

Brentano
String Quartet

December 3, 2011
7:30pm
Allred Theater

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tonight's performance.

Thank you!

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7:30pm
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The Brentano String Quartet appears
by arrangement with David Rowe Artists
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The Brentano String Quartet

Mark Steinberg, violin
Misha Amory, viola

Serena Canin, violin
Nina Lee, cello

PROGRAM

Quartettsatz ('Quartet Movement') in C-minor, Opus Post., D. 703

Franz Schubert
1797-1828

Allegro assai

String Quartet No.1 in A-minor, Op.7

Béla Bartók
1881-1945

Lento

Allegretto

Allegro vivace

INTERMISSION

String Quartet in A-minor, Op. 132

Ludwig van Beethoven
1770-1827

Assai sostenuto-Allegro

Allegro ma non tanto

Molto adagio-Andante

Alla Marcia, assai vivace-Allegro appassionato

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Since its inception in 1992, the Brentano String Quartet has appeared throughout the world to popular and critical acclaim. "Passionate, uninhibited and spellbinding," raves the London Independent; the New York Times extols its "luxuriously warm sound [and] yearning lyricism"; the Philadelphia Inquirer praises its "seemingly infallible instincts for finding the center of gravity in every phrase and musical gesture"; and the Times (London) opines, "the Brentanos are a magnificent string quartet...This was wonderful, selfless music-making." Within a few years of its formation, the Quartet garnered the first Cleveland Quartet Award and the Naumburg Chamber Music Award; and in 1996 the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center invited them to be the inaugural members of Chamber Music Society Two, a program which has become a coveted distinction for chamber groups and individuals ever since. The Quartet had its first European tour in 1997, and was honored in the U.K. with the Royal Philharmonic Award for Most Outstanding Debut. That debut recital was at London's Wigmore Hall, and the Quartet has continued its warm relationship with Wigmore, appearing there regularly and serving as the hall's Quartet-in-residence in the 2000-01 season.

In recent seasons the Quartet has traveled widely, appearing all over the United States and Canada, in Europe, Japan and Australia. It has performed in the world's most prestigious venues, including Carnegie Hall and Alice Tully Hall in New York; the Library of Congress in Washington; the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam; the Konzerthaus in Vienna; Suntory Hall in Tokyo; and the Sydney Opera House. The Quartet has participated in summer festivals such as Aspen, the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, the Edinburgh Festival, the Kuhmo Festival in Finland, the Taos School of Music and the Caramoor Festival. Beginning in June 2013 the Quartet will serve as the collaborative ensemble for the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, succeeding the Takacs Quartet.

In addition to performing the entire two-century range of the standard quartet repertoire, the Brentano Quartet has a strong interest in both very old and very new music. It has performed many musical works pre-dating the string quartet as a medium, among them Madrigals of Gesualdo, Fantasias of Purcell, and secular vocal works of Josquin. Also, the quartet has worked closely with some of the most important composers of our time, among them Elliot Carter, Charles Wuorinen, Chou Wen-chung, Steven Mackey, Bruce Adolphe, and György Kurtág. The Quartet has commissioned works from Wuorinen, Adolphe, Mackey, David Horne and Gabriela Frank. The Quartet celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2002 by commissioning ten composers to write companion pieces for selections from Bach's Art of Fugue, the result of which was an electrifying and wide-ranging single concert program. A

similar project called “Fragments – connecting past and present” will commemorate their 20th anniversary in 2011/12. For this program they have commissioned six composers to write works informed by incomplete pieces left behind by previous masters. The Quartet has also worked with the celebrated poet Mark Strand, commissioning poetry from him to accompany works of Haydn and Webern.

The Quartet has been privileged to collaborate with such artists as soprano Jessye Norman, pianist Richard Goode, and pianist Mitsuko Uchida. The Quartet enjoys an especially close relationship with Ms. Uchida, appearing with her on stages in the United States, Europe, and Japan.

