

**High Octane Octet– Program Notes by Dr. Carly McIlvaine-York**  
**Written for the American Classical Orchestra Concert**  
**Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, March 28, 2025**

**Felix Bartholdy Mendelssohn (1809-1847)** was born to well-educated, wealthy parents in Hamburg, Germany. To mark their social and financial elevation, Mendelssohn's parents had their four children baptized as Lutheran Christians in 1816. When they were later baptized as Christians in 1822, they changed the family name from Mendelssohn to Bartholdy, which was the name of a family farm.

Felix showed exceptional talent as both a pianist and composer at a very young age. He gave his first public appearance as a soloist for Dussek's "Military" Concerto at the age of nine. By the age of twelve, he was taken to give a performance of music by Bach and Mozart for the famed poet Goethe, with whom he developed a lasting friendship. Indeed, it is said that the third movement *Scherzo* of Mendelssohn's String Octet in Eb Major, was inspired by Goethe's poem, "Walpurgis Night's Dream". Felix continued to develop as a composer in his youth under the tutelage of Carl Frederich Zelter. He wrote five operas and eleven symphonies, among other works, before reaching adulthood.

Mendelssohn began work on the *String Octet in Eb Major, Op. 20* in the summer of 1825, at the age of sixteen. He dedicated it as a birthday gift to his dear friend and violin teacher, Eduard Rietz. The *Octet* is written in the 4-movement style of a typical Classical string quartet or symphony. All eight players are given equal voicing and weight, which is particularly evident in the fugue in the final movement.

The unique work is scored for four violins, two violas, and two cellos, making it essentially a double string-quartet. The opening movement in Eb Major is structured like a sonata-allegro form with two contrasting melodic themes, development, recapitulation, and coda sections. The Andante second movement is set in the relative minor key of C minor, and begins with a lyrical, rich melody in the violas. Fanny Mendelssohn, the composer's sister and musical peer, wrote that the third movement *Scherzo* "is to be played staccato and pianissimo with shivering tremolos and lightning flashes of trills. All is new, strange and yet so familiar and pleasing – one feels close to the world of spirits lightly carried up into the air." It is the fourth movement that gives this *Supersonic* concert its name. It is an 8-part fugue on fire that works out the theme in all instruments from the lower voices to the high violins. The ingenious working of the theme into several variations points to Mendelssohn's deep love and respect for the work of J.S. Bach. The ACO brings a fresh look at this well-known masterpiece via historic playing techniques and the warmer sound of gut strings.

Czech composer **Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)** was raised as a child by devoted parents who were innkeepers. Young Antonin played the violin for the patrons of the inn, but he showed talent in music that far surpassed the amateur music-making of his family and village. Through the urging of his music teacher, Dvořák's father enrolled him in the Institute for Church Music in Prague, where he learned the piano, organ, and composition. After graduation, he struggled to

earn a living as a professional performer and private music teacher, and even had difficulty buying paper on which to write his music. But in 1875, he won a composition grant from the Austrian State Government, which helped his financial situation and allowed him to meet Johannes Brahms, with whom he developed a close friendship. Just three years later he published the *Slavonic Dances*, and that piece brought him world-wide notoriety.

Dvořák's growing fame earned him a three-year residency in New York City as the Director of the National Conservatory of Music from 1892-1895. The honor came with a lavish salary that enabled him to also bring his wife and six children. While in America, he wrote some of his best-loved, most enduring works. Dvořák's Symphony No. 9, "From the New World," was among those works, premiering at Carnegie Hall in December 1893 to a full house.

In 1887, while Dvořák's career was blossoming, but prior to his triumphant concerts in Moscow with Tchaikovsky (1890) and his New York residency, he was living and working in Prague. His violinist-friend and colleague from the Provisional Theater Orchestra coincidentally taught violin lessons to Dvorak's neighbor. He wrote the *Miniatures* in January 1887 for a private performance of the work in which he played viola, and his friend and neighbor performed the two violin parts. The *Miniatures* comprise four distinct movements that are characterized by their respective titles: *Cavatina*, *Capriccio*, *Romanza*, and *Elegia*. Dvořák was so fond of *Miniatures* that he wrote a second version of it for piano and violin, which was published in 1887, entitled *Romantic Pieces*. Dvořák wrote a letter to his publisher about the piece, saying, "My work brings me as much pleasure as if I were writing a major symphony – what do you say to that? (The music is,) of course, aimed at amateur musicians, but didn't Beethoven and Schumann also once write little pieces?... and look what they came up with!"