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Mendelssohn's "Late Style": Form, Texture, and Sonority in the Final Chamber Works

Benedict Taylor

Out of all the composers to whom the term "late style" might reasonably apply, Felix Mendelssohn, it is fair to say, is not the name that most readily comes to mind. It might seem more than a little curious in the case of a composer who died in his thirties, but as with Mozart and Schubert before him, the specter of lateness has nevertheless been raised in relation to the music of Mendelssohn's final years. Foremost among such accounts has been that by the German musicologist Friedhelm Krummacker, who hears a new, "late" manner being developed in certain of Mendelssohn's compositions from the mid-1840s onward, but the idea is not entirely absent from other scholars' writings.¹

Krummacker is referring specifically to two chamber works written in the last two years of Mendelssohn's life and published posthumously, the String Quintet No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 87/MWV R 33 (1845), and String Quartet No. 6 in F Minor, Op. 80/MWV R 37 (1847), though the 1846 oratorio *Elijah* in some respects inhabits the same orbit, while the two pieces for string quartet written in 1847 and published (again posthumously) as Opus 81, Nos. 1 and 2 (MWV R 34 and 35), might similarly be adduced to bolster this category.² More essentially, I would propose we are really talking about one of these works, the F-minor Quartet, whose unusual expressive and dramatic qualities compel writers to seek out any trace of these properties in its neighboring compositions. For Krummacker, revealingly, the Opus 87 Quintet is an only partially successful realization of principles that would find their consummation in Opus 80, characterized by him as the "perfected late work."³

Krummacker applies the term “late” primarily as a descriptive convenience to designate the new stylistic principles he hears being developed in these pieces, rather than explicitly calling upon the idea’s wider aesthetic and biographical connotations, although some remarks he leaves on the dissolution of material, the emptying out of lyrical substance into an empty shell, and the “broken ideal of organic interconnection” have an undeniable resonance with the idea of lateness as often applied, for instance, to Beethoven’s music.⁴ The author’s circumspection is justified, for in some respects the broader idea of “lateness” could well be questionable in this context. Taken as a chronological category it is *prima facie* dubious applied to a composer who died at the age of thirty-eight with little foreknowledge of his end (in this respect unlike Schubert, who knew for some years he was likely to die comparatively young).⁵ However, the associations of this repertoire with death are more extensive than just the untimely demise of the composer, and here we see how long the shadow cast by the F-minor Quartet proves to be. As is well known, Opus 80 was written by Felix in the aftermath of the sudden death of his elder sister Fanny Hensel in May of 1847—a “Requiem for Fanny” as it is sometimes mawkishly termed—and though establishing links between an artist’s biography and the perceived emotional qualities of the work produced may be risky, no one has ever denied that the overridingly tragic quality of the quartet reflects something of the anguished state of the composer at the time of its composition.⁶ Thus the quartet is associated with death in a twofold manner—that of Mendelssohn’s sister just two months before he started it, and by posthumous association, his own within two months of its completion.

The association with death only really works, however, in the case of the F-minor Quartet and those other works written after May 1847, such as the two Opus 81 pieces. *Respice finem* (look to the end!): of course, when the end is so dark, it is hard not to extend its shadow back over earlier works written before any knowledge of the impending tragedy, but the latter move reflects the romanticizing of reception more than the bare facts of biography. At best, one might point to a parallelism between the sometimes irascible behavior and mood swings of the overworked and increasingly disillusioned composer of the mid-1840s and a more ambivalent, darker, or frenetic quality in some of his pieces from this time (one that, in the case of Opus 87, might be conceived as a legitimate aesthetic quality of the work). Such an approach, however, risks reducing this music to a debased Romantic aesthetics that (ironically) once dogged Mendelssohn reception from the opposite angle—the fallacy that art is essentially the unmediated expression of its author’s emotional state at the time of creation.

Still, "lateness" is as much an aesthetic or critical category as a biographical one, and there are sufficient musical reasons for viewing Opus 87 and Opus 80 as part of a new stylistic departure, one that may well be interpreted through the concept of "late style." There is a constellation of traits common to these pieces, which while often present in Mendelssohn's earlier music, find a new concentration and single-minded application here. Krummacher identifies a characteristic quality of the later chamber works when he describes their "lack of songlike thematic material," the "unexpected contrasts of tonality and dynamics" within movements, and the "concentrated formal structure . . . in which extended passages are dominated by a single rhythm." "Transitional and developmental passages are not as closely woven as once before, and the remaining motivic development no longer permeates entire movements."⁷ What this all boils down to is a renunciation of the organic mediation that in Krummacher's opinion informs the aesthetic and formal qualities of Mendelssohn's "middle period" works (most specifically the chamber music from the years after 1837, initiated by the Opus 44 quartets).

I would like to extend Krummacher's list to include a new concentration on sonority and texture (especially the use of tremolo and quasi-orchestral effects), figuration, and a "rotational" formal tendency that often goes beyond Mendelssohn's earlier usage. There is certainly room to develop a reading of how these musical features relate to the idea of "lateness" understood as an aesthetic category: the seemingly deliberate discontinuities and polarized relation between subjective expression and formal objectivity is often associated with "late style," for instance, whereas the use of conventional material and foregrounding of surface presentation recalls notable qualities of Beethoven's late quartets and sonatas, just as the rotational approach finds a further parallel with the tendency to strophic or variation form also associated with this repertoire.⁸ For present purposes, though, I propose to bracket the question of lateness as such (it will be returned to at the end of this article) and examine in greater detail the intriguing characteristics of these final chamber works in their own right. What is the role played by the elements that feature so conspicuously in these pieces, and how do they interact with principles of Mendelssohn's established sonata practice? Irrespective of their ostensible "lateness," to what extent is there a sense of a new style emergent in these works? In effect, I seek here to offer a new account of Mendelssohn's later sonata practice from the perspective of recent developments in *Formenlehre*, building on and in some cases departing from earlier work on the composer.⁹ Focusing on the first and third movements of

the Opus 87 Quintet and the outer movements of the Opus 80 Quartet, I examine a cluster of salient features identified in the above account:

- the explicit highlighting or dramatization of the successive returns of material through generic formal expectations, what might be called the “rotational” aspect of Mendelssohn’s sonata forms, and how this operates with or against other parameters in creating larger structural continuity and discontinuity (e.g. cadential articulation and harmonic root motion);
- the use of *figuration* or extended passages of rhythmic uniformity, and again how this relates to more conventional tight-knit thematic presentation and lyrical phrase types;
- the associated use of *texture* and *sonority* as salient or form-articulating elements, alongside a notable sensitivity to *register*.

Aspects of all these properties can be found, in different configurations, in each work. For this reason, the discussion is arranged around their specific musical instantiation in individual movements rather than thematically around the categories themselves.¹⁰

Quintet Op. 87, First Movement, *Allegro vivace*

The most significant way in which the first movement of Opus 87 prefigures the style of Opus 80 is in its foregrounding of figuration—its emphasis on texture and motion. Most conspicuous of such passages is the triplet material first heard in measure 23 (ex. 1), which returns on numerous occasions throughout the movement. Entering following the close of the primary theme with a clear perfect authentic cadence (PAC) and a softer derived response (measure 15), this section seems on first glance transitional. Loose-knit in construction, tonally mobile, and motivically uniform to the point of plainness, the passage strongly implies the rhetoric and energizing quality of a sonata transition. Yet there is something odd about this material and indeed the interpretation just proposed. The sheer insistence of the reiterated tarantella triplets and monorhythmic texture have an obsessive or frenetic quality about them, which would seem on the face of it to bear out Krummacker’s reading both of rhythmic monotony in Mendelssohn’s late music and—at least in this work—its potential aesthetic shortcomings.¹¹ Even more peculiarly, as subsequent events soon reveal, this passage will not even function as a transition—a turn of events that gives us cause to question the analysis offered so far and examine the music in greater detail.

Example 1. Mendelssohn, String Quintet No. 2 in B-flat, Op. 87 (1845), first movement, exposition, first appearance of triplets in "false transition," mm. 19–42.

The movement opens with a dynamic primary theme in the tonic B-flat, richer than normal in motivic components but sentential in their presentation and working out. A four-measure presentation phrase consisting of no fewer than three distinct ideas is followed by a four-measure response starting on ii_3^6 , and the concluding idea is then reiterated in a

continuation that elides with cadential function. Just as significant as the largely triadic motivic content is the textural presentation of the theme in the first violin over energetic sixteenth-note tremolo accompaniment in the four other parts, imparting a quasi-orchestral breadth of sound, and the registral expansion that reaches a high f^3 amid the cadential drive of mm. 11–12.

In response, the new phrase starting midway through measure 15 (designated P1.2) takes up the primary theme's basic idea and elaborates on the contrasting idea in a lyrical counterpoise to the earlier phrase; in its harmonic function of prolonging the dominant it would seem to offer a possible contrasting middle in a small-ternary primary group. However, breaking off from the V^7 of measure 22, the new "transitional" triplet figuration abruptly enters on a chromatically raised V_5^6 of G minor (see *ex. 1*). Both harmonically and motivically, the appearance of this material is a decided non sequitur. Having moved in sequence to D minor, the new transition-like material then becomes stuck on repeated half cadences to V/D minor. Over continuing reiterations of the triplet figure in the violin the other sustained parts slip through diminishing harmonies, as if searching for a new direction. Instead, with a crescendo and flourish over a F^7 harmony, the music unexpectedly breaks into a relaunch of the primary theme back in the tonic. And, retracing the same harmonic progression as was opened up by the failed "transition," this primary material is now modified to lead to a clear medial caesura on C—the dominant of the expected secondary key of F.

Transitions that do not transit, primary themes that do—something is certainly peculiar about the makeup of this movement. To understand the multiple and seemingly bewildering functional reinterpretation of material witnessed in the first half of Mendelssohn's exposition, we might turn to the notion of functional "becoming" recently proposed by Janet Schmalfeldt. Specifically, this movement rewards comparison with a valuable reading Julian Horton has recently made of a similar procedure in the first movement of Mendelssohn's C-minor Piano Trio, Op. 66, written a few months earlier in the spring of 1845.¹² In that piece, as Horton shows, Mendelssohn effects a remarkable process of structural expansion by successive reinterpretations of intrathematic function in the exposition, in which projected small-scale designs are overridden by apparent transitional sections, only in turn to be reinstated at a larger level. Here in Opus 87, the P1.2 theme in measure 15 is first heard as forming a contrasting middle (CM) to a projected small ternary (ST) design (*fig. 1*), but this reading is jettisoned with the arrival of the transition-like triplet figure in measure 23. With the ossifying of the transitional momentum and reappearance of the opening theme P1.1' in the tonic at measure 41, however,

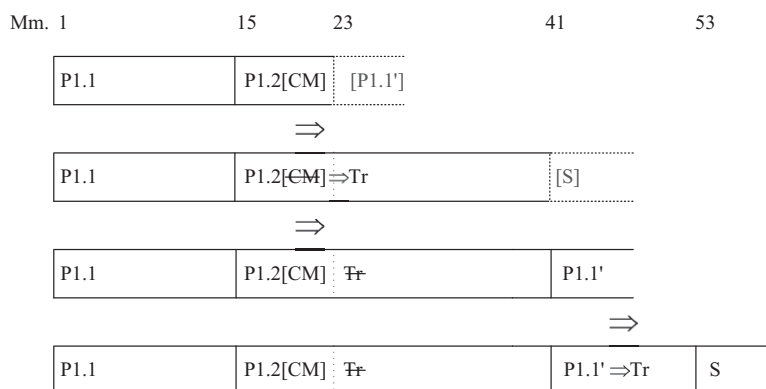


Figure 1. Successive reinterpretation of formal function in the exposition of Mendelssohn's String Quintet No. 2 in B-flat, Op. 87, first movement.

the status of P1.2 as a contrasting middle is retrospectively reinstated, and the transitional function of mm. 23–40 is in turn placed in question. The discontinuities in harmony, motivic content, and not least rhetoric and functional expectation thus highlight the intrusive and somewhat gratuitous quality of the triplet passage. Finally, the reprise of P1 in the small ternary design becomes reinterpreted from measure 46 onward as transitional in function (a familiar example of a small ternary reprise dissolving into transition). Figure 1 attempts to illustrate the above series of functional reinterpretations.

What the diagram fails to show, however, is the relation between the erstwhile transition passage—the triplet figuration of mm. 23–40—and the eventual transition effected by the returning P1.1'. In its progression V/g–g–V/d–d the relaunched primary theme in mm. 47–51 follows the harmonic avenue set out earlier in the failed transition, now continuing so as to arrive at V/V. It is as if the triplet passage does, albeit indirectly, play a role in the course of the exposition, pointing the way to the eventual attainment of the medial caesura at measure 53.

As in the earlier C-minor Piano Trio, a degree of formal expansion is effected by Mendelssohn's design, but what distinguishes the first movement of Opus 87 from that of Opus 66 is the enigmatic status of the triplet passage. Despite the harmonic consequences drawn from this figuration, the primary theme group might well have proceeded without this foreign interpolation. This passage of apparently aimless triplets, is, in short, anomalous, a "problem" within the course of Mendelssohn's exposition. This is more or less what Krummacher's reading suggests. Like him, one could view this from a negative perspective, the figuration being merely passagework, ultimately empty. I would rather choose to see this slightly

frenetic quality, set against the late-style context outlined at the start of this article, as a legitimate aesthetic aim of the work. Moreover, we could easily argue that the way in which this already problematic material is handled so as to problematize its status still further appears utterly deliberate, and hence surely the very point of Mendelssohn's design—the composer setting up an unresolved issue to which the subsequent course of the music will return. And such potential is realized sooner than might be expected, in the continuation of the secondary theme.

Mendelssohn's secondary theme (S) enters without any appreciable break from the C_3^6 chord rather abruptly reached at measure 53. While the even quarter-note rhythm and descending contour are entirely characteristic of this theme type in Mendelssohn's mature music,¹³ the sense of tonal center is at best emergent here. Even without the weakened first-inversion medial caesura preceding it, the theme's initial two-measure phrases lead from an implied (but never explicitly confirmed) tonic F to its lightly tonicized dominant, C ($B\sharp_5$ s are present, but no Bb). There is hence an ambiguity as to whether the opening melodic phrase, unfurling down from the pitch c^2 , should be heard as starting on $\hat{5}$ of F major or on $\hat{8}$ of C. Only at the end of the larger eight-measure unit is F definitively reached, resulting in a harmonically end-weighted phrase. Varying this design, the next eight measures (mm. 61–69) oscillate between D minor and A major, before leading through the cycle of fifths to C, from which point the opening phrase reemerges in F major, hence implying that these preceding measures form a contrasting middle in a small ternary design. The solidity of the F-major harmony reached at measure 69 is underpinned by a tonic pedal in cello and second violin, as if the secondary theme has finally received tonal clarification by its end. Yet what might at first escape notice is that the melodic line now enters on f^3 in place of the earlier c^3 , implying either a shift to an initial $\hat{8}$ head-note or $\hat{5}$ of B-flat, the global tonic. While the apparent newfound stability of the F-major harmony would suggest the former, as the phrase progresses the music indeed falls back to B-flat (measure 75). A secondary theme that returns to the tonic without having secured its own cadence in the secondary key (Sonata Theory's "essential expositional close" or EEC) is not good news, and it is at this point that the triplet figuration left behind in the false transition makes its reappearance in the first violin.

If there is still a problem, the following measures attempt to iron it out. At first the triplet-infused passage leads back to the G-minor associated with its initial appearance, but after twice alternating this figuration with the contrasting idea from the secondary theme, from measure 81 the music seeks to combine the two thematic ideas contrapuntally. This seems to be a crucial stage in the integration of the once anomalous triplet

figuration into the rest of the exposition's material. This melding of the lyrical secondary theme with the energetic triplet figuration will lead through registral expansion to the regaining of F major and its apparent confirmation through the return of primary theme material at measure 90 (here designated S^C). The recall of the primary theme (or a derivation of its initial motive) as the culmination of the secondary group is a typical Mendelssohnian gesture and often serves to close the exposition. Its presentation here over $\frac{6}{3}$ harmony might argue for its status as belonging still to the secondary theme zone, as pre-cadential, rather than constituting a true closing theme, but its appearance certainly suggests that the end of the exposition is nigh.¹⁴

Things are rarely so simple in this movement, however. Reworked into a new eight-measure form, the theme, on repetition at measure 98, is ornamented in the first violin with triplets recalling the transition material (ex. 2). Not only is there a dense overlapping of motivic constituents but again the once anomalous triplet figure seems set on closer integration. But flirting with this figuration is a perilous activity: like opening Pandora's box, once let out this material has a tendency to invade the entire texture, and within five measures all five parts have rapidly disintegrated into frantic tarantella triplets played in bare octaves in the darker key of D minor. The tonality seems significant, recalling the harmonic goal of the original passage in mm. 23–35. It is indeed worth observing how the tonal areas demarcated by the returning triplet figuration in the latter stages of the exposition—moving first to G minor in measure 79, then to D minor here at measure 102—correspond to the succession of keys originally presented by this material.

To extricate himself from this seething morass of D minor, Mendelssohn hits upon a new strategy: the triplet momentum is transformed into a new *arpeggiato* figure in the first violin (measure 106), which may be utilized much less obtrusively as an accompanimental figure to the primary theme's head motive, and drives the increasingly spirited (and registrally expansive) music back to F major. The long-awaited structural PAC at measure 120 (Sonata Theory's EEC) is capped with a return of the secondary theme in an indisputably post-cadential closing theme context (now the use of the $\hat{8}$ -form of the melodic incipit provides a gentle subdominant emphasis).¹⁵

Across the exposition the extraneous, disruptive quality of the triplet figuration has been first ameliorated by its partial integration into the secondary theme area and, when this strategy proved ineffective, surmounted by the derived *arpeggiato* accompanimental figure at the end. The remainder of the movement continues this path of thematic integration and functional normalization. Roughly corresponding to the succession of

S^c (cadential unit, based on P theme)

reintroduction of triplets

PAC (limited scope)

Dm

new form of triplet motion

Example 2. Mendelssohn, String Quintet No. 2 in B-flat, Op. 87, first movement, exposition, return of triplets undermining expected cadential closure, mm. 90–107.

themes in the exposition, the development offers further possibilities for the triplet figure's contrapuntal combination with primary and secondary material, taking further the process seen in the latter stages of the exposition. Initially continuing with the closing material, from measure 144 the primary theme resurfaces in the tritonally distant key of E minor (in replacing the inverted secondary theme heard just before at measure 132 an unexpected similarity in contour between the two themes is revealed). From measure 166 the transitional triplets reemerge in turn, but now employed merely as accompaniment to the ongoing development of primary theme material, which is subsequently replaced by the secondary theme at measure 172 and hence likewise combined with the figuration.

By measure 187 the triplets drop out. Thus this section normalizes the triplet idea as a benign accompanimental element in an intricate motivic texture, without granting it the status of a thematic unit in its own right.

The most telling use of the triplets, however, is reserved for the retransition, which harnesses their dynamic potential for the attainment of a generically required goal. Its pressing into service now for a genuine functional purpose effectively redeems this material by making good on its intrinsic transitional (or retransitional) quality. Indeed, this section reworks the passage (mm. 27–40) that had led to the unexpected resumption of the primary theme at the end of the false transition. But what in the exposition had formed an odd conduit back to a primary theme that by rights should have been left behind becomes reworked as an entirely logical springboard for relaunching this same theme at the head of the recapitulation (measure 226). Given over a first inversion tonic and overlaid with a new counter-subject, this highly charged moment of reprise forms the climax of the movement thus far.

In this recapitulation, the entire contrasting middle/false transition area (P1.2) that had originally proved so problematic is now cut, the primary theme leading directly into the medial caesura and appearance of the secondary theme at measure 242. Triplets reemerge in the latter stages of S.1 and S^C, the two places where they had appeared in the exposition, but thereafter give way as before to the *arpeggiato* triplets that supersede them, never to return. Instead, the lengthy coda seeks to combine the culminating *arpeggiato* figure first with the secondary theme, and following the decisive tonic arrival at measure 350, melding them with the bustling sixteenth-note accompaniment of the primary theme.

Standing back from the preceding account, we might view the problematic of the movement as being concerned with the interaction and integration of three different types of motion and textural activity. Most of the movement is dominated by one or more of these rhythmic-accompanimental types: only the second theme is really free from them, and this is for limited passages (its initial stages in mm. 53–74 before the reentry of triplets, and its use as closing theme, mm. 120–26). First, we have the dynamic upsurge of the opening primary theme, presented with a characteristic tremolo accompaniment in the four other voices that imparts an almost orchestral fullness of sonority. Its reappearance throughout the movement typically serves to relaunch the formal trajectory and positive aspiration associated with this theme, often in response to more troubled passages in which the course of the music appears to have become stalled or questioned. Characteristic of its later manifestations is its entry over tonic $\frac{6}{3}$ harmony, accentuating its forward-striving quality, which can even override the cadential articulation of larger sectional

boundaries. Secondly, we have passages of uniform triplet motion—the repetitive tarantella figuration that interrupted the primary theme in measure 23 and caused such commotion across the exposition. There is something wayward about this idea; functionally anomalous at first and often intrusive or invasive, the triplets’ energy can, however, be harnessed for gain. The latter quality is demonstrated by their functional reinterpretation as retransition, but it is ultimately realized in the triplets’ transformation into the third and final type of rhythmic texture: the arpeggiated accompanimental figure that sustains the triplet motion in a form that integrates itself far more productively into the cadential drive at the close of the exposition, recapitulation, and coda. Thus by the end of the movement, the destructive qualities of the triplet figuration have been transformed into the arpeggios of the third type, which is then combined in the coda with the even sixteenth-notes of the primary theme, in whose relatively untroubled motion the movement is brought to a close.

Quintet Op. 87, Third Movement, *Adagio e lento*

Rotational elements, identified earlier as characteristic features of a putative late style in Mendelssohn, were only mildly present in the first movement of the Opus 87 Quintet, in the role played by the return of the primary theme throughout the design. This principle is, however, far more crucial to the design of the Quintet’s third movement. In this dark *Adagio e lento*, a highly expressive trajectory is articulated by the threefold alternation between primary and secondary themes, reaching a climax in the movement’s coda in which the major-key secondary theme ultimately achieves transcendence over the somber minor mood of the opening.

The term “rotational” might benefit from some clarification here: by this term, I am referring to the cycling through an ordered series of thematic events, set out in a regulative strophe corresponding to the sonata-form exposition, and in the present case specifically to the alternation between highly contrasting and affectively polarized primary and secondary themes. In Mendelssohn’s design, the brief though musically significant development section (mm. 39–52) does not feature the secondary theme but is confined to primary and transitional material, serving as a link back to the return of the opening in the recapitulation; thus it does not play a full part in the rotational structure I am describing (fig. 2).¹⁶ Both the recapitulation and coda (starting at measures 53 and 79 respectively) do present the alternation between primary and secondary themes, thus forming the second and third rotations in this design.¹⁷ Within this construction it is furthermore significant how each rotation increases

1	10	24	30	39	53	64	70	79	88	94	102
Exposition				Dev.	Recapitulation			Coda			
P1	P2⇒Tr	CF	S	P1[/Tr]	P1	CF	S	P1	S	codetta	
i:PAC	v:HC	v:IAC		no	i:HC	no		I:PAC			
		elided		cadence		cadence					

Figure 2. Mendelssohn, String Quintet No. 2 in B-flat, Op. 87, third movement, formal outline.

emphasis on the emotionally charged P-S interaction by the successive cutting down of intermediary P2 and transitional material.