The Quartet has recorded the Opus 71 Quartets of Haydn, and has also recorded a Mozart disc for Aeon Records, consisting of the K. 464 Quartet and the K. 593 Quintet, with violist Hsin-Yun Huang. A forthcoming release on Aeon will feature the Beethoven Quartets Op. 127 and 131. In the area of newer music, the Quartet has released a disc of the music of Steven Mackey on Albany Records, and has also recorded the music of Bruce Adolph, Chou Wen-chung and Charles Wuorinen.

In 1998, cellist Nina Lee joined the Quartet, succeeding founding member Michael Kannen. The following season the Quartet became the first Resident String Quartet at Princeton University. The Quartet’s duties at the University are wide-ranging, including performances at least once a semester, as well as workshops with graduate composers, coaching undergraduates in chamber music, and assisting in other classes at the Music Department.

The Quartet is named for Antonie Brentano, whom many scholars consider to be Beethoven’s “Immortal Beloved”, the intended recipient of his famous love confession.

Franz Schubert Quartettsatz (quartet movement) in c minor

Ushering in the set of three great string quartets Schubert wrote at the end of his life is a torso of a work, the Quartettsatz (quartet movement) in c minor, written in 1820. This powerful movement was originally intended to be the first movement of a full quartet, and there exists a sketch for the opening of a second movement as well. It is not known why Schubert never completed the work, but the movement he did write is a masterpiece fully worthy of being in the company of the later, last three quartets.

The conflict between desire and reality is very often at the heart of Schubert’s music, a conflict at the root of what it is to be human. For we are rarely masters of Fate, and mortal longing defines the painful space between possibility and imagined fulfillment. By way of exploration one can look at the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe, as related by Ovid in the *Metamorphosis*. Pyramus and Thisbe, two of the most beautiful people in the land, are desperately in love, yet forbidden by their fathers to wed. Their sole communication is through a small hole in a wall, large enough to transmit a whisper,

small enough that lips that offer a kiss will never know a response. They decide to steal away in the darkness of night and meet. On her way to meet her lover Thisbe spies a lion who has recently feasted on prey, his mouth still awash in blood, and she runs off, inadvertently dropping her cloak. The hungry lion chews on the cloak, drops it, and leaves. Pyramus, looking for his love, stumbles first upon the bloody cloak and, thinking Thisbe eaten by a monstrous creature, uses his sword to join her in death. Then, upon her return, Thisbe finds Pyramus dead and leans on the sword herself.

Terrible, incomprehensible forces coexist here with the beauty of tender vulnerability. The stranglehold of authority, the physical presence of the wall, the violence of nature, the impossibility of omniscience: all these are external obstacles interfering with the purity of love. But still the shadows they cast upon that love, spawning yearning and hope, introduce a fragility and an aching quality to that love that we recognize as deeply human. The renunciation of life as a reaction to thwarted love also exalts this love.

In the Quartettsatz such elements exist in close juxtaposition. The piece begins with a tremulous figure reminiscent of the opening of that other great uncompleted Schubert work, the Unfinished Symphony; there is a sense of instability created which permeates much of the work, even in anxious figures accompanying otherwise lyrical themes. It is a precarious and poignant ambiguity which is quintessentially Schubertian, the song that is even more beautiful because it exists only in memory or in imagination. Yearning and desire are even more moving when one dares to hope despite being confronted over and over by unforgiving realities. In Notebook/To Lucien Freud/On the Veil from School of the Arts poet Mark Doty speaks of "no hope/without the possibility of a wound." Schubert shows us the forces that wound, and the immense sensitivity of the soul that hopes. In this piece, Fate deals the final blow.

2005 by Mark Steinberg

Bartok: String Quartet No. 1

For the young Béla Bartók, the period of 1906-1909 marked a time of enormous change, experimentation and turmoil.

At the beginning of this period, he might fairly be described as a disciple and admirer of the German composer Richard Strauss. By its end he was conversant with the works of Debussy, thanks to his friend Zoltán Kodály, and had embarked on his career as one of the earliest ethnomusicologists, collecting and recording folk music in his notebooks and on Thomas Edison's wax cylinder. Folk music was also becoming a central force in Bartók's own compositