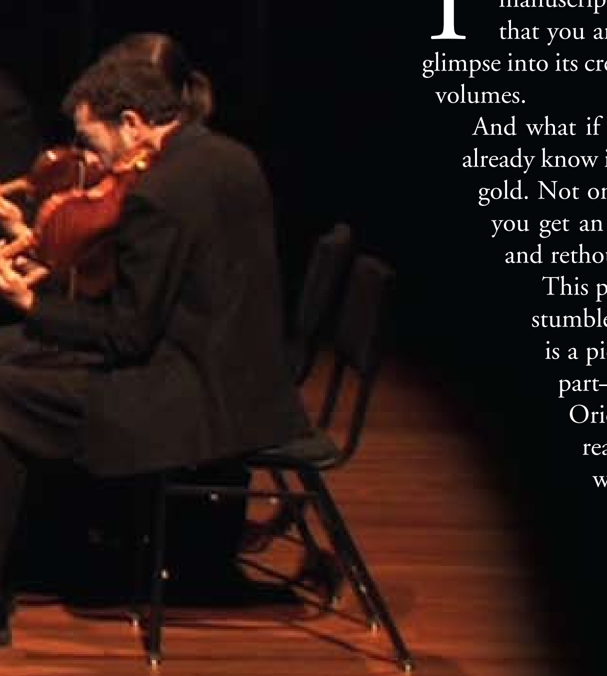
The Borromeo (with first violinist Nick Kitchen at far left) and Ariel string quartets perform the 1825 version of Mendelssohn's Octet, the autograph projected above for the audience's benefit. The composer later changed the opening tempo, Allegro molto vivace, to Allegro moderato ma con fuoco.

by Judith Kogan

A *Funny* THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE *Scanner*

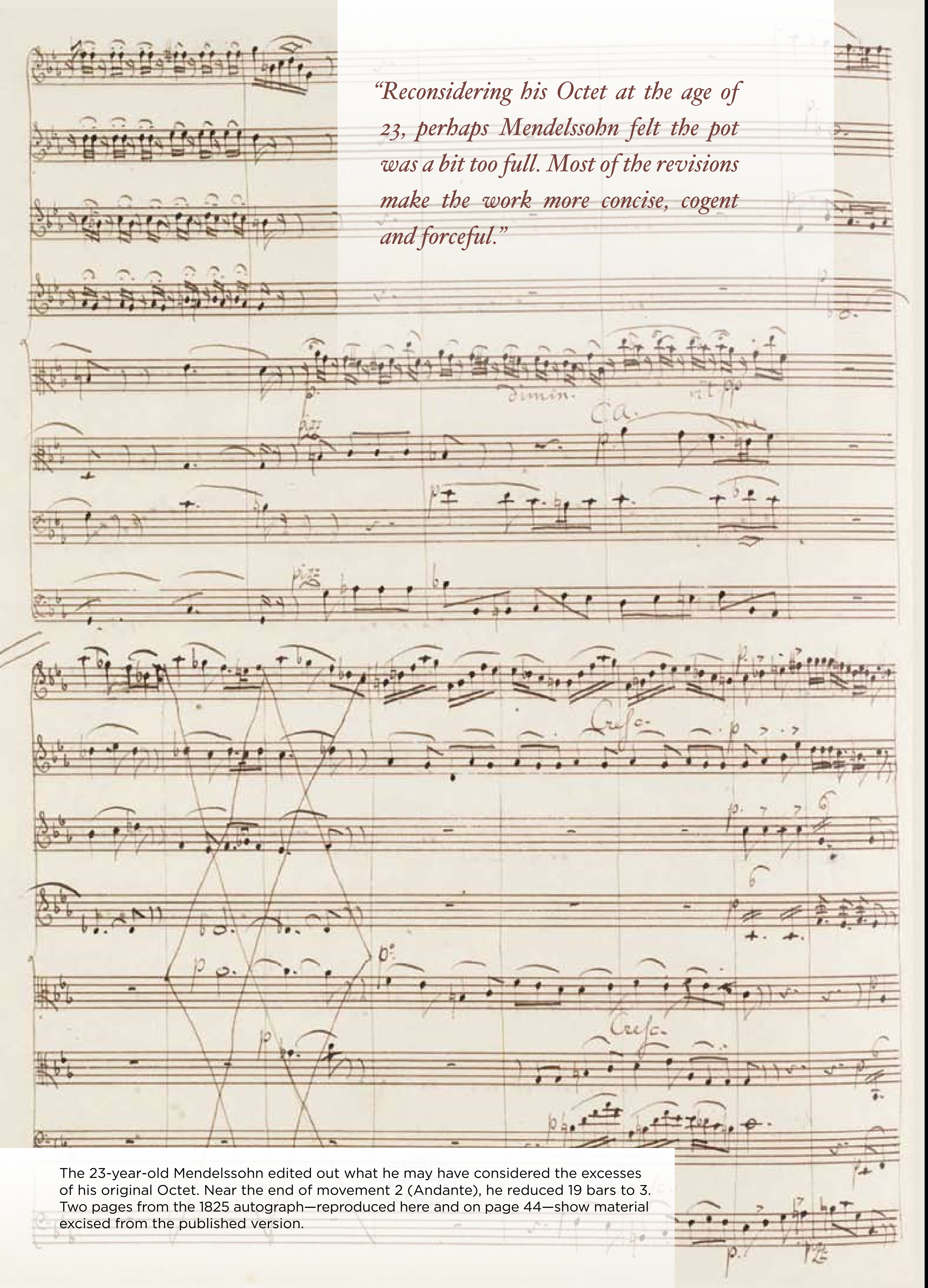
Using his laptop to read from the 1825 autograph of the Mendelssohn Octet, violinist Nicholas Kitchen noticed that it was not exactly the same work he had been playing all these years.



