

Canon for Two Violas

by

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy

This composition is contained in a letter dated June 26, 1831, now housed in the Pierpont Morgan Library. The recipient of the letter was Sir George Smart, an English composer and organist, who also played the viola. The composition of a viola duet seemed to be a long-standing joke between the two, and in a later letter to Smart (dated March 27, 1838) Mendelssohn writes: "And shall I really and seriously write a tenor [viola] duet?" In this earlier letter from 1831, Mendelssohn discusses the origin of the canon:

But this reminds me of my great negligence in performing a promise I gave to you at my departure. The idea of the tenor duet presented itself to my conscience, and I felt myself guilty. I would have written it down and sent it to you immediately, but as I do not exactly know in which style you would like it, I think it better to send you first a specimen here, in order to ask you, whether I shall continue it the same way:

The short twenty measure canon follows, with initials designating Smart as Viola I and Mendelssohn as Viola II. At the end of the duet, Mendelssohn indicates: *Dal Segno in inf.*, which he comments on:

You see in this manner it goes to eternity and perhaps you should like to have the duet somewhat shorter. As soon as I shall know your orders about it I will set myself at work and will not come to Portland Street but with the finished tenor duet in my hand. I hope you recollect that you promised not to play (neither the specimen nor the whole) with any other tenor player but me.

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