

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# THE ATLANTIS TRIO & ENSEMBLE:

MENDELSSOHN 2009: JAAP SCHRÖDER (VIOLIN), PENELOPE CRAWFORD (FORTEPIANO), ENID SUTHERLAND (CELLO)

by Peter Watchorn, producer & co-founder, *Musica Omnia, Inc.*

2009 is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Felix Mendelssohn, one of the greatest composers of the nineteenth century and one of the pioneers of the modern “early music” revival: his enormous contribution restored the music of J. S. Bach to its proper pride of place in the standard concert repertory. This year will also see the completion of an important project by the innovative classical recording label, *Musica Omnia*, and one of its major period instrument recording ensembles, *The Atlantis Trio*, (also known in its augmented incarnation as *The Atlantis Ensemble*). This project, “Mendelssohn 2009”, consists of virtually all of the composer’s chamber output for fortepiano with other instruments. It includes the three early fortepiano Quartets, the Violin & Fortepiano Sonata (op. 1-4), the Sonata for Clarinet and Fortepiano (with Australian clarinettist, Owen Watkins), the two famous fortepiano Trios (op. 49 & 66), the little-known fortepiano Sextet (op. pos. 110) and the Sonata for viola and fortepiano.

Founded in 1990 by Dutch violinist Jaap Schröder for performing and recording the Schubert Octet, *The Atlantis Ensemble* was named to symbolize cooperation between trans-Atlantic musicians from Europe and the United States, and was the first collaboration between Schröder and two American colleagues, cellist and composer Enid Sutherland and fortepianist Penelope Crawford. They formed the *Atlantis Trio*, a group that has remained together consistently for the last 18 years, with many concerts and a number of widely admired recordings. The last few years have seen an increase in the Trio’s (and the larger Ensemble’s) recording activity for *Musica Omnia*, the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based CD label for which Atlantis has recorded exclusively since 2000.

One remarkable feature of *The Atlantis Trio*’s sound is the interaction and blend between violin and cello - a homogeneity of tone and style that is rarely encountered in modern chamber music playing. To match it, you have to go back to the greatest pre-WW II piano trio of Jacques Thibaud, Pablo Casals and Alfred Cortot, where

a similar flexibility and sensitivity between the string players in both tone and articulation is immediately apparent. Hearing the Atlanteans brings to mind the musicianship and flexibility of the chamber music playing that still existed at the turn of the twentieth century, before the era of metal strings, big concert halls and continuous vibrato. Perhaps it comes close to the original sounds of the early nineteenth century as well. A little background on each player will show how the foundations were laid. **Jaap Schröder** has founded and played with numerous ensembles and orchestras, from the *Netherlands Quartet* (as second violin) to *Quadro* and *Concerto Amsterdam* (with Brüggen, Leonhardt and Bylsma), and the *Smithson*, *Esterhazy* and, most recently *Skålholst* Quartets. Schröder is as active as ever at the age of 84, with his technique and tone undiminished, a tribute to his daily practice of technical exercises as well as to his engagement with the music. Schröder’s homage to the French school of violin playing distinguishes him from other European, especially Dutch violinists, who are far more often influenced by the Russian school of playing and pedagogy. As he puts it:

My musical education has been most influenced by my violin studies at the *Ecole Jacques Thibaud* in Paris and by my work with the brothers Pasquier, whose famous string trio I had so often admired in Amsterdam. The French violin tradition, characterised by a highly articulated and flexible sound, has inspired my own playing style.

**Penelope Crawford** began her musical education at age 5 and earned performance degrees in piano from the *Eastman School of Music* and the *University of Michigan*, with additional studies at the *Mozarteum* in Salzburg and the *Accademia di Santa Cecilia* in Rome. Her teachers included Mark Wessel, Rosina Lhevinne, Cécile Genhart, Kurtt Neumüller, Guido Agosti and Gyorgy Sandor. The most important influence in her musical life was undoubtedly Cécile Genhart. In her words:

My four years with Cécile Genhart were pivotal in my relationship to music and to the piano. Mrs. Genhart was an inspiring teacher, whose students adored her. Every lesson was thrilling, and I couldn't wait to get to a practice piano to try to incorporate what I had learned. Besides emphasizing the fundamentals of good musicianship, she taught me to listen, to think, and most important, to care about everything I did at the piano. I wonder sometimes now what she would think about the direction I've taken with period instruments and performance styles (particularly of 18<sup>th</sup>-century music), which might seem alien to one of her generation. I'd hope that she would still hear in my playing the essentials I learned from her.

Crawford gained her first experience with early keyboard instruments when she enrolled in a harpsichord class at the *Accademia di Santa Cecilia* in Rome in 1964. Later, while pursuing a Masters Degree in piano at the University of Michigan, she accompanied several graduate recitals on the harpsichord. Within the next few years both Crawford and Sutherland had joined the *Ars Musica Baroque Orchestra*, one of North America's first period instrument ensembles, which eventually led to their collaboration with Jaap Schröder.