There's something magical about seeing the hand of the composer on a music manuscript. Apart from the pleasure of gazing at an *objet d'art*, there's the sense that you are in the room with the composer. The original manuscript provides a glimpse into its creator's psyche. Even the irregularity of the dots and squiggles may speak volumes.

And what if you come across a manuscript that is an early version of a piece you already know intimately? If looking into composer's brain is your fancy, you've struck gold. Not only do you get to connect with the creator at the time of composition, you get an insight into his—or her—development. How the composer thought and rethought. What was rejected, what was revised.

This past summer, Nicholas Kitchen, first violinist of the Borromeo Quartet, stumbled upon this sort of gold mine. The monumental Mendelssohn Octet is a piece he's played "countless times," he says—all four violin parts, a viola part—and in combination with both young and established quartets: the Orion, St. Lawrence, Parker, and Brentano among them. What he didn't realize was that the work that was written in 1825, when Mendelssohn was sixteen—establishing the composer as the most accomplished child



“Reconsidering his Octet at the age of 23, perhaps Mendelssohn felt the pot was a bit too full. Most of the revisions make the work more concise, cogent and forceful.”

The 23-year-old Mendelssohn edited out what he may have considered the excesses of his original Octet. Near the end of movement 2 (Andante), he reduced 19 bars to 3. Two pages from the 1825 autograph—reproduced here and on page 44—show material excised from the published version.

prodigy ever—is not exactly the piece everyone knows. That version is Mendelssohn's reworking of it in advance of publication seven years later (1832). With four or five large-scale changes, four-to-five medium changes and hundreds of tiny changes, it reveals a lot about how Mendelssohn evolved.

Why wasn't the Octet published at its completion? According to R. Larry Todd, Duke Professor of Musicology and author of *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music*, Mendelssohn had case of "revision illness." Hypercritical and never satisfied, he approached composing as a process. He told Robert Schumann that only a fifth of what he'd written had actually been published. Unlike Brahms and Varèse, Mendelssohn didn't burn early versions of pieces or letters—perhaps thinking they had value as works in progress—but would not submit a piece to his publisher until he felt confident it was ready.

