

# Dover Quartet with Escher String Quartet

SUNDAY, MARCH 29, 2 PM  
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

NOTES BY KEN MELTZER

## DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)

### Two Pieces for String Octet, Opus 11 (1924–5)

- I. *Prelude. Adagio*
- II. *Scherzo. Allegro molto*

## FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809–1847)

### Octet for Strings in E-flat Major, Opus 20 (1825)

- I. *Allegro moderato ma con fuoco*
- II. *Andante*
- III. *Scherzo. Allegro leggierissimo*
- IV. *Presto*

## INTERMISSION

## GEORGE ENESCU (1881–1955)

### Octet in C Major, Opus 7 (1900)

- I. *Très modéré*
- II. *Très fougueux*
- III. *Lentement*
- IV. *Mouvement de Valse bien rythmée*

### Two Pieces for String Octet, Opus 11 (1924–5)

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, on September 25, 1906, and died in Moscow, Russia, on August 9, 1975.

⌚ Approx. performance time: 10 mins.

📅 SMF performance history: SMF premiere

Dmitri Shostakovich completed his *Two Pieces for String Octet* (four violins, two violas, two cellos) in 1925. Shostakovich, still a teenager, was studying composition with Maximilian Steinberg at the Leningrad (St. Petersburg) Conservatory of Music. Shostakovich began the work in 1924, but put the music aside in order to complete his *First Symphony*, Opus 10 (1925). Shostakovich originally intended this chamber work to be a suite in five movements. But Shostakovich finally settled upon a piece comprising only two movements, a *Prelude* and *Scherzo*. The music reflects a modernist approach, and the avoidance of anything that might suggest “bourgeois” tastes, an anathema in Stalinist Russia.

I. *Prelude. Adagio*—The *Prelude*, with its stern opening measures in slow tempo (*Adagio*), ensuing quick-tempo, contrapuntal episode (*Più mosso*), and reprise of the *Adagio*, is very much in the tradition of the Baroque French overture. In the music’s brief span, Shostakovich explores a strikingly broad range of instrumental colors and effects.

II. *Scherzo. Allegro molto*—The relentless, irrepressible energy of the concluding *Scherzo*, as well as its satirical, even sardonic character (enhanced by the frequent appearance of upward *glissandi*), anticipate parallel movements in Shostakovich’s mature symphonies.

### Octet for Strings in E-flat Major, Opus 20 (1825)

Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg, Germany, on February 3, 1809, and died in Leipzig, Germany, on November 4, 1847.

⌚ Approx. performance time: 35 mins.

📅 SMF performance history: 4/01/13, 3/27/09

The works Felix Mendelssohn composed during the second decade of his life are remarkable for their number, variety, and level of accomplishment. However, two compositions from those years stand out as creations of extraordinary genius, music that would do credit to the greatest composers at the absolute zenith of their maturity and powers.

In August of 1826, Mendelssohn, then 17 years old, completed his Overture to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The magic of this extraordinary music prompted one British musicologist to remark: “With *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* we cannot think of Shakespeare without Mendelssohn or Mendelssohn without Shakespeare.” Mendelssohn’s friend, the great German composer, Robert Schumann, hailed the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* Overture as “an inspired moment when the mature master took his first and loftiest flight.”

But the previous year, Mendelssohn composed a chamber work that proudly stands alongside the *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Overture as a creation of towering genius. In October of 1825, Mendelssohn completed his *Octet for Strings*, Opus 20, a composition dedicated to his teacher, Eduard Rietz.

The 16-year-old Mendelssohn’s *Octet* remains one of the glories of the chamber music repertoire. It is a work of extraordinary vitality, melodic inspiration, and dramatic impact.

Mendelssohn’s genius with instrumental colors is apparent in the strikingly rich sound he achieves from just eight string instruments. Mendelssohn himself specified that the *Octet* should be performed “in symphonic orchestral style.”

In order to achieve that effect, Mendelssohn directs that dynamic gradations be executed with particular care: “pianos and fortes must be strictly observed and more strongly emphasized than is usual in pieces of this kind.”

In 1900, German composer Max Bruch wrote of the *Octet* and *Midsummer Night’s Dream* Overture: “Both works have earned immortality, but to me the *octet* will always remain the greater miracle.” Mendelssohn himself admitted to Schumann that among all of his early compositions, the *Octet* was his favorite, one that he often recalled with great affection. As Mendelssohn remarked: “I had a most wonderful time in the writing of it.”

The *Octet* is scored for an ensemble of four violins, two violas, and two cellos.

I. *Allegro moderato ma con fuoco*—The *Octet*’s opening movement (by far the longest of the four) is notable throughout for its breathtaking energy and momentum. Over rich accompaniment by the ensemble, the first violin sings the wide-ranging principal theme. The theme undergoes an extensive treatment by the ensemble, finally resolving to the hushed, flowing second principal melody, played by the fourth violin and first viola, to echoes of the opening theme from the first violin. The two themes intertwine. In the exposition’s bracing final measures, the first violin soars over the ensemble, while the cellos boldly play the opening theme. The extended development, by turns agitated and hushed, includes both principal themes. Toward the close, syncopated figures lead to a brilliant run of sixteenth notes, heralding the return of the opening theme, the start of the recapitulation. The first violin’s final, joyous statement of that theme is capped by a series of *fortissimo* chords.

