

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Arod Quartet & Danel Quartet: Mendelssohn Octet

Sunday 22 March 2026, 6pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

We are proud to be a place where people come together to discover and connect with the wonder of classical music. Throughout the year, we provide unrivalled opportunities to encounter, live in person, the full range of music, and a variety of different ways for you to experience it.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Shostakovich 2 Pieces (Prelude & Scherzo) for octet, Op.11 10'

Mendelssohn Octet in E flat, Op.20 32'

Interval

Enescu Octet in C, Op.7 35'

Performers

Arod Quartet

Danel Quartet

*This performance lasts approximately 2 hours.
There is a 20-minute interval.*

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–75)

2 Pieces (Prelude & Scherzo) for octet, Op.11

1 Prelude

2 Scherzo

Teenagers might suffer a fair bit of stick in the 21st century. But teenage years are also a time of huge passions, indelible memories and – it has to be said – astonishing creativity, as the three pieces in tonight's concert demonstrate beyond doubt. All three of today's composers were teens when they wrote the concert's pieces – not that you would detect any lack of musical maturity, or certainly any absence of artistic ambition.

The 18-year-old Dmitri Shostakovich, in fact, broke off work on tonight's opening piece in December 1924 to focus on ideas for two major creations, his First Piano Sonata and Second Symphony. He was still a student at the time, at what was then the Petrograd Conservatoire (now the St Petersburg Conservatoire). He had originally planned a five-movement suite for string octet, and completed the opening Prelude before he diverted his compositional attentions. When he later returned to

the project he struggled to refocus on it, deciding simply to write a Scherzo as a counterweight in July 1925, and then call it a day.

With their spiky dissonances, driving rhythms and bracing clarity, both movements show Shostakovich the pioneering young modernist hard at work. The Prelude is dominated by its opening's powerful chords, which give way to a winding melody that begins in the cellos, and later slithering, muted figures in the violins. In a faster middle section, the players pass melodic fragments back and forth, before the return of the opening material and an unexpectedly bright conclusion.

The fast and furious introduction to the Scherzo sets the tone for the rest of the movement, which – after a brooding cello melody – pits a gleefully dissonant violin theme against a pounding cello accompaniment. The music gradually builds to a climax, before disintegrating into a rush of intertwining lines and growing again to a brusque ending.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47)

Octet in E flat, Op.20

1 Allegro moderato ma con fuoco

2 Andante

3 Scherzo. Allegro leggierissimo

4 Presto

We leap back in time exactly a century for tonight's second piece. It has become something of a cliché to mention the youthful enthusiasm and energy of Felix Mendelssohn's Octet. But, likewise, it's an inescapable fact that Mendelssohn wrote the work at the remarkably tender age of just 16, and hard to deny that he was at least flexing his compositional muscles in it. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised: he had grown up in one of Berlin's most privileged and culturally connected families, and had been immersed from a young age in the latest thinking across politics, literature, music, philosophy and plenty more. Later in life, he remembered the Octet as 'my favourite of all my compositions', adding: 'I had the most beautiful time writing it.'

He composed the piece as a birthday gift for his friend and violin teacher Eduard Rietz, and clearly intended the Octet's sometimes florid, virtuosic first violin part specifically for its anniversary recipient. He completed it on 15 October 1825, presented it to Rietz two days later, and Rietz proceeded to copy out its parts by hand himself in preparation for its first private performance. But it had to wait another 11 years before being unveiled before the public at Leipzig's Gewandhaus on 30 January 1836.

And while the Octet's music might seem vivacious, carefree, even spontaneously composed in a burst of creativity, Mendelssohn in fact pored over the piece, putting it through quite a lot of substantial changes and revisions. The only movement, in fact, that Mendelssohn didn't substantially revise is the Octet's third, a gossamer fairy scherzo that prefigures a style he'd go on to make entirely his own, not least in the *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream* that he wrote just a year later. The composer is said to have been inspired by the 'Walpurgis Night' section of Goethe's *Faust*, in which the devilish Mephistopheles invites his acolyte to a gathering of witches and demons, high in the German mountains. Even at the age of 16, Mendelssohn counted Goethe – who was 60 years his senior – as a friend, having first met the revered writer at the age of 12 and impressed him greatly with his playing and his wide-ranging intellect.

The Octet's lengthy first movement (more than twice as long as any of the work's later movements) launches with such a bounding, propulsive theme in the first violin that it is almost impossible not to associate with youthful vigour. Mendelssohn divides his eight players into smaller groups for the thoughtful second movement – separating, for example, the four lower instruments from the four higher in the movement's very opening. And once his quicksilver scherzo has disappeared in a puff of smoke, he shows off his mastery of interweaving musical lines in the Octet's bold, confident finale, which feels like a release of the energy that's been pent up during the previous two movements.

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George Enescu (1881–1955)

Octet in C, Op.7

- 1 *Très modéré* –
- 2 *Très fougeux* –
- 3 *Lentement* –
- 4 *Mouvement de valse bien rythmée*

If Mendelssohn counts undeniably as a musical prodigy, then so too, surely, does George Enescu. Enescu ran up an astonishing catalogue of childhood achievements, playing the violin from the age of four and beginning composing at five, securing a place at the Vienna Conservatoire aged seven, and continuing his studies at the Paris Conservatoire from the age of 14. Later, he would be revered as a violinist, pianist, conductor, composer and teacher (his students included Yehudi Menuhin, who described him as 'the most extraordinary human being, the greatest musician, and the most formative influence I have ever experienced'). Enescu is a stratospheric star in his native Romania, but somewhat less well known to UK audiences.

Which is hard to understand, perhaps, when you encounter a work of such ambition, richness and complexity as his Octet. Enescu was 18 when he completed the piece in 1900, about a year after his graduation from the Paris Conservatoire, though he retained warm connections with the institution and dedicated the piece to his former composition teacher, André Gedalge (who later convinced Parisian publishers Enoch & Cie that they should take it on). Enescu was clearly out to impress his former professor, designing the Octet on a grand scale, as a single, 40-minute span of music that cunningly melds together the four movements of a traditional symphonic structure, with themes and ideas tying them together, often transformed by their new musical settings, but perpetually propelled forward by a relentless sense of momentum. While Mendelssohn's earlier Octet might have entrusted most of its melodic material to its first violinist (in a tribute to Reitz), Enescu opts for a far more egalitarian approach of interweaving melodic lines, putting all eight of his musicians into constant dialogue and discussion.

The first movement's majestic opening theme remains (almost) in unison for quite some time, becoming increasingly exotic as it unfolds, later giving way to a more lyrical, folk-like viola melody. After a brief pause, the second movement erupts as an angular, jagged scherzo that bristles with demonic energy, only to die away in preparation for the lyrical but somewhat unsettled slow movement, whose unusual sequence of harmonies grows more strangely reassuring on every repeat. Enescu brings earlier themes and moods together in the Octet's darkly exuberant finale, a sensual but decidedly spiky waltz.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2026

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