For Kitchen, this alternate-version discovery was made possible by the use of technology in the study and performance of music. His entire music library is in his laptop. Whenever possible, he reads from a manuscript converted to a pdf for his computer screen. Access to manuscript facsimiles and ease of uploading them has led him, in a way, to blaze a trail in the evolution of classical concerts. Whenever possible, he presents them as audio-visual experiences—18th-century instruments with 21st-century technology. And through them, Kitchen has not only been able to connect with audiences for whom the classical concert has grown stale, but also, in some ways, to present the pieces with greater respect than has previously been possible.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ORIGINAL VERSION OF THE OCTET

Kitchen had seen a facsimile of the original almost a decade earlier in the New England Conservatory library. "I just went to glance at it to connect with the handcraft of the composer and enjoy its beauty," he said. Mendelssohn's early artistic talents were manifest in painting and draftsmanship, as well as music. "I noticed on that quick look a few superficial differences, but my feeling was that the substance was the same."

That changed when Kitchen obtained a scan of the original. The Octet manuscript is in the collection of the Library of Congress, with which Kitchen has a special relationship, the result of access to a Guarneri del Jesu—donated by the widow of his teacher Szymon Goldberg—in the Library's instrument collection. During a week at the Library performing Bach's Sonatas and Partitas on the Guarneri, Kitchen asked to be taken on a tour of the Library's "Treasures Vault." He and a librarian spent hours looking through original manuscripts of Schoenberg, Bartók, Beethoven, and Brahms. According to Kitchen, the Library is extremely careful with the physical material but wants the music to be studied. The Mendelssohn Octet was not of particular interest to him during that visit, because he knew its facsimile had been distributed to libraries. But he left with a scan of the Octet for study at home.

As he read through the manuscript on his computer screen, Kitchen discovered that differences between the original and published versions were not as trivial as he'd thought. "Reading a score in a library, you'll discover a few things," he says. "But not unless you take it home and take out your instrument to play it—when you read from beginning to end for as many hours as you want—will you see everything."

The computer has changed the nature of how people do research. Kitchen practices from manuscripts—the primary material—just as in Mendelssohn's time, players worked from the composer's hand. Ironically, the computer has brought us back to that time. "It's not hard now to reproduce what came from the composer's hand," reports Kitchen, adding that it would take five minutes to transfer the Octet pdf file to eight different computers so every player could read from the original manuscript.

The Octet was conceived on a broad scale. It's like the pot into which the young polymath composer poured everything that excited him. Mendelssohn loved complex contrapuntal music. He'd written fugues of up to five parts; the octet's fugue has eight. Romantic in expression but Classical in style, the Octet has elements of concerto, symphony, homages to Mozart, Beethoven and Handel, allusions to Goethe's *Faust*, and echoes of *Andria* (a comedy by Terence, the 2nd-century B.C. Roman playwright), which Mendelssohn was translating from Latin into German. When Mendelssohn "finished" the Octet in 1825, he presented the autograph score as a birthday gift to his violin teacher, Eduard Rietz. As a thank you, Rietz copied out the instrumental parts for use in the work's first performance. According to Larry Todd, before Mendelssohn reworked it, the original Octet would likely have been played a handful of times a year—including performances in Mendelssohn's Berlin home, with Rietz on first violin part and the composer playing second.

Reconsidering the work at the age of 23, perhaps Mendelssohn felt the pot was a bit too full. Most of the revisions make the work more concise, cogent and forceful.

BORROMEO AND ARIEL QUARTETS PERFORM THE ORIGINAL VERSION

In Jordan Hall, Boston, on October 27, 2009, in a presentation entitled "Ottetto: What were Mendelssohn's First Thoughts?" Kitchen led an illustrated discussion of the changes the 23-year-old Mendelssohn made to his brilliantly precocious Octet. Sitting as mirror images in an arc with the cellists meeting at the middle, the Borromeos, the quartet-in-residence at New England Conservatory, and the Ariel Quartet, starting its second year in NEC's professional string quartet program, performed the original version, as they read from laptop computers on purpose-built stands with eight cords emanating from the stands and meeting at a common outlet covered by a small rug. A tap on each player's foot pedal changed the page on the screen. Overhead, the page of score being read by the musicians was projected onto a 7.5x10-foot screen, enabling the audience to see the page of manuscript it was hearing.

For the most part, the manuscript is easy to read. Its calligraphy is exquisite: neat penmanship, clear dynamic indications, cascades of sixteenth notes lined up as perfectly as pearls on a necklace. But a subtext seems to lurk in the size and shape of dynamic markings and other directions. Swells that looks dainty in the published edition in some cases looks enormous in the manuscript.

Reading the manuscript also reveals ambiguities. "You'd take hours to notice this in the abstract," Kitchen says, "but rehearsing from the manuscript, you get to a certain bar where two notes are hard to read. As eight people, you try different versions and within five minutes, you've decided how to read those notes." Acknowledging that their decision might be different from a publisher's, Kitchen said the musicians' unanimity gave them confidence in the correctness of their opinions.

A few clear indications in the score seem, musically speaking, to be mistakes. In one such spot, the group played what was on the page, but Kitchen thinks he may suggest they treat it as an error.

WHAT MENDELSSOHN CHANGED

Mendelssohn edited out what he may have considered youthful excess: reducing repetitive sequences and complexity, doubling voices for better balance, re-voicing chords, and, on occasion, tempering the spiciness of dramatic chords—as Kitchen jokes, civilizing them. The composer also changed the tempo markings at the start of three of the movements. Other than the tempo marking, the third movement is unchanged.

Mendelssohn also added, on the title page, an instruction: "This Octet must be played by all the instruments in the style of a symphonic orchestra. Pianos and fortes must be exactly observed and more strongly emphasized than is usual in works of this type."

First Movement: Allegro moderato ma con fuoco (orig: Allegro molto vivace) The propulsive opening theme, expressed in the original version in 4/4 time in quarter notes over two bars are recomposed in the published version as eighth notes within a single bar, reducing a movement of more than six hundred measures to one of 318. The development section is shorter and contains new material. The published recapitulation doesn't restate all the material from the exposition; everything is more compact.

Second Movement: Andante Mendelssohn removed individual bars, eliminated duplications and adds certain harmonic touches. Toward the end, a passage is reduced from 19 bars to 3.

Third Movement: Allegro leggierissimo (orig: Allegro moderato) Unchanged, except for tempo marking.

Fourth Movement: Presto (orig: Molto allegro e vivace) The fugal section in the original version is longer and contains more significant modulations, more dynamic alteration, and more complicated counterpoint layering. At one spot in the published version, instead of the five things going on in the original, there are only two, giving the moment greater impact.

SPREADING THE GOSPEL—PACKAGING THE PRESENTATION

The Borromeo and Ariel Quartets have recorded the two versions of the Octet and are developing a sound file (downloadable CD) and videofile (DVD) with explanations and illustrations that they plan to make accessible via the Internet. A comparison of the two versions reminds us that what can seem inevitable on the page is often the result of a long process of painstaking work—and reassessment after the passage of time.

Judith Kogan is author of Nothing But the Best: The Struggle for Perfection at the Juilliard School *(Random House) and a contributor to* Strad *and* Strings *magazines. A professional harpist, she and soprano Maria Jette have recorded settings of folk songs from the British Isles by Benjamin Britten and* Mélodies, *by Gabriel Fauré (Centaur Records).*

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> *"Unlike Brahms and Varèse, Mendelssohn didn't burn early versions of pieces or letters—perhaps thinking they had value as works in progress—but would not submit a piece to his publisher until he felt confident it was ready."*