The climactic effect of the coda is partly a matter of textural presentation. The return of the D-minor primary theme is presented over a dramatic tremolo, emerging from a hushed *pianissimo* in the second violin that slowly grows to take over the entire four-part accompanimental texture, rising to a full *fortissimo* with the breakthrough to tonic major in measure 86 (ex. 3). From an unearthly, barely audible flickering in a lone instrument to a quasi-orchestral richness of sonority, this passage forms one of the most powerful moments in Mendelssohn's chamber music. Nonetheless, this climax has been arrived at as the culmination of a number of processes across the course of the movement—not only textural, but also harmonic and motivic.

Most clearly, the sonorous conception in the coda is the consequence of a larger process of intensification in accompanimental figuration across the movement. Tremolo as such had been introduced in the brief development section as part of a threefold sequence that alternates two measures of the primary theme with a shuddering diminished seventh interjection. But this idea itself forms an escalation in rhythmic motion from a quickening of rhythmic values already glimpsed across the exposition, whereby the opening eighth-note pulse had quickened incrementally to numb staccato sixteenths in the cello's trudging accompaniment of measure 10 and thence accelerated into thirty-second notes upon the arrival on V at measure 14. In the ensuing passage (mm. 16–24), this new pulse is given an extra kick by the accented sixty-fourth note pairing every quarter beat, imparting an uncanny, slightly sinister dance-like effect. Such acceleration obviously serves an immediate generic function in the sense of "energy gain" that it provides in securing the exposition's secondary tonality, and the secondary theme correspondingly offers a brief relaxation from this process, its homorhythmic texture and eighth-note

Example 3. Mendelssohn, String Quintet No. 2 in B-flat, Op. 87, third movement, coda, mm. 78–97.

pulse recalling the construction of the opening theme. But the development section that is elided with the final cadence of this theme takes further the process of rhythmic diminution by introducing a new accompanimental figure in thirty-second note triplets that ornament the basic idea of the returning primary theme, alternating this with the new tremolo idea appearing in measure 41. These triplets continue throughout the subdued recapitulation of the opening material, giving way only to the earlier repeated dance rhythms for the standing on V passage at measure 64 and the ensuing reprise of the secondary theme. Thus when the tremolo texture emerges out of the dying strains of the secondary theme in measure 78 it is simply the final stage of a long process of accompanimental rhythmic intensification.

Almost as important in creating this sense of continuity, however, is the overriding of large-scale points of cadential articulation throughout

the movement, as a result of which the cadence in D major at the end of the coda's statement of the second theme in measure 94 becomes the first PAC in the tonic since the end of the primary theme's initial phrase in measure 10, underscoring the sense of homecoming and release at this point.¹⁸ The end of the exposition, as we saw, was elided with the start of the development, turning a potential terminal PAC in A major into an initiating imperfect authentic cadence (IAC) in A minor.¹⁹ The recapitulation, in turn, emerges out of the first violin's sextuplet solo murmurings and diminished harmony, whose dominant function is at best implied. Finally, the coda materializes over tonic minor $\frac{6}{4}$ harmony, arrived at through the breakdown of the secondary theme before it has been able to reach any cadence. Not only then is the cadence at measure 94 the first in the tonic since the opening phrase, but this is moreover the first time the second theme has been permitted to cadence in its major key.

In expressive terms, there is something deeply satisfying about how this confirmation of the major mode has been saved for the very end. Unusually, the second theme has been stated not just once but twice in the tonic major, first in the recapitulation and then again in the coda. The D-major return of the theme in the recapitulation might have directly formed the triumphant goal of the movement, but the way in which this section breaks down with the atmospheric return of the minor-mode primary material, only for this theme to reemerge dramatically at the height of the coda, makes its eventual resolution the more powerful. And what makes this breakthrough especially fitting, or in material terms, "logical," is the way in which it reworks a motivic figure originally associated with the fateful collapse of the music from the relative major back to the tonic minor in the opening measures of the movement.

Following the initial four-measure phrase in D minor, a balancing phrase, fanning out chromatically from the fifth scale-degree on which the melodic line had come to rest, had moved to a weak arrival on the relative F major (measure 7, *ex. 4*). But this goal is no sooner reached than it is undercut by a descending sequence of thirds, presented in bare octaves across all five voices, falling from A down to a distant E \flat . This pitch is now harmonically interpreted as a Neapolitan to the tonic minor, the upper melodic line twisting round to reach the tonic scale degree in a sinuous E \flat -D-C \sharp -D figure (motive x). The same figure had in fact been heard in the Quintet before, in the latter stages of the preceding movement, where it had served a similar function. In this uneasy and emotionally ambivalent *Andante scherzando*, an extended cycle of fifths sequence had led from the recapitulation of the second theme in the tonic major back to the movement's overall G-minor tonic. But the last stage had been achieved through the same chromatic movement from a root-

P1
Adagio e lento

P2
stacc.
i:PAC

Example 4. Mendelssohn, String Quintet No. 2 in B-flat, Op. 87, third movement, opening.

position Neapolitan to raised leading note, with the $\flat\hat{2}-\hat{1}-\hat{\sharp}7$ motive prominent in the bass (mm. 97–98, ex. 5)—an idea that is subsequently dwelt upon in the movement's uneasy final measures.²⁰ In taking up this figure again in the early stages of the ensuing *Adagio*, Mendelssohn is reinforcing its associations with the tragic darkening from major-key promise to minor-key despondency.

Absent from the remainder of the exposition, this figure returns as an integral part of the short development section. Formed as a dramatized retransition from A back to D minor, this section divides the tonal space into three stations of a minor-third cycle (a–c–E \flat), utilizing the three-note chromatic descent of motive *x* in the bass as the crucial link between each stage. The last of these returns to the same pitches (E \flat –D–C \sharp) as the motive's original appearance in measure 9, breaking off from the expected sequential continuation C \sharp ⁹–F \sharp by reinterpreting E-flat major as a large-scale Neapolitan to the tonic D minor (measure 48). This time around, upon the return of the primary theme in the recapitulation the original E \flat –D–C \sharp motive from measure 9 is emphatically highlighted through its statement in octaves across all four accompanying voices (mm. 61–62, ex. 6). A de-chromaticized version is then used to secure the medial caesura in measure 64.

Example 5. Mendelssohn, String Quintet No. 2 in B-flat, Op. 87, second movement, link to coda, mm. 81–88.

Example 6. Mendelssohn, String Quintet No. 2 in B-flat, Op. 87, third movement, recapitulation, highlighting of chromatic turn figure, mm. 60–62.

Hence when the motive is reheard in the coda—first in the first violin in measure 84, second and more decisively, in the cello in measure 85—it is as an idea possessing a long history of tragic collapse from major to minor. Yet, in a remarkable dramatic reversal, this figure finally provides the means for overcoming the movement's minor mode, breaking through to D major on the first beat of measure 86 (see [ex. 3](#)).²¹ The tonic major has been secured through facing up to and seizing hold of this idea, not despite it. Having increasingly focused on the charged alternation of primary and secondary themes through the cutting out of intermediary material across the movement's rotational cycles, the way in which the second theme is now heard to complete the first highlights the close affinity in melodic

construction between the two, despite their affective contrast. Eight post-cadential measures softly confirm the D-major PAC in measure 94.

Quartet Op. 80, First Movement, *Allegro vivace assai*

Rotational elements and the formal saliency afforded to texture and sonority also characterize the opening movement of Mendelssohn's F-minor Quartet, written two years after the B-flat Quintet, though such principles are employed in a distinctly new manner here. The rotational quality of this movement derives from the stark contrast between the violent minor-mode primary material and the brief repose offered by the major-mode secondary theme, but much more than in the slow movement of Opus 87 it is the successive returns of the opening primary theme that become paramount across the design. The second theme itself appears only twice, in the exposition and recapitulation, but the onset of each of the four main formal sections (exposition, development, recapitulation and coda) is pointedly set off by the highly dramatic return of primary material, which owes its identity as much to texture and sonority as to thematic content.²² Hence the succession of formal sections, articulated by the cyclical return of the opening at the head of each, becomes highly dramatized. The formulaic sonata design takes on the mantle of an implacable, almost predestined course, generic formal demands—the way in which the unfolding of the sonata's sections plays out according to listener expectations—being used in the service of the expressive trajectory.

Across this design, a dynamic momentum that carries the music forward over the thematic returns is provided (as in Opus 87's *Adagio*) by the persistent overriding of large-scale points of cadential articulation. The disparity or non-congruence between tonal root motion and thematic structure is familiar from many of Mendelssohn's works, in which the point of recapitulation may often be harmonically underarticulated, but rarely is it taken to the lengths found here in Opus 80. The proposed III: HC medial caesura in measure 53 is elided with $\frac{6}{4}$ harmony for the start of the secondary theme, which is then presented over a syncopated dominant pedal. Even though the theme returns over a tonic pedal in the recapitulation, the uneasy syncopation and increasing infiltration of the minor mode toward its end instills an underlying instability into both appearances, as if the lyrical repose offered by this theme is destined to be short-lived. The secondary theme will in fact never attain cadential closure: on both its appearances, the reiterated closing IACs are broken off on their penultimate dominant-seventh harmony by the violent onset of the next thematic rotation over a diminished vii^7 of the tonic F minor. Most pointed of all is the approach to the recapitulation, where the

emphatic return of primary group material—the distinctive one-measure introductory tremolo in cello and viola (P^0)—occurs at measure 161 on the same diminished vii^7 harmony as had initiated the development, before any hint has been given of the tonic (see [ex. 11](#) below). When F minor is subsequently heard in measure 167 and measure 172, it will be only in first inversion.

The combination of cyclical thematic and linear harmonic elements create a sense of inexorable unfolding, of being impelled ever forward across a structure where the future is to some extent preordained by the expected cyclical rotations of material. Crowning this design, the coda both forms the culmination of and stands outside the preceding three rotations. It is initiated once more by the return of the P^0 module over diminished-seventh harmony in measure 253, but this tremolo figure is now extended to form a cadence to F minor, thus tonally grounding the start of the P1.1 theme at measure 259 and also returning for the first time since the exposition to the original form of the idea heard there. There is thus a sense of restarting to this part, the coda being set off from the preceding three sections and yet leading out of them. Its second stage is formed by a *Presto* section that presents a climactic unison idea derived from material that has emerged over the course of the movement. The final measures return to the movement's registral extremities, revisiting the b^3 heard at the start of the recapitulation, the highest pitch in the movement. The coda thus forms the telos of the movement, at once a summing up and culmination.

The second way in which Opus 80 significantly engages with attributes of late style is the type of thematic material used throughout the quartet. "What is at first vexing about Op. 80 is its predilection for figurative rather than motivic elements," writes Krummacker.²³ Nearly all the primary and transitional material that dominates the opening movement can to some extent be considered "figurative," at least on the surface, in that it appears to rely on reiterated figures that in motivic terms are often quite elementary and driven by constant rhythmic motion, making an impact as much through textural identity as by thematic quality as such. The initial one-measure prefix, P^0 , is almost pure sonority, a gritty tremolo low in cello and viola outlining the F–C fifth, which is subsequently filled out through the running scalar figures of the P1.1 theme (see [ex. 7](#) below). The transitional material of mm. 41–52 (illustrated in [ex. 10](#)) relies on sequential treatment of a saltarello-like three-triplet/quarter figure and the imitative presentation between upper and lower voices results in constant triplet motion across the four parts. Perhaps what is meant most by this label, however, is the absence of lyrical themes: only the P2 theme starting at measure 23 presents anything like a hint of legato melodic

p^0 P1.1 Presentation
 h.i. Continuation frag. Cadential
 Allegro vivace assai
 p sf $cresc.$ sf $cresc.$ ff
 fp sf $cresc.$ sf $cresc.$ ff
 fp sf $cresc.$ sf $cresc.$ ff
 Fm: i ped (I⁷ - iv) i vii⁰ - i⁶ vii⁰/V - V

Example 7. Mendelssohn, String Quartet No. 6 in F Minor, Op. 80 (1847), first movement, opening.

continuity, and this soon becomes subject to sequential elaboration. Yet the surface characteristics of much of this material should not hide the tight-knit thematic construction, and to this extent the designation as figurative obscures a crucial point of Mendelssohn's design.