II. *Andante*—After an introductory passage, the violas play a theme, soon incorporated by the violins. The theme—more a motif than a melody—soon builds to an impassioned outburst. Throughout the *Andante*, Mendelssohn employs motivic fragments as the basis to explore a wide range of colors and moods, often in sharp contrast to the youthful exuberance of the opening movement. The tension finally resolves to a *pianissimo* close.

III. *Scherzo. Allegro leggierissimo*—The third-movement *Scherzo* was, according to Mendelssohn, inspired by the “Walpurgis Night” in Goethe’s *Faust*:

The flight of the clouds and the veil of mist  
Are lighted from above,  
A breeze in the leaves, a wind in the reeds,  
And all has vanished.

Felix’s sister, Fanny, described the *Scherzo*:


The whole piece is to be played *staccato* and *pianissimo* with shivering tremolos and lightning flashes of trills. Everything is new and strange, yet at the same time utterly persuasive and enchanting. One feels very near to the world of the spirits, lifted into the air, half inclined to snatch up a broomstick and follow the aerial procession. At the end the first violin takes flight, light as a feather—and all is blown away.

IV. *Presto*—The second cello launches the finale with the scurrying principal theme, soon incorporated in turn by each member of the ensemble. The breathless contrapuntal sequence culminates in a *fortissimo* unison statement that serves as the finale’s subsidiary theme. Music from the third-movement *Scherzo* intertwines with the finale’s themes, as the Mendelssohn Octet sprints to a brilliant finish.

### Octet in C Major, Opus 7 (1900)

**George Enescu was born in Liveni Vîrnav (now George Enescu), Rumania, on August 19, 1881, and died in Paris, France, on May 3/4, 1955.**

 Approx. performance time: 40 mins.

 SMF performance history: SMF premiere

George Enescu remains the most prominent of Rumanian musicians. He was born in the province of Moldavia. At the age of only 7, Enescu attended the Vienna Conservatory, where he studied violin, chamber music, harmony, and composition. Enescu then traveled to Paris and studied at the National Conservatory, where his teachers included the distinguished French composers Jules Massenet and Gabriel Fauré. Enescu also studied counterpoint and fugue with André Gédalge. Enescu soon established himself as a composer and virtuoso violinist of the first order, as well as a highly accomplished pianist and conductor.

Most of Enescu’s artistic life was centered in

Paris. Enescu also made several visits to the United States, the earliest in 1923. Despite his busy international schedule, Enescu found time to return to his native country, where he contributed much to Rumanian musical life. However, once the Communists took control of Rumania after WWII, Enescu left his native country for the duration of his life.

Among his pupils were several eminent violinists, including Arthur Grumiaux and Yehudi Menuhin. Menuhin began studies with Enescu in Paris during the American-born prodigy’s second decade. Menuhin described his teacher, mentor, and friend as: “the Absolute by which I judge all others... the most extraordinary human being, the greatest musician and the most formative influence I have ever experienced.”

George Enescu was a versatile composer whose output includes several chamber pieces, shorter orchestral works (the *Rumanian Rhapsodies*, Opus 11, being the best known), symphonies, and the lyric tragedy, *Oedipe*. Enescu completed his Octet for Strings in C Major, Opus 7, in 1900, the year following his graduation from the Paris Conservatoire. Enescu dedicated the work to Gédalge. During 1900, Enescu was performing (alternatively as a violinist, pianist, and conductor) in numerous concerts in Paris and Bucharest. It appears that the Octet had its premiere in Paris on December 18, 1909, as part of “Soirées d’Art” concert presenting works by Enescu. Like the Mendelssohn (and for that matter, the Shostakovich), Enescu’s Octet would be a remarkable achievement for a composer at the height of his maturity, let alone one still in his teenage years.

The Octet is scored for four violins, and pairs of violas and cellos. A preface to the score contains the following by the composer: “This work can be played with a full string orchestra on condition that certain singing parts be entrusted to *soloists*. I leave it to the judicious choice of the conductor to decide which passages are to be played solo.”

I. *Très modéré*—The opening movement is based upon two extended themes. The first is presented at the outset by the ensemble, in unison. After the opening theme reaches a *fortissimo* resolution, the first violin and first viola introduce, in canon, the second principal theme, marked *très doux*. The themes undergo the traditional sonata form development and varied restatement. In the final measures, the muted first violin intones the initial theme, over

sustained accompaniment by the remaining members of the ensemble. The composer directs that a short pause be taken following the movement’s hushed conclusion.

II. *Très fougueux*—The expressive marking for the second movement, *très fougueux*, may be translated as “very fiery” or “very impetuous.” This movement serves as the Octet’s scherzo, with energetic, irrepressible, and forceful music evoking a *danse macabre*. This music alternates with a far more elegant sequence (*Moins vite*). The frenetic energy of the closing measures finally subsides, leading to the third movement, which follows without pause.

III. *Lentement*—The slow-tempo movement opens with hushed music, played by muted strings, and very much in the spirit of a nocturne. Midway, the mood brightens, as the first violin soars over the ensemble (*Plus animé*). Toward the close, the atmosphere becomes restless and agitated, leading to the finale, which also ensues without pause.

IV. *Mouvement de Valse bien rythmée*—The final movement is a series of waltzes, encompassing an impressive variety of moods and instrumental colors. Echoes from previous movements appear as well, as the Octet propels to a vibrant conclusion.