**Enid Sutherland**, cellist, viola da gamba and composer, described her earlier years playing cello and discovering earlier instruments and playing styles:

In 1970 I was finishing up a DMA in cello at the University of Michigan. The only remaining requirement to be fulfilled was the giving of three recitals. One night around that time, Penny and I and our respective husbands were having dinner together. Penny said that she was getting serious about building a harpsichord from a kit. She had talked about it off and on before. I responded by saying that if she did that, I would try to find a gamba and learn how to play it. The next day my husband went to the musicology department, borrowed a gamba and brought it home to me. I couldn't put it down. I devoted myself to it. I gave up the DMA in cello and soon became the instructor of gamba at the university (a position I still hold) and have had a nearly 40-year career of teaching and performing "early music", although that is a bit of a misnomer since my exploration of musical styles and performance practices now reaches into the mid-nineteenth century. About ten years after, I returned to the cello in its early version. I did a lot of solo playing on both instruments and worked with many different ensembles around the country. But for the past 18 years my playing career has been centred on my work with *The Atlantis Trio*. Our path has taken us from the Baroque through the classics and finally to the Romantics. Schubert, the Schumanns and the Mendelssohns have been our recent focus, and we have on occasion invited some wonderful guests to join us so that we could record quartets, quintets and sextets.

## The Graf

As the Atlanteans gained experience together they turned to the trios of the early nineteenth century, a focus which coincided with Crawford's acquisition of a truly fine Viennese fortepiano from 1835 by the master builder, Conrad Graf. Crawford recalled:

This particular Graf, from 1835, was built just four years before the maker presented Clara and Robert Schumann with a similar instrument as a wedding gift. The piano was found in Sweden and then beautifully restored by Edward Swenson and Robert Murphy. A highly decorated instrument, it was probably made for the nobility. I learned from Ed Swenson that the piano had been rescued from oblivion by a family in Sweden, whose bid at auction saved it from becoming a table.

The Graf has since been used to perform and record much of the Romantic chamber literature, most notably the Felix Mendelssohn cycle. The Graf piano was also used for the two Schubert song cycles, *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*, with baritone Max van Egmond.

## The Mendelssohn Recordings:

It was in 2000, the year that *Musica Omnia* began, that Penelope Crawford met with me to discuss the possible involvement of *Atlantis* in a series that the new label planned in order to present the 19<sup>th</sup>-century repertoire in historically appropriate performances using period instruments. The venture was called *The Romantics*, and the first project for the Atlanteans was a recording of fortepiano trios by the Mendelssohn siblings, Felix (Trio No. 2 in C minor, Op. 66) and Fanny (*Musica Omnia*, MO 0105). This was supplemented by a spoken CD introduction to the music, *Beyond the Notes*, recorded by all three members of the trio, in which they discussed performance practice and other musical and social history topics. Next came the D Minor Fortepiano Trio and the early D Major Fortepiano Sextet. (MO 0205). The Sextet performance, the first using period instruments, with the trio augmented by violists Peter Bucknell, Daniel Foster and bassist Anne Trout, were revelatory, especially in the tonal cohesion and clarity of the string ensemble and balances between strings and fortepiano. Both the sheer beauty of sound and articulate performance style revealed much about these works that had remained hidden in more mainstream performances.

In late 2006 a memorable set of sessions (with violist Daniel Foster once more) yielded the three Mendelssohn Fortepiano Quartets and the Sonata for Violin and Fortepiano (MO 0304), the young composer's first published opuses (1-4). This project began rather inauspiciously on a 90-degree day when the quartet and production team arrived at the recording site, only to find that construction work had begun on the building. Penny Crawford recalls:

As we met we discovered not only that repair work was being done on the concrete façade of the building, but also that the heat was still on in the auditorium. Nothing looked workable, and as we finally entertained the gloomy prospect of calling it quits and everyone returning home, we knocked once again on the door of Ypsilanti's First Presbyterian Church where we'd had no response an hour earlier. We were welcomed inside and found, to our surprise and delight, the ideal recording site for our work—a beautiful wood and plaster sanctuary offering excellent acoustics, a quiet environment, and a friendly pastor and congregation who seemed happy to have us there.

In autumn of 2008 the Mendelssohn 2009 project continued with recordings of the viola and clarinet sonatas, with Jaap Schröder playing viola and Owen Watkins the six-keyed clarinet. This will mark the end of one of the first projects planned by *Musica Omnia* at its inception nearly 10 years ago. However, the label and *The Atlantis Ensemble* will continue their partnership with a survey of chamber works with fortepiano: the great piano Quintet and Quartet, both in E Flat Major, and the D

Minor Piano Trio by Robert Schumann – just in time for the bicentennial commemoration of that composer's birth in 1810, one year after that of his friend, Felix Mendelssohn.

#### **1. Recordings of Felix Mendelssohn:**

- MO 0105: Trio in C minor, Op. 66 (w Fanny Mendelssohn: Trio in D minor)
- MO 0205: Trio in D minor, Op. 49/Sextet in D major, Op. (pos) 110
- MO 0304: The Young Felix Mendelssohn (3 CD's)
  - Quartets for fortepiano and strings, Op. 1-3
  - Sonata for violin and fortepiano (Op. 4)
  - Sonata for clarinet and fortepiano
  - Sonata for viola and fortepiano

#### **2. Other recordings:**

- MO 0208: Clara Schumann: Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 17
- Robert Schumann: Piano Trio in D minor, Op. 63
- MO 0210: Beethoven: Piano trio Op. 1/3 in C minor/Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 36
- MO 0211: Robert Schumann: Piano Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 47
- Sigismond Thalberg: Piano Trio in A major, Op. 69
- MO 0212: Robert Schumann: Piano Quintet in E-flat major, Op. 44
- Franz Schubert: Piano Quintet in A major "The Trout"
- Die Forelle (Max van Egmond, baritone)
- MO 0107: Franz Schubert: Die schöne Müllerin (Max van Egmond/Penelope Crawford)
- MO 0108: Franz Schubert: Winterreise (Max van Egmond/Penelope Crawford)