To take the most obvious example, the opening P1.1 theme (ex. 7) is a perfectly formed classical sentence (indeed, it invites comparison with that most archetypal of sentences, the opening eight measures of Beethoven's Opus 2, No. 1, the affinity underscored by the common F-minor key signature and ascending $\hat{1}\text{--}\hat{5}$ bassline). A two-measure basic idea in mm. 2–3 is presented sequentially in response in mm. 4–5 (the only mildly non-classical element is the subdominant harmony here in place of the more usual dominant); the continuation reduces this material into one-measure units (compressing the opening $\hat{1}\text{--}\hat{5}$ melodic span into a converging $\hat{\sharp}7\text{--}\hat{b}6 \rightarrow \hat{1}\text{--}\hat{5}$ arpeggiation) over increased rate of harmonic movement, leading to the arrival on V on the downbeat of measure 9. On a formal-functional level, Mendelssohn's P1.1 fulfills perfectly the requirements for a primary theme. That this music may appear "figurative" is understandable, since the thematic identity it possesses seems subsidiary to sonority and harmonic function, while the continuous rhythmic motion on the surface masks the differentiated underlying harmonic rhythm.²⁴ Yet the necessary harmonic and motivic functions for a tight-knit opening theme are carried out as surely here as in any classical precedent.

The designation of this movement as being figurative at the expense of motivic must also be disputed. Mendelssohn's opening material is in fact subject to as logical a development as would be found in most sonata forms; if anything, the motivic working and following through of the material's implications is carried out with greater concentration here than in many of the composer's works from the preceding decade. A case in point is how the harmonic implications of the primary theme are

progressively developed across the movement. The i - $I\flat^7$ - iv progression of its first four measures is immediately accentuated in the return of the theme at measure 16, the F - C fifth of the preceding tremolo replaced by the subdominant-tending seventh F - $E\flat$, and the new form of the theme outlines a $I\flat^7$ harmony, accelerating the movement to iv (ex. 8). When it next returns, at the opening of the development, the tonic chord is entirely passed over: the passage retraces the i - iv progression of the opening, but now a dominant functioning vii^7 of F minor (mm. 96–98) elides directly with a dominant functioning vii^7 - V_5^6 of B -flat minor (mm. 99–101, ex. 9). At the point of thematic reprise (see ex. 13 below), the vii^7 dominant-substitute is allocated six full measures, while the tonic chord of mm. 167–68 is given only in weaker first inversion (recalling the I_5^6 in mm. 100–101) before moving to iv . The fact that the coda initially returns to the original version of the theme given in mm. 2–3 emphasizes the way in which this section seems to stand back from and sum up the three preceding sections in making a return to the opening material, though the subdominant inclination is subsequently manifested at a higher level with the theme breaking off in its eighth measure on iv (measure 265).

The motivic derivation of material is also made with evident economy. As shown in example 10, all the primary group and transitional material is closely linked in motivic content. The opening fifth span F - C of P^0 is filled in by the basic idea of $P1.1$, whose continuation contracts the enclosing $E\flat$ - $D\flat$ diminished seventh back into the fifth; additionally, the bass line ascends through this fifth space over the eight measures of the theme. The responding $P1.2$ module takes up the $D\flat$ - $E\flat$ diminished seventh and treats it in imitative fashion, emphasizing its construction from two overlapping tritones. For the most part, the development section will present a single-minded working out of this $P1.2$ material (with a nod to its reworking in the extension to $P2$ heard at mm. 33–40). $P2$ clearly derives its rhythm and motivic content from $P1.2$ (to which it corresponds in formal position by virtue of following $P1.1$), forming a reworking of its material; here, the angular tritones, ascending conjunct third, and diminished harmonic basis are replaced by a softer four-note descent, first from $\hat{5}$ and then from $\hat{3}$, and from measure 33 onward the continuation grows steadily closer to the original $P1.2$ idea. The former motivic idea in turn is clearly used to construct the transition theme (mm. 41ff), which alternates the four-note descent of $P2$ with the rising third and falling tritone of $P1.2$. Though looser-knit in construction than the opening, this theme still employs a sentential logic in presenting its basic idea first on $\hat{3}$ and then on $\hat{5}$ before extending the scalar descent in a continuation phrase that effects the modulation to the secondary key of A -flat. Although the second subject seems to stand outside the concentrated motivic

Example 8. Mendelssohn, String Quartet in F Minor, Op. 80, first movement, mm. 15–19.

Example 9. Mendelssohn, String Quartet in F Minor, Op. 80, first movement, start of development section, mm. 96–104.

manipulation of the surrounding music, this is very much the expressive point of this fleeting moment of respite, and even this section contains liberal use of a descending stepwise third figure that might well be related to the pervasive motive of the preceding material.

Indeed, such motivic affinities extend throughout the whole quartet, this being one of the most tightly integrated of Mendelssohn's later compositions. Though there is no literal quotation of earlier themes in later movements, as is found prominently in Mendelssohn's early cyclic works, the affinities in material and gesture between movements are pronounced to a degree seldom seen in the composer's later music. To highlight just a few of the obvious connections:

- As numerous commentators have observed, the quartet is permeated by the color of F minor. Three of the four movements are in F minor, and the one exception, the third-movement *Adagio* in the relative A-flat, starts out as if it were in F minor (this implication will be brought out

Example 10. Mendelssohn, Quartet in F Minor, Op. 80, first movement, motivic working.

even more strongly in the movement's coda, mm. 107–9). Alongside this sense of tonal coloring, we find recurring textures and sonorities, most obviously the presence of tremolo (e.g., the fifth F–C opening both outer movements). Registral highpoints (e.g., b^3 in the opening movement, c^4 in the finale) seem deliberately calibrated.

- Characteristic highly dissonant gestures built around the interval of the tritone and underlying diminished seventh harmony abound throughout the quartet, often allied with the dotted rhythm of P1.2. Much of the first movement is dominated by this tritone figure; the finale clearly returns to this idea in its development section (mm. 125–48, 189–96) and its influence can also be heard in the grating tritones of the second-movement scherzo (mm. 17–19).
- An ascending bass line, often chromatic or part chromaticized, underpins several of the movements' themes. First heard in the rising bass of P1.1 (F–G–A \flat –B \flat –C), a more chromatic variant (E–F–G \flat –G \flat –A \flat –A \flat –B \flat –C) undergirds the opening theme of the second movement. This scherzo theme itself reworks the contrapuntal pattern given a few moments earlier in the measures preceding the first movement's final *Presto* (mm. 283–85, a version of the "Monte" schema): the scherzo starts from where the previous movement had more or less left off.²⁵

The closing theme of the *Adagio* draws on the idea in an inner voice, providing a post-cadential prolongation of the secondary key of E-flat ($\hat{\#}5-\hat{6}-\hat{7}-\hat{8}-\hat{b}7-\hat{6}-\hat{b}6-\hat{5}$, mm. 39–43), a passage that subsequently sparks the movement's major crisis point when it erupts, out of rotational order and in the distant key of B major, in the middle of the reprise (mm. 70–75).

- The descending scalar motive characteristic of the first movement's P2 and transition (Tr) themes recurs in several places across the quartet. The "new theme" of the first-movement coda (measure 290) presents a version starting on $\hat{8}$, derived via the new cello countersubject added to the expanded transition passage in the recapitulation (mm. 204–9).²⁶ Heard again in the cello, the third movement starts from what appears to be $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}-\hat{7}-\hat{1}$ in F minor, subsequently reinterpreted as $\hat{8}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{\#}5-\hat{6}$ in A-flat, and takes up the figure again for its second subject. For its primary theme the finale utilizes the same $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}-\hat{7}$ motive as the first-movement transition and then reworks it into the cello's $\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}-\hat{2}$ descent in the linking phrase (alluding to the similar gesture at the start of the *Adagio*). Even the new theme in the development draws on this motive (alluding, as we shall see, to the second subject of the *Adagio*).

The process of motivic working seen here can hardly be considered a complete denial or negation of the principle of "organic interconnection" that Krummacker reads as informing Mendelssohn's chamber music of the late 1830s. Nonetheless, the perception that something of the smoothness of the middle-period works has been sacrificed has some basis: the very concentration of the motivic working instills an expressive urgency to the exposition's unfolding that verges on the obsessional, a feature abetted by the absence of lyrical cantabile and the superficially figurative texture, and the contrast between primary and secondary themes is deliberately heightened, not mediated across the course of the movement. The more "organic" unfolding of thematic material and greater fluidity of melodic linkage demonstrated in the third-movement *Adagio* offers a glimpse of what has been renounced elsewhere in the quartet.

What further obscures the fact that fairly traditional motivic working remains operative in this movement is the formal salience given to secondary parameters such as sonority, texture, and register, whose audible impact on the listener is far more direct and may on occasion come into conflict with other modes of formal articulation. This quality is seen most clearly in the use of the opening P⁰ idea, which serves to mark the return of large-scale thematic sections. Although a prefatory harmonic and thematic role is present in its outlining of the F–C fifth, the identity of the idea is primarily sonorous and textural, imparted through the distinctive

tremolo low in cello and viola. Appearing here as merely introductory in function, a prefix anticipating the accompanimental texture of the primary theme that enters in measure 2, the idea would seem to occupy a lower status than the "thematic" P1.1. But not only will it prove the most conspicuous means of marking the onset of new thematic rotations across the movement, it will also be developed as a salient thematic entity in its own right. Its use at the start of the development already begins to break down distinctions between "pre-thematic" P⁰ prefix and "thematic" P1.1 theme. In a fragmentation of the movement's opening gestures, the prefix is combined with the running sixteenth notes of P1.1's first measure, presented as a combined series of attacks expanding in register and rounded off into a three-measure unit by a return to the tremolo sonority. This compound initiatory idea is treated sequentially, initial presentations in three-measure units subsequently foreshortened by overlapping the tremolo of the third measure with the start of the next unit. Effectively, the P⁰ idea has become amalgamated with the opening of P1.1 as a thematic gesture capable of developmental elaboration.

More pointed still is the moment of recapitulation. From measure 161 the amalgamated gesture that initiated the development cuts in brutally in the other three parts under the high $b\flat^3$ in the first violin, effectively initiating a third (recapitulatory) rotation of the movement's thematic material (ex. 11).²⁷ Now shortened to two-measure units, the

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 156-160) shows the continuation of the tremolo in the first violin and the running sixteenth-note pattern in the other parts. The second system (measures 161-174) shows the recapitulation of the P1.1 theme in the first violin, with the other parts providing accompaniment. The score includes dynamic markings such as *ff*, *sf*, *p*, and *cresc.*, and structural labels like P1.1, P1.2 (augmented variant), and P2. The key signature is F minor, and the time signature is 3/4.

Example 11. Mendelssohn, Quartet in F Minor, Op. 80, first movement, elision of development and recapitulation, mm. 156–74.

threefold statement of the composite P⁰–P1.1 starting gesture leads to a compressed statement of the first part of the P1.1 theme, leaving off on the same [E, G, B \flat , D \flat] diminished seventh on which the passage had dramatically entered.

