the U.S., Spain, Canada, Mexico, and South Korea.

A top prize-winner at solo and chamber music international competitions such as Carlos Prieto, Florian Ocampo, Plowman, New England, and Vittorio Gui, Dr. Atapine's debut recording with pianist Adela Hyeeyeon Park is released on Urtext Digital. He has collaborated with such eminent artists as the Tokyo String Quartet, Simon Carrington, and Anthony McGill, among many others. Born into a family of musicians, he entered the Special Music School of St. Petersburg Conservatory at an early age. He continued his studies in Spain with Alexander Fedortchenko at the Asturias Conservatory. Dr. Atapine obtained his Bachelor and Master of Music degrees at Michigan State University with Suren Bagratuni. He completed his education with the legendary Aldo Parisot at the Yale School of Music, obtaining an Artist Diploma and the Doctor of Musical Arts degree. Since 2007 he has served as the Artistic Director of the Ribadesella Chamber Music Festival in northern Spain. Currently Dr. Atapine is Assistant Professor of Cello and Artistic Director of the Argenta Concert Series, a nine-concert chamber music series, at the University of Nevada, Reno.



## James Winn piano

James Winn, piano and composition professor at the University of Nevada, Reno and principal keyboard of both the Reno Philharmonic and Reno Chamber Orchestras since 1997, made his professional debut with the Denver Symphony at the age of thirteen, and has been performing widely in North America, Europe, and Japan ever since. With his duo-piano partner, Cameron Grant, he was a recipient of the top prize given in the two-piano category of the 1980 ARD International Competition in Munich. Dr. Winn has been a solo pianist with the New York City Ballet, a member of the New York New Music Ensemble, and of Hexagon, as well as a frequent guest with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Speculum, The Group for Contemporary Music, and Bargemusic.

Well-known as a specialist in new music, he has been involved in numerous world premieres and premiere recordings by many renowned composers, among them over a dozen Pulitzer Prize winners. He performs regularly in recital with internationally acclaimed New York based violinist Rolf Schulte. Dr. Winn's own compositions have been performed internationally. He has received the UNR College of Liberal Arts' prestigious Mousel/Feltner award for creative activity, an Artist Fellowship Grant in composition from the Nevada Arts Council, the 2007 Award for Creative Activity from Board of Regents of the Nevada System of Higher Education, and, in 2009, was given the Governor of the State of Nevada's Award for Excellence in the Arts.

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### The Argenta Trio Especially Thanks

Tony & Becky Czarnik

David Bowles, Adela Hyeyeon Park

Gary Albright, Katharine DeBoer, Carla Sanders



The Argenta Trio is the trio-in-residence at the University of Nevada, Reno. [[www.unr.edu/cla/music/ensembles/argenta\\_trio.htm](http://www.unr.edu/cla/music/ensembles/argenta_trio.htm)] The ensemble is composed of pianist James Winn, a member since 1997, violinist Stephanie Sant'Ambrogio who joined the trio in 2007, and cellist Dmitri Atapine who became a member of the music faculty in 2009. From their first concert together, their chemistry was immediate and palpable. After standing ovation performances of Mendelssohn's C Minor Trio, it was apparent that their artistry deserved to be captured on CD. The Argenta Trio members are excited to embark on their musical journey together with this recording of the piano trios of Felix Mendelssohn.

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