

Fine Arts Quartet
at the National Gallery of Art
“the Fine Arts Quartet is one of the gold-plated names
in chamber music... suave and elegant...”

Mendelssohn Experimented, and Fine Arts Gets Results

Tuesday, January 27, 2009; Page C04

In his late teens, Felix Mendelssohn's music took on an experimental streak, pungent and dramatic. His father, viewing his deeply gifted son as a classically inspired artist, was horrified. The son eventually caved to his father's entreaties, returning to a more orderly if still marvelously constructed sound. On Sunday evening at the National Gallery of Art as part of the "Mendelssohn on the Mall" festival, the estimable Fine Arts Quartet put some of the early advanced explorations in high relief, making you wonder what might have been had Mendelssohn had more of the hellion in him.

Due to its long history, the Fine Arts Quartet is one of the gold-plated names in chamber music. In its suave and elegant account, Mendelssohn's String Quartet Op. 12 emerged as a direct successor to the late string quartets of Beethoven. The lead violin traced an unbroken line in a slow movement highly redolent of the great Cavatina of Beethoven's Op. 130 quartet, while sequences of the finale move into the netherworld of Beethoven's late style, resplendent lines floating at fathomless depths. History has tied Mendelssohn to Bach, but, this calibrated and colorful playing made him a direct ancestor to Schoenberg and other great 20th-century modernists.

In the other works on the program -- two quartet movements from Op. 81 and String Quartet Op. 44, No. 1, composed a decade after Op. 12 -- Mendelssohn moved into a more conventional posture. Fine Arts expertly distilled out the gestures that are singularly Mendelssohn -- busy passages with driving notes that dance up and down, along with poignant lyrical flights. Those qualities were firmly ensconced within an orderly structure where textures are more proportioned, tensions smoothed over.

-- Daniel Ginsberg