Paradoxical though it might sound, this moment of extreme rhetorical violence is one of the most ambiguous formal points in Mendelssohn's music—despite the fact that this return is unmistakably signposted as a major event. For this formal juncture is smoothed over by an intricate overlapping of thematic elements—the contrapuntal superimposition of P⁰, P1.2, and P1.1 themes—and the non-congruence between thematic and harmonic cycles, with the result that there are three possible moments at which the recapitulation may be located:

- thematically, texturally, and registrally, at measure 161 with the dramatic return of the P⁰ tremolo figure on the dominant-functioning vii⁷ of F minor; the first violin's $\flat\flat 3$, attained as the culmination of a large-scale chromatic ascent across the preceding eighteen measures, is the highest note of the movement, and creates an unprecedented four-and-a-half octave gap with the low E \natural in the cello. To the listener, this rhetorical and registral highpoint comes across as the most evident point of reprise.
- harmonically and thematically, six measures later with the first return to tonic harmony with the F-minor $\frac{6}{3}$ at measure 167: even more remarkably, this harmonic reprise coincides with the literal return of the actual P1.1 theme (as opposed to its tremolo prefix), whose first three measures are given in the second violin in the original form heard in mm. 2–4.²⁸ Given how this occurs in the midst of a highly fraught passage amid the overlapping statement of an augmented variant of P1.2 in the first violin (whose resolution to the tonic scale degree is delayed by the appoggiatura at the start of this measure), this moment probably passes listeners by without notice.
- thematically and harmonically, with the clear return of primary theme material over tonic $\frac{6}{3}$ harmony at measure 172, following the subsidence of the preceding climactic passage.²⁹ Here, the recapitulation proper proceeds from the later P2 theme, passing over further use of P1.1 and P1.2 which have already been heard in the preceding measures and exhaustively used in the development. Thus the reprise of initial primary theme material has been telescoped with the climactic end of the development.

For analysts prioritizing harmonic design, the second or third of these options are mostly likely to be taken as properly constituting the

end of Recapitulation | CODA (thematic start) | (harmonic start)

250 [S] *dim.* *pp* *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp* *cresc.*

dim. *pp* *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp* *cresc.*

dim. *pp* *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp* *cresc.*

V⁷ - I V⁷ - // vii⁰ - vii⁰ - vii⁰ [V⁷] - i

[IAC] [broken off] [PAC]

Example 12. Mendelssohn, Quartet in F Minor, Op. 80, first movement, end of recapitulation into start of coda, mm. 250–59.

point of recapitulation. Yet the fact that the first comes across far more strongly to the listener is significant, for it highlights the importance that has become consigned to texture and register in creating an audible means of formal articulation in this movement.³⁰ The P⁰ module has become so salient an initiating gesture that its restatement appears to mark the onset of a new formal section, even when this occurs on a harmonic dissonance.

By the start of the coda, the P⁰ figure has effectively grown into a thematic gesture in its own right (ex. 12). From measure 253 to measure 258, the tremolo figure is extended up in two-measure units through all four voices in turn, heard three times now in a sequence leading to an implied PAC in F minor created by the return of the P1.1 theme in measure 259.³¹ To all intents and purposes the prefix is now treated as material capable of musical elaboration—in other words, as a motive, a thematically salient entity. It is as if sonority itself, independently of harmony, rhythm, or diastematic shape, is now able to sustain a meaningful musical process. The growth of a figure that was at the start essentially bare sonority and texture into something that is thematic and formally salient here points the way to the even more radical emancipation of sonority in the quartet's finale.

Quartet Op. 80, Finale, *Allegro molto*

The finale of Opus 80 sets out from where the first movement left off. There are notable correspondences between the two in thematic material and especially in the use of sonority and texture. Rotational elements are less pronounced now: as in the first movement, the secondary theme appears only in the exposition and recapitulation, but the return of primary theme material is less strongly marked as a dramatic event. Indeed,

The musical score is for the opening of the finale of Mendelssohn's Quartet in F Minor, Op. 80. It is in 2/4 time and F minor. The first system (measures 1-8) is marked "Allegro molto" and includes dynamic markings *p* and *cresc.*. The second system (measures 9-16) includes dynamic markings *sf*, *dim.*, and *p*. Section labels *P0*, *P1.1*, *P1.2 (from P0)*, and *P1.1'* are placed above the staves.

Example 13. Mendelssohn, Quartet in F Minor, Op. 80, finale, opening.

even though larger sectional boundaries are here cadentially articulated, the effect is, paradoxically, of greater formal dissolution than in the first movement. A sense of onward growth and intensification is provided first by the development of sonority and texture, which reaches an extraordinary peak in the development section, and secondly by the concentration on rhythmic motion, which culminates in the coda. More than any other part of the quartet, it is surely this finale that bears out Krummacker's diagnosis of "sequences of figuration in unchanging rhythms that propel the movements along their way."³²

Prefaced as in the first movement by a one-measure tremolo outlining the fifth F–C, the primary material of the finale splits into two overlapping phrases (mm. 1–9, mm. 9–16, *ex. 13*). As Krummacker observes, the dissolution of melodic contour in these two ideas is yet further pronounced than that in the first movement, "the one impulse being primarily rhythmic, the other primarily sonorous."³³ The first (*P1.1*), sentential in construction, is marked by the persistent syncopated rhythm that appears in all but the last of its eight measures, imparting a propulsive swing to the phrase. Its final measure overlaps with the *P1.2* idea: an alternation between registers of the cello's opening slurred tremolo texture. This idea is almost pure sonority (it appears merely to delay a matching consequent to the opening phrase), yet it too will prove thematically salient. Initially

presented as a repeated two-measure unit prolonging the dominant, its fifth and sixth measures accelerate into half-measure alternations, before a descending cello line (possibly an echo of the opening of the preceding *Adagio*) links up with the return of P1.1. This time the theme is harmonically altered and extended so that when P1.2 returns in measure 29 the music is already growing into a transition to the secondary key of A-flat. Noteworthy in this following passage is: a) the increasing overlapping and combination of elements from both themes; b) the infiltration of tritones and diminished-seventh harmony from measure 37 onward; c) the use of the accelerated tremolo texture to articulate the cadential progression to V of A-flat—a remarkable conception, whereby a crucial harmonic function is given to an idea that seemed merely sonorous and decorative, if not formally superfluous.

The ensuing secondary group is marked by recurrent harmonic instability. It is elided with the transition through undercutting the dominant seventh at measure 48 by an interrupted progression to vi (none other than the overall F-minor tonic), the projected medial caesura at the start being overridden, and the subsequent return of a variant of the primary theme in “closing theme” position (measure 81) enters again as part of a deceptive movement, this time to the flattened submediant, overriding the structural PAC anticipated by the cadential approach of the preceding measures. The darker \flat VI coloring here instills a powerful insinuation of the minor mode into the secondary key of A-flat. One might assume at this stage that the exposition will go on to retrace the tragic “failed” expositional progression i–III–iii found in the first movement of the “Appassionata” Sonata (a work in the same key). Such expectations are ultimately thwarted: in contrast to Beethoven’s work, Mendelssohn’s exposition will end in the relative major. But such is the attenuation of texture and dissolution of thematic content that the effect is if anything even more negative than the stark but straightforward clarity of Beethoven’s minor mode.³⁴

Unlike the first movement, the finale’s exposition does ultimately attain a closing cadential articulation of its secondary tonality of A-flat, but this is done in such a way as to empty it of all power or force. John Horton speaks of moments in this movement “when the music becomes almost athematic, with writing of a strange bareness found nowhere else in Mendelssohn.”³⁵ One such place is here at the end of the exposition, as with minimal thematic content and increasingly drained of its former rhythmic vitality, the music dissolves into texture and sound. From measure 97 a melodic idea derived from the syncopated primary theme is repeated in four-measure pairs over a fingered tremolo background texture. It seems hardly suitable as a closing gesture, as its final notes form only an inconclusive $\widehat{5}-\widehat{3}$, but from measure 113 the idea’s final two

Example 14. Mendelssohn, Quartet in F Minor, Op. 80, finale, end of exposition, mm. 97–121.

measures are fragmented and reiterated, as if turning it into a closing gesture by default (ex. 14).

The dominant pedal in the cello that had underpinned this passage finally resolves in measure 117 to the tonic, but the upper line has still not reached the end of its melodic phrase, its final measure being given now in augmentation, thus forming an IAC with the bass, in which the $\hat{5}$ in the upper voice resolves belatedly only onto $\hat{3}$. As if to compensate for the lack of finality, the $\hat{5}-\hat{3}$ in the melodic voice is repeated in the subsequent two measures, but by now the bass has dropped out, and the tremolo of P1.2 has already taken over the texture, its entry overlapping with the cello's attempted cadence in measure 117. This phrase overlap effectively covers any gap between exposition and development, since the two original parts of the primary theme now straddle the boundary. One might speak of a “deconstructed” or “decomposed” cadence here. There is no sense in which the IAC in measure 117 sounds like a cadence capable of confirming the secondary tonality (whose first attempt had been already sidestepped at measure 81). The end of this exposition dissolves into the development with a frightening emptiness.

For the majority of its course, the development section is given over to an extraordinary exploration of timbre and texture, as thematic identity

is drained away into interval and rhythm, and to harmonic progressions expressed by figurative material that seems conceived for sonorous effect. The opening, for instance, alternates half measures of tremolo between the two violins, moving up through an A-flat major arpeggio, but while the former quality clearly identifies the passage as a form of P1.2, the rising arpeggio newly introduced links this back to the opening of P1.1. Motivic content has here been taken over by and is developed through textural presentation. The P1.1 theme, already akin to figuration in its rhythmic and motivic uniformity, is reduced to a purely textural element, while material like the P1.2 passage that originally appeared purely figurative becomes treated as thematically salient.

This development can be divided into three distinct parts. The first (mm. 121–212) is dominated by the interval of the tritone, which appears first as a simultaneity in lacerating octaves (mm. 125–30, slightly modified 141–47), clearly relating to the P1.2 theme of the first movement, and then, in an extended climactic passage, is liquidated into a succession of melodic intervals over a dominant pedal (mm. 189–96). A third part (mm. 237–68) resumes the retransitional function that the end of the first section had implied. Here, harmonic progression is articulated through a tremolo texture that seems conceived as pure sonority. The lead back to the tonic $\frac{6}{4}$ at measure 253 is utterly traditional, as is the subsequent acceleration in phrase rhythm from four- to two- and then to one-measure units in the following linear ascent up to the dominant goal of measure 268. What differentiates Mendelssohn's conception from ostensibly similar precedents for "athematic" harmonic sequences—most notably that in the retransition of the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony—is that the very material used for presentation is actually "thematic": the entire passage is conceived as a development of sonority, which belongs to the identity of the material more strongly than any diastematic, rhythmic or harmonic quality.

Between these two parts, however, appears an unusual interpolation: a new theme, seemingly unrelated to anything else in the movement—it espouses a slight affinity to the second theme, but this is tenuous at best. Its emergence at this point is already curious, as the preceding passage had seemed ideally conceived for serving as a retransition, presenting a strong dominant preparation for a possible reprise along with a motivic anticipation of the primary theme's basic idea. Furthermore, it is unusual in Mendelssohn for the development section to be longer than the exposition, and had a recapitulation occurred at this point the relative proportions of the two would have been typical at 120 measures to 92, whereas the final proportions (120/148) are quite uncharacteristic.



Example 15a. Mendelssohn, Quartet in F Minor, Op. 80, finale, new theme in development, mm. 213–21.

Example 15b. Mendelssohn, Quartet in F Minor, Op. 80, third movement, second theme, mm. 28–32.

This interlude provides the only real moment of respite in the movement, escaping from the incessant unrest that had marked even the secondary theme. Entering in D-flat following the same deceptive V→VI progression that characterized the break at measure 81, it seems a gesture laden with private resonance typical of the nineteenth century's harmonic never-neverland of the flat-submediant (ex. 15a). Virtually all commentators describe it as a “new theme,” but what has gone hitherto unnoticed is that it is actually a close allusion to the third movement's secondary theme (ex. 15b): common to both is the $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ descent followed by the movement down to $\hat{5}$ with the unmistakable $\hat{7}$ grace note to the $\hat{6}$ appoggiatura, though the latter part is clouded by the minor mode in the finale.³⁶ Its presentation first in D-flat and subsequently in E-flat furthermore returns it to the original pitch level of the third-movement exposition.

This theme from the *Adagio* possesses a special status, as it was the only lyrical idea in the entire quartet that ever found fulfillment in cadential confirmation (the PAC given in III: 39 and 94). The second subject of the first movement had been cut off on both its appearances by the return of the opening tremolo, and that of the final likewise undercut by the movement to \flat VI—the same progression that now forms the catalyst for the new theme's emergence. Thus in recalling this previous theme (or a gently distorted memory of it) in the midst of the finale, Mendelssohn is

looking back on the one brief moment of repose in this turbulent and troubled work—a moment that will not last.

The working out of the sonorous implications of the primary material, in particular the P1.2 tremolo, reaches a *non plus ultra* in this development section (the retransition might well be conceived of as a liquidation of this idea); from this point on, this tremolo texture is hardly used (it is present only as a subsidiary element in the accompaniment to the P1.1 and closing themes), and for the remainder of the movement it will be rhythmic momentum that takes over as the dominant element. With the recapitulation of the primary theme at measure 269 a countermelody in the first violin introduces a new triplet rhythm which continues against the original syncopated P1.1 idea. Short-lived for the moment, its continuation nevertheless effects a brusque link to the reprise of the secondary group (measure 289), most of the coloristic transitional material (which has been exhaustively used in the development) being removed. This triplet idea returns, however, at measure 370, leading out of the cadentially open reprise of the closing section (given now in the tonic minor) and linking to the coda. Heard for the most part against the syncopated rhythmic pattern of the reiterated primary theme, increasingly stripped down to fundamental tonic-dominant oscillations, the eighth-note triplets take over the final ninety measures of the work.

Mendelssohn here gives free reign to the negative implications of unremitting triplet figuration that the first movement of Opus 87 had managed at length to subdue. The harnessing of rhythmic momentum and thematic repetition imparts a desperately driven quality, further brought out by a sense that the music is going back over the same ground in a futile loop (as with the return at measure 427 of material heard at the start of the coda). Registrally too, the coda is pushed to new extremes: the first violin's ascent to the high c^4 in measure 413 returns and goes beyond the highest previous pitch in the quartet, the $b\flat^3$ attained at the first movement recapitulation and coda. This high c^4 will be heard once again in the final measures. Ultimately, the tarantella rhythms, insistent repetition, and drive to registral extremity take over and compel the piece to its end.

Mendelssohn's Late Style? In Search of the "New Approach" in Opp. 87 and 80, and the Opus 81 Fragment

Both Opus 87 and Opus 80 admit unmistakable similarities in sound and expression. There are common surface phenomena—the widespread use of tremolo, figurative thematic material, the emphasis on sonorous presentation—but no less important, the emotional tone of each is distinctly

darker and more troubled than much of the composer's earlier chamber music. Yet these similarities should not cause us to overlook the quite distinct use to which such elements are put in each work, nor for that matter their evident precedents in the music of Mendelssohn's preceding decade.

Looking to the first movement of Opus 87, for instance, some clear antecedents are noticeable for its procedures, even if this work offers new realizations of them. The process of functional reinterpretation seen in the earlier stages of the exposition finds obvious precursors in the D-major Quartet, Op. 44, No. 1 (1838), and two Piano Trios, Opp. 49 and 66 (1839 and 1845), while the gradual integration of transitional figuration is foreshadowed in earlier string quartets such as the first movement of Opus 44, No. 2 (1837). The wider concern with movement and sonorous planes of motion is likewise a hallmark of Opus 44, No. 3 (1837–38), whose opening movement similarly progresses from a state of greater rhythmic complexity to one of greater simplicity. There is a concern with surface features identified as belonging to a putative late style, but these, too, are not unprecedented. The orchestral tremolo effect of the primary theme is already prominently used in Opus 44, No. 1, while the intrusive triplets find a more benign predecessor in the transitional material of the second Cello Sonata, Op. 58 (1843). The Opus 87 Quintet certainly does go beyond these examples in its concerted focus on such elements. Yet the anomalous figuration becomes ever more integrated, reinterpreted, and utilized for functional ends. The moments of discontinuity and febrile surface should not hide the continuities and logical use made of such material—what Krummacker might in another place have considered the “classical synthesis” ultimately achieved. To this extent, the late-style features seem to be more a matter of an increased prominence given to characteristic surface sonorities than of radically reassessed structural principles.

As with the first movement, there are evident “late” qualities in the Quintet's *Adagio*—the prominence given to textural presentation and sonority in order to articulate the climactic goal of the coda, the use of highly contrasting thematic ideas whose opposition is brought into greater relief through the successive rotational cycles—though again, these features do not arise independently of other formal procedures (motivic process, harmonic articulation). The emphasis on rotational unfolding is not entirely new, but it is an idea seen with increased frequency in Mendelssohn's music of the 1840s (an important precedent is given by the finale of the “Scottish” Symphony).³⁷ As much as anything, though, the sense of “lateness” here is imparted from the dark emotional tone of the piece: the funereal tread of the opening themes, the sinister rhythmic insistence of the transitional material. The B-flat Quintet takes further

elements already present in the composer's music of the early 1840s and increases the range of discontinuity and instability permitted, but does not offer a radical departure from his earlier music, even as it reformulates many of its elements in an original and expressively complex manner.

These attributes are transformed, however, in Opus 80. Whereas in the first movement of Opus 87 reiterative figuration was introduced as a problem into a more conventional texture and syntax, and textural presentation in the third movement was only the most immediate aspect of a rotational structure built equally upon motivic working and characteristic Mendelssohnian principles of large-scale cadential deferment, in Opus 80 the actual thematic material used is more often akin to figuration in its rhythmic uniformity, and its textural and sonorous presentation is as much part of its essence as diastematic identity. In effect, figuration was an anomalous intrusion into a more conventional thematic syntax and phrase structure in the first movement of Opus 87, whereas in the outer movements of Opus 80 the brief appearance of distinct themes proves anomalous within the prevailing figurative-like texture, and unlike the latter this lyrical material is not subject to development. The relation of "thematic" to "figurative" appears to have been reversed. The use of texture, meanwhile, as one of the preeminent ways to signal structural boundaries is not new to Opus 80, but it is taken to an extreme in this work, while other parameters appear to be emptied of their customary power to articulate form.³⁸ Likewise, the non-congruence of bass progression with thematic design is typical of Mendelssohn, but again Opus 80 takes this principle much further. In the first movement, not only does the recapitulation occur (as often with Mendelssohn) over an active bass progression, but more exceptionally both the exposition and recapitulation are cut off before reaching their expected cadential close. The overriding of cadential junctures by the return of a formally salient tremolo texture is taken to yet more extraordinary lengths in the finale, in which large-scale cadential articulations at the end of the exposition and start of the recapitulation are dissolved into a textural event.

The notion of what exactly the term "figurative" means here nevertheless requires more careful scrutiny. Figuration might suggest a formulaic quality, a lack of characteristic motivic content or melodic interest, reiterative rhythmic patterns and the filling out of a harmonic template. When we speak of figuration, we are not paying attention to diastematic questions of theme and harmony, and even the rhythmic aspect—which may seem to dominate the music at these moments—becomes nullified through its uniformity, resulting in relatively undifferentiated blocks of sound. In other words, figuration concentrates on and is characterized almost entirely through texture, hence the close alliance of the two in

Mendelssohn's later style. Figuration might typically refer to a type of texture and thematic construction associated with loose-knit passages such as transitional passagework and developmental sequences. However, as seen in the opening themes of the quartet's outer movements, material that might appear to be figurative insofar as it downplays melodic distinctiveness and is presented in rhythmic and motivic near-uniformity can be used just as easily to construct tight-knit phrase types such as sentences, and here we see how the customary designation of Opus 80's material as figurative obscures a crucial aspect of Mendelssohn's radical reformulation of the relation between texture and syntax in this work. In this quartet, the distinction between "figurative" themes (tight-knit theme-types that consist of figurative-sounding material) and "thematic" figuration (looser-knit material that is nevertheless treated as thematically salient and subjected to development) is often slight.

This reduction of thematic content to figurative outlines gives rise to the sense of an emptying out of musical material, one of the most characteristic features of late style. There are hardly any themes in the finale, for instance, only bare vestiges of conventional phrase structures tracing the expected harmonic course. Thematic substance consists of the lowest-level substrate of harmonic functions (such as in the opening theme) or linear progressions (seen throughout the development section), and cadences carrying the structural weight of an entire section will be dissolved into a play of sonority, as in the case of the decomposed cadences at the end of the exposition and development. One might think such emptying out of content would result in an impression of cold, impersonal objectivity—the subjective element withdrawing to leave only the ossified remains of thematic structure and the almost neoclassical formal shell—but instead the effect is highly emotional, not despite but if anything *through* the contradiction—a unique amalgam of a distinctly subjective quality of grief allied to harsh formal necessity. A deep expressivity arises out of the opposition between, on the one hand, the formal objectivity issuing from the implacable rotational order and the sense of numbness resulting from the reduction of theme to texture and timbre, and, on the other, an animation and inner continuity imparted by the urgency of the elided tonal trajectory and concentrated motivic working.

The F-minor Quartet reconstitutes elements of the composer's musical language in often far-reaching and deeply expressive ways. Returning to the question of late style deferred at the start of the foregoing analysis, it will be clear by now that many of the quartet's qualities are also characteristic features of late works. Besides the biographical resonance with death and anguished emotional tone there is the controlled violence with which formal conventions are handled, the radical inversion of material

whereby lyricism and conventional subjective expression is drained from the thematic substance, the drastic repudiation of cadential trajectories and customary means of closure. Features familiar from Mendelssohn's earlier practice are taken up but in many cases extended to such a degree that the result is barely comparable; indeed the far-reaching reassessment of his earlier formal practice (and possible "critique" of inherited classical conventions) is one of the strongest ways in which the F-minor Quartet may be claimed to partake in the notion of late style.³⁹

Still, even if a plausible argument can be made along these lines, it is not entirely clear to me what purpose such classification serves. Having a "late style" may be assumed to be a sign of prestige, but neither Mendelssohn nor his Opus 80 quartet really needs such support in order to shore up their worth. Furthermore, it is hard to extrapolate from this one piece that a new style was being fashioned by Mendelssohn, one which would have provided the point of departure for future works.⁴⁰ One of the most evident features of the composer's chamber music from 1837 onward is how each work presents a quite distinct refashioning of formal problems and the syntactical implications of its material. Despite numerous points of commonality and stylistic trademarks, the three quartets of Opus 44 are notable for their differences, as are the pieces that followed: the F-major Violin Sonata, the two cello sonatas, and two piano trios. The same is true of these late chamber works.

Krummacker's judgment of aesthetic shortcoming is in need of serious reassessment with regard to Opus 87. With the exception of the textually problematic finale, the quintet emerges as a much more carefully crafted composition than supposed. To see this piece as an imperfect stage on the way to a perfected late style would be to commit a grave injustice to its own original reformulation of elements of Mendelssohn's earlier practice, its balancing act between surface rhetorical instability and structural continuity. Opus 80, though, is something quite else in its single-minded pursuit of texture and sonority, its dramatic focus and expressive immediacy. One may emphasize the groundbreaking quality of this approach—how prophetic it seems to be of late nineteenth-century quartet writing, its exemplary status within the genre⁴¹—but one should not overlook how Mendelssohn grounds this exceptional sonorous surface in rigorously reworked syntactical principles, or the status of this work, not as a discontinuous historical stepping-stone to a broken future, but in its own aesthetic right.

Indeed, Opus 80 is probably not even the final music Mendelssohn wrote for string quartet. Two completed movements of a further, incomplete quartet survive: a set of variations in E major marked *Andante sostenuto* (MWV R 34), and an A-minor scherzo, *Allegro leggiero* (MWV R

35), published posthumously as Opus 81, Nos. 1 and 2. No date is given on the manuscripts, but a tiny sketch for the E-major variation theme at the end of the scherzo in the autograph of Opus 80 implies it was conceived after at least some of the F-minor work had been written.⁴² The E-major *Andante sostenuto*, very probably the opening movement of the intended quartet, at first seems placid in comparison with the fraught tone and uncompromising construction of the F-minor Quartet.⁴³ Variations are generally associated with late style, it is true, and the underlying principle of developing an idea through textural modification might credibly link with the formal concerns of Mendelssohn's last years, though the association of this movement with the stylistic orbit of the previous two chamber works still seems tenuous.⁴⁴ But following a fairly standard trajectory of rhythmic acceleration, the *Presto* fifth variation in E minor suddenly pitches the listener back into the turbulent world of Opus 80, with obsessive triplet-like reiterations and an impassioned first violin part that soars to painful heights, revisiting the same high c⁴ of the earlier piece's final coda.⁴⁵ Subsiding via a recitative-like passage, the music attempts a return to the opening theme, but the hesitant opening phrase breaks off, to be succeeded by a reference to the texture of the first variation. Literal return proves impossible now, but instead the music manages to grow into a new variation with which the movement softly closes.

The scherzo has nothing of the starkness of the corresponding movement in Opus 80 but nevertheless possesses the same uneasy undercurrent as the *Andante scherzando* of Opus 87, a fact aided by the uncertain metric structure of the opening theme, besides suggesting something more benign from the scherzo to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1843). On the last page of the manuscript is the opening of what appears stylistically to be a finale, in E major and common time, marked *Allegro vivace* (ex. 16; the fragment is catalogued as MWV R 36).

Six measures are preserved, breaking off midway through the consequent phrase. Whether the movement would have followed the cheerful course set out by the theme, whose simple tunefulness appears miles away from the world of the F-minor Quartet, or whether instead the undulating tremolo of the inner parts—here merely accompanimental—would have taken over the texture to dominate it as in the finale of Opus 80, is impossible to know. “*Respice finem* is a very good motto” wrote Tovey apropos Mendelssohn—that is, “if the end is there for you to look at.”⁴⁶ As extreme a conception as the F-Minor Quartet seems unlikely from the six measures we have, but with works that are so late as to be unwritten, no one can tell.



Example 16. Mendelssohn, unpublished string quartet fragment (MWV R 36), presumably the finale of an unfinished Quartet in E Major (1847) (Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Krakow, mus. ms. autogr. Mendelssohn 44/10, 11r).

Notes

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1. Friedhelm Krummacher, *Mendelssohn—der Komponist: Studien zur Kammermusik für Streicher* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1978); and esp. "Mendelssohn's Late Chamber Music: Some Autograph Sources Recovered," in *Mendelssohn and Schumann: Essays on Their Music and Its Context*, ed. Jon Finson and R. Larry Todd (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1984), 71–84. Both Wulf Kunold and Thomas Schmidt concur with Krummacher's reading in "Die Streichquartette von Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy," liner notes to the Melos Quartet recording, Deutsche Grammophon 415883-2 (1982), 17–18; "Mendelssohn's Chamber Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Mendelssohn*, ed. Peter Mercer-Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 147–48. More generally, it is a truism of Mendelssohn scholarship that Opus 80 might point to a nascent new style. See Eric Werner, *Mendelssohn: A New Image of the Composer and His Age*, trans. Dika Newlin (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963),

496; John Horton, *Mendelssohn Chamber Music*, BBC Music Guides (London: BBC, 1972), 58; R. Larry Todd, "The Chamber Music of Mendelssohn," in *Nineteenth-Century Chamber Music*, ed. Stephen E. Hefling (New York: Schirmer, 1998), 202, and again in *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 562. Rainer Cadenbach problematizes this issue in his useful study "Zum Gattungsgeschichtlichen Ort von Mendelssohns letztem Streichquartett," in *Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy: Kongreß Bericht Berlin 1994*, ed. Christian Martin Schmidt (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1997), 209–31.

2. For instance, the world-weariness demonstrated by the prophet in Part II of *Elijah* readily relates to the idea of lateness, and has been linked by other scholars with the overworked and exhausted state of the composer in his final years. Krummacher refers to both *Elijah* and the Opus 81 pieces in his 1984 chapter, though does not discuss them at any length. A few songs from these years might also be considered under the aegis of "lateness": the Eichendorff "Nachtlied" (Op. 71, No. 6), the Lenau setting "Auf der Wanderschaft" (Op. 71, No. 5), and the "Altdeutsches Frühlingslied," text by Friedrich Spee, Op. post. 86, No. 6, written on 7 October 1847 and known to be Mendelssohn's last composition.

3. Krummacher, "Mendelssohn's Late Chamber Music," 80. Not dissimilarly, in his earlier study Krummacher initially sees later chamber music such as the Quintet, Op. 87, and Cello Sonata, Op. 58, announcing a new approach (*neuer Ansatz*) which finds successful realization in the Opus 66 Piano Trio and, in especially acute form, Opus 80, but subsequently emphasizes Opus 80's radical break with the preceding works (*Mendelssohn—der Komponist*, 467–68).

4. Krummacher, *Mendelssohn—der Komponist*, 205. See especially the influential understanding of Beethoven's late style proposed by Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedermann, trans. E. Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998). Adorno's perspective has been developed by authors such as Carl Dahlhaus, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Approaches to His Music*, trans. Mary Whittall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Daniel K. L. Chua, *The "Galitzin" Quartets of Beethoven* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Michael Spitzer, *Music as Philosophy: Adorno and Beethoven's Late Style* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); it is also echoed by Edward W. Said in *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Pantheon, 2006).

5. Henry F. Chorley, who visited Mendelssohn in Interlaken at the end of August 1847 and noted his "aged and sad" appearance, suggests that the composer spoke on occasion as if he knew he had not long to live, though we might suspect the author's account, published a few years later, to be colored by future events. "The Last Days of Mendelssohn," in *Modern German Music: Recollections and Criticisms*, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1854), 2:384, 387, 391.

6. Those who met Mendelssohn during the last months of his life agree that the composer felt he had found an outlet for his grief in creative work. Ferdinand David recounts how he had found Mendelssohn "deeply affected by the loss of his sister," but following the initial period of shock he worked "almost with a sick man's zeal. . . .

After composing for whole days on end, then for as many more he would go off to the mountains, come back sunburnt and exhausted, and begin straight away to compose again." David to William Sterndale Bennett, 25 November 1847, quoted in R. Sterndale Bennett, "The Death of Mendelssohn," *Music & Letters* 36 (1955): 375. The emotional association also stretches back to this time. Chorley describes the quartet as "one of the most impassioned outpourings of sadness existing in music," and Ignaz Moscheles, to whom Mendelssohn later played the work in Leipzig, commented to the composer on the work's "extraordinarily gloomy mood." Chorley, "The Last Days of Mendelssohn," 387; Moscheles to Joseph Fischhof, 7 November 1847 (referring to a meeting on 5 October), quoted in Ernst Rychnowsky, "Aus Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdys letzten Lebenstagen," *Die Musik* 8 (1908–9): 143.

7. Krummacher, "Mendelssohn's Late Chamber Music," 75.

8. In recent decades the notion of "late style" has generated a considerable literature extending well beyond application to Beethoven's music. See, for instance, Lorraine Byrne Bodley and Julian Horton, eds., *Schubert's Late Music: History, Theory, Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Scott Burnham, "Late Styles," in *Rethinking Schumann*, ed. Roe-Min Kok and Laura Tunbridge (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 411–30; Laura Tunbridge, *Schumann's Late Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Margaret Notley, *Lateness and Brahms: Music and Culture in the Twilight of Viennese Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Four Last Songs: Aging and Creativity in Verdi, Strauss, Messiaen, and Britten* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Said, *On Late Style*; and Joseph N. Straus, "Disability and 'Late Style' in Music," *Journal of Musicology* 25 (2008): 3–45. A revisionist impulse is witnessed in Sam Smiles and Gordon McMullan, eds., *Late Style and Its Discontents: Essays in Art, Literature, and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), which corresponds to the attitude adopted in the current article.

9. In this respect my account follows the course advocated earlier in Benedict Taylor, "Mendelssohn and Sonata Form: The Case of Op. 44, No. 2," in *Rethinking Mendelssohn*, ed. Benedict Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 185–209. The two central contributions, whose approach and terminology inform the current analysis, are William E. Caplin, *Classical Form: A Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), and James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

10. A note is necessary here on the textual status of these two works. Both Opus 87 and Opus 80 were published posthumously, but as Krummacher argues ("Mendelssohn's Late Chamber Music"), though it is clear that Opus 80 was considered to be finished by Mendelssohn, who simply died too soon to see it through publication, the earlier Opus 87 had been left unpublished for over two years owing to the composer's dissatisfaction with it. His criticism was directed at the finale, a problem that was exacerbated in the posthumous 1850 publication which conflated two

distinct versions. This movement is not considered in this essay, however, so these issues do not affect my argument. There are minor textual problems in the current edition of the first two movements (mm. 137–40 in the first movement’s development were to be replaced with a variant reading; six bars in the coda of the *Andante scherzando* were marked for deletion—to my mind an unfortunate loss), but nothing that substantially affects my analysis. Neither work has yet been published in the *Leipziger Mendelssohn Ausgabe*.

11. This feature is put into relief when contrasted with a comparable figure used earlier in the transition to the first movement of the second Cello Sonata, Op. 58 (mm. 42ff; 1843), consisting of three eighth notes in a 6/8 *Allegro assai vivace* tempo. In the sonata, the figure is handled with much greater restraint and sustains more melodic interest, arising quite naturally from the previous thematic material and proving unambiguously transitional in function.

12. Julian Horton, “Syntax and Process in the First Movement of Mendelssohn’s Piano Trio Op. 66,” in Taylor, *Rethinking Mendelssohn*, 236–62; my own graphic representation in [Figure 1](#) is indebted to Horton’s model. For Schmalfeldt’s original formulation and a briefer analysis of the first Piano Trio, Op. 49, see *In the Process of Becoming: Analytic and Philosophical Essays on Form in Early Nineteenth-Century Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 164–170.

13. See Krummacher’s summary in “On Mendelssohn’s Compositional Style: Propositions Based on the Example of the String Quartets,” in *The Mendelssohn Companion*, ed. Douglass Seaton (Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 554.

14. The precise distinction between secondary and closing theme status is still a contested matter in formal theory; I discuss this problem in a forthcoming article. Here I adopt the perspective that the return of P material here is rhetorically C-like but precedential, what Sonata Theory terms S^C .

15. This interplay between $\widehat{5}$ and $\widehat{8}$ forms of the second subject and closing theme is foreshadowed in the first movement of the E-flat Quartet, Op. 12; see Benedict Taylor, *Mendelssohn, Time and Memory: The Romantic Conception of Cyclic Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 179.

16. Hepokoski and Darcy would term this a “half rotation”; see *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 206–7.

17. I am using the sonata-theory term for want of a better designation (one might also speak of a “strophic” or double variation format), though one should note that my usage here is slightly idiosyncratic and flexible in application. The term is used with slightly different nuance in my later discussion of Opus 80, in which the fact of cyclical return of P material at the head of each rotation becomes a more salient feature than the alternation of P and S within rotations, as in Opus 87 III.

18. There is a potential PAC in the tonic D minor in the primary theme recapitulation, measure 56, but this occurs mid-phrase, with the melodic line immediately continuing down to $\widehat{5}$, and thus is of limited scope.

19. Mendelssohn's secondary theme is given in the dominant major, unusual in a minor key work, though found earlier in the slow movement of the "Italian" Symphony. There is also a precedent in the first movement of Schubert's A-minor Sonata, D. 784, a work published posthumously a few years earlier in 1839 and, coincidentally, dedicated by the publisher Diabelli to Mendelssohn himself.
20. It is returned to both in measure 94 (part of a passage Mendelssohn appears to have marked for deletion in the autograph) and again in mm. 100–101.
21. Again, the E \flat Neapolitan of measure 84 is arrived at through a harmonic sequence of thirds; the location, following the four-measure opening phrase (mm. 79–82 corresponding to mm. 1–4), parallels the sequence of descending melodic thirds and original appearance of motive *x* in the consequent phrase of mm. 5–10.
22. It is this de-emphasis on the rotational return of the S theme that differentiates Mendelssohn's conception most clearly from a prominent F-minor precursor, the first movement of Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata, in which the P and S themes are clearly marked as complementary antagonists, linked by motivic inversion. On the strophic or rotational tendency of the "Appassionata" see Adorno, *Beethoven*, 60, 83–84; James Hepokoski, *Sibelius: Symphony No. 5* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7; and Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 206–7, 284–85.
23. Krummacher, "Mendelssohn's Late Chamber Music," 83.
24. This aspect is pointed up in comparison with the first movement of Opus 66, whose opening theme, closely related to that of Opus 80, similarly relies on figurative motivic constituents (arpeggiation and scale fragments) and largely uniform quaver motion. But in the earlier work the figuration gives way to the emergence of lyricism with a cantabile theme in violin (measure 22), which although derived from an augmentation of the opening figuration, appears to bestow the music with a theme-like quality that was previously missing.
25. This foreshadowing of the following movement seems to have been emphasized by the composer. As the autograph score shows (Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Krakow, Mus. ms. autogr. Mendelssohn 44/9), this passage in the first-movement coda was originally heard with the changing-note figure submerged in inner parts under quaver passagework in the first violin. Mendelssohn subsequently gave the quaver arpeggios to the cello and brought out the idea by giving it prominently to the first violin, also extending this linking passage by three measures. The idea might trace its origins to a strange passage that interrupts the smooth flow of the second subject (mm. 69–72, 78–81).
26. It is unusual for Mendelssohn to extend his transition passages in a sonata recapitulation: typically, later primary group and transitional material will be drastically curtailed (as seen, for instance, in Opus 87 I). The expansion of this section is thus already marked as formally salient, imparting an extra significance to the new countermelody in the cello. Most commentators have overlooked the thematic derivation of the "new" theme in the coda from earlier material. An exception is given by Cadenbach, who perceptively notes how the composer actually obscured a more

evident relation between the P2 idea and the coda by replacing the original even quarter notes with the tied half-note–eighth / three-eighths rhythm in measure 24, thus emphasizing instead the link back to P1.2. Cadenbach, “Zum gattungsgeschichtlichen Ort,” 216–19.

27. The discontinuity at this point is increased by the unusual voice-leading between the preceding root-position Neapolitan of mm. 159–60 and the diminished vii⁷ of mm. 161–62, the bass dropping a diminished third.

28. Despite the fact that the thematic return here seems to clinch the case for this moment as marking the real moment of recapitulation, it is worth noting that this feature was added by Mendelssohn as a second thought: the autograph reveals that the second violin originally doubled the cello line a third higher, not lower, starting on C rather than F, and thus P1.1 was not given at all at its original pitch level (the crossed-out passage is not legible in its entirety but the start can be deciphered).

29. Although an F-minor $\frac{6}{3}$ has been given prior to this at measure 167, at a middle-ground level the entire passage of mm. 161–71 prolongs the vii⁷ diminished seventh, on which it starts and ends. In contrast, the P2 theme at measure 172 starts on the first inversion tonic and leads to a weak PAC in F minor at the start of the transitional passage in measure 190, thus more securely forming a return to tonic harmony.

30. Indeed, the textural saliency of measure 161 was brought out by Mendelssohn's revisions to the passage. As the autograph score shows, in his original conception the three lower voices were already playing tremolo from measure 154 onward. This increases the continuity across the formal break—consistent with Mendelssohn's usual approach to the recapitulation—but diminished the dramatic impact of the return of tremolo measure 161. By striking out the preceding tremolo Mendelssohn sets off the return of the P⁰ module as a major textural event, ensuring that this moment stands out as crucial formal juncture. Hans-Günter Klein offers a useful discussion of this passage in “Korrekturen im Autograph von Mendelssohns Streichquartett Op. 80: Überlegungen zur Kompositionstechnik und Kompositionsvorgang,” *Mendelssohn-Studien* 5 (1982), 114–16; see also Krummacher, “Mendelssohn's Late Chamber Music,” 82.

31. The effect is of formal extension from one- to two-measure units, though the autograph shows Mendelssohn's initial idea was to have the P⁰ figure presented in two-measure units in the exposition (thus the coda would have formed a textural acceleration and expansion). The change back to an F-minor key signature from the F major of the recapitulated second subject does not occur until the start of the P1.1 theme at measure 259, perhaps implying that Mendelssohn considered the new section as starting there, not six measures before (this notation is present in the autograph as well as the posthumously published score). The six measures heard before the start of P1.1 thus possess a curious parallelism with the six-measure limbo in the recapitulation between the onset of P⁰ at measure 161 and return of P1.1 with tonic harmony at measure 167. Yet by now the P⁰ idea cannot be considered “rotationally inert” (in Hepokoski and Darcy's phrase). Mendelssohn's notation seems to reflect

the sense of harmonic confirmation that occurs only with the cadence to F minor in mm. 258–59.

32. Krummacher, "Mendelssohn's Late Chamber Music," 75–76.

33. Krummacher, *Mendelssohn—der Komponist*, 334.

34. A closer precedent may be given by the first movement of Beethoven's own F-minor Quartet, Op. 95, whose exposition dies away over repeated IACs that fail to provide strong grounding for the secondary key of D-flat. While this undercutting of the exposition's structural cadence is also characteristic of Mendelssohn (a similar effect is given in the opening movement of Opus 44, No. 2), the affinities with Opus 95 certainly seem closer here in Opus 80's finale than in its first movement. Despite an oft-noted similarity in their figurative-like opening material, the two quartets' opening movements are quite distinct in their construction.

35. Horton, *Mendelssohn Chamber Music*, 60.

36. The affinity in grace-note figure was brought out by Mendelssohn in revisions entered in the autograph: the finale version originally alternated an un-ornamented version with a mordent double-grace note version, before the composer changed all occurrences to the single grace note that characterized its initial appearance in the *Adagio* theme.

37. See Taylor, *Mendelssohn, Time, and Memory*, 263–73.

38. As Thomas Schmidt has recently argued, this principle is found throughout the composer's oeuvre. Timbral texture in Mendelssohn is "much more than the garment that lends audible colour and shape to a supposed musical essence that resides in the fundamental structure of thematic and tonal form." In his music, "the change from one textural configuration to another almost invariably signals some structural articulation." Thomas Schmidt, "Form Through Sound: *Klangfarbe* and Texture in Mendelssohn's Instrumental Compositions," in Taylor, *Rethinking Mendelssohn*, 285–87, 275.

39. A useful approach along these lines has been outlined by Julian Horton, "Mendelssohn's Quartet Op. 80 and the Analysis of Late Style," paper presented at the Ninth European Music Analysis Conference, Strasbourg, 1 July 2017.

40. Hans Kohlhase likewise questions the extent to which Opus 80 radically breaks with Mendelssohn's earlier music, pointing to similarities with the construction of the first movement of Opus 44, No. 3, in "Studien zur Form in den Streichquartetten von Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy," *Hamburger Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft* 2 (1977): 104.

41. See for instance Cadenbach, "Zum gattungsgeschichtlichen Ort," 225–31.

42. Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Krakow, Mus. ms. autogr. Mendelssohn 44/9, 13r. Above the variation theme is a sketch for the second theme of Opus 80's *Adagio*, and above this a further unidentified idea (it appears to share the 2/4 time signature of both Opus 80's *Adagio* and Opus 81, No. 1 (*Andante*), and possesses an affinity in

melodic contour with the latter, though the absence of Ebs in the notation implies F major). There is some evidence that the scherzo was the first movement of Opus 80 to be conceived. A sketch appears in a pocket book from 6 July 1847, the earliest known source for the work (Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms Mendelssohn g. 10 fol. 52r–54r). Moreover, in the autograph the inscription “H.d.m.” (*Hilf du mir*–Help me [God]) is given at the start of both this and the opening movement. Mendelssohn customarily used this appeal at the start of a work, but not usually for inner movements (neither of the last two movements have it), suggesting that its presence in the scherzo may be a result of this movement being the first part of the quartet committed to paper. On the other hand, the three final movements are all written on the same 16-stave manuscript paper, the opening movement being written on a different paper type consisting of 14 staves, so the chronology is not certain.

43. The reasons for supposing these variations to be the first movement are three-fold: First, they share the same key as a sketch for what is probably the finale (discussed below), and a slow movement of a multi-movement work in the overall tonic would be, I believe, unprecedented for Mendelssohn. Second, the designation “H.d.m.” is given at the start of both variations and scherzo. This suggests that as with Opus 80, the scherzo was written down first, and then, the finale temporality abandoned, Mendelssohn turned to the opening movement (the variations), thus repeating the “H.d.m.” on its first page (the scherzo is inconceivable as a first movement). The only real alternative is that the two movements simply belong to different works, but the E-major theme at the end of the scherzo (demonstrating some affinity in melodic contour to the variation theme) suggests good grounds for their connection. Third, though variations are generically available for a slow movement (as in several examples from late Beethoven or indeed Schumann’s Opus 41, No. 1), an opening variation movement of initially moderate tempo accelerating to a quicker one toward its end also has clear precedent in late Haydn (e.g., Opus 76, Nos. 5 and 6). On this matter, a puzzling statement by Moscheles might also lend (limited) support. On meeting Mendelssohn on 5 October 1847 and hearing the F-minor Quartet, Moscheles relates Mendelssohn also played for him “the first piece of a still unfinished (different) quartet in D minor. They are variations, less gloomy, somewhat more consoling, and harmonically particularly distinguished.” Moscheles to Fischhof, 7 November 1847, in Rychnowsky, “Aus Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdys letzten Lebenstagen,” 143. The D-minor reference has long confused scholars, as no such piece has come down and the key scheme fits neither the E-major variations nor really the A-minor *Allegro leggiero* (a scherzo in the dominant minor is an unusual choice). It is generally assumed Moscheles’s memory was faulty on this point (he also misremembered the slow movement of Opus 80 as being in F minor, though this is understandable from the harmony of the opening measures). It does, however, suggest that Mendelssohn was thinking of beginning a quartet with a variation movement, and given the remaining evidence it seems highly likely that this was actually the Quartet in E for which we possess two potential movements and a fragment of a third.

Still, a number of questions remain: E major is not a common key for a string quartet in this period, though Mendelssohn did favor this key in other works and there are earlier examples by Haydn, Boccherini, and Schubert. As to the key of the

projected slow movement (assuming there would have been one), C major or even C-sharp minor seem the most likely choices (following the key scheme of the Quintet Op. 18 in either its 1832 or 1826 versions).

44. Excepting the early Viola Sonata (MWV Q 14) and the *Variations Concertantes* for Cello and Piano, Op. 17, of 1829, Mendelssohn turned sustained attention to the form only after 1841 with the *Variations sérieuses*, Op. 54, and the two sets published posthumously as Opus 82 and Opus 83 (MWV U 158 and 159).

45. The tempo changes from 2/4 to 6/8 for this variation, though most of it is written as if 12/16 (sounding as four groups of sixteenth-note triplets in 2/4), which is used to create a dynamic metrical interplay against odd measures grouped as 6/8. A *minore* variation is perfectly standard in variation sets, though neither of Mendelssohn's previous major-key examples from the previous decade—the two rejected sets for piano probably dating from 1841 (Op. 82 and Op. 83)—feature one, even if there is a *minore* variation in the earlier Op. 17 *Variations Concertantes*.

46. Donald Francis Tovey, "Mendelssohn: Overture, 'The Hebrides,' Op. 26," in *Essays in Musical Analysis*, vol. 4: *Illustrative Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 90.