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## Concert unearths overlooked Mendelssohn gems

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The Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, which reached its midpoint Saturday, is celebrating the 200th birthday of Felix Mendelssohn. His curious status in the pantheon gives the theme, "Mendelssohn and the Dawn of Romanticism," hints of proselytizing.

Mendelssohn usually has been viewed as a junior member of the club that includes Beethoven, Brahms and Schubert. Received wisdom says that he wrote beautiful but not always profound music, that he favored the overly sentimental and failed to alter music history.

Yet he was perhaps our greatest prodigy, writing exalted masterpieces like the String Octet and "A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture" at 16 and 17. At his death at 38, he was a super celebrity: a gifted composer, pianist, conductor and progenitor of the Bach revival. But the tide of history worked against him, fueled by anti-Semitism starting with Richard Wagner and by the modern rejection of Victorianism. (Mendelssohn had been huge in London.)

His music is omnipresent, though just a small corpus of hits has currency. But Great Lakes artistic director James Tocco has unearthed overlooked gems like Saturday's centerpiece, the Concerto for Violin, Piano and Strings, Op. 110. The music is no masterwork, but its three movements are full of irrepressible charm, dashing passagework and tender secrets shared in violin-piano duets. By the way, he wrote it at 14.

The concerto was given a rip-snorting performance by violinist Ani Kavafian and Tocco, backed by the Biava Quartet and several student groups. The passionate playing helped bury the composer's genteel stereotype.

Concerts earlier in the week included more mature rarities like the String Quintet No. 2, Op. 87, and the Violin Sonata in F (1834), each offering compelling drama and poetry. Better still was the well-known Piano Trio in C minor, whose lyric songs and gossamer wings underscore a genius for invention in standard forms.

The festival is offering a reaffirmation of Mendelssohn as a key if conservative voice of early Romanticism. As biographer R. Larry Todd has written, Mendelssohn mediates between past and present, layering richly expressive music on top of the classical values of poise, balance and clarity. To put it another way: Music of beauty, joy, exquisite melancholy and refined expression is nothing to take for granted.

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Mendelssohn's Concerto took up the entire second half of Saturday's concert.

Before intermission, the program traversed a wide swath of music history, from an early Haydn string quartet, to Robert Schumann's mid 19th-Century romanticism and a 21st century work by festival resident composer Stephen Hartke.

Haydn's Op. 33, No. 2 ("The Joke") is one of those works in which you can hear the father of the string quartet inventing the idiom as we know it, as a conversation among equals. The young Biava Quartet played with quicksilver flash and energy, and invested the witty grand pauses and false endings of the finale — the source of the work's subtitle — with panache. Schumann's "Marchenbilder" ("Fairy Tale"), Op. 113, played by violist Kim Kashkashian and pianist Pei-Shan Lee, is a series of four moody miniatures that often suggest the black shadows of the composer's mental disorders. Kashkashian's footing seemed atypically unsure in the opening movement, but she soon settled, her deep, middle-earth tone capturing Schumann's mercurial shifts in tone and deep feeling.

Written in the wake of 9/11, Hartke's piano quartet "Beyond Words" (2001) is a haunting lament in which he channels formal ideas inspired by the 16th-Century English composer Thomas Tallis. Violin, viola and cello float, vibratoless, in a kind of free counterpoint, their unified desolation continually interrupted by bracing interjections from the piano, an outsider wandering in shock. The musicians — Lee, Kashkashian, violinist Yehonatan Berick and cellist Paul Katz — played with gripping concentration. The journey moves from darkness to light, the piano slowly joining the strings in conversation. Whispered consonance appears at the close like a quiet prayer, and the piece ends — like Olivier Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time" — with a ray of hope.

## Additional Facts

Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

FOUR out of four stars

Saturday, Seligman Performing Arts Center, Beverly Hills

Festival continues through Sunday. Schedule, highlights, interviews at [www.freep.com/glf](http://www.freep.com/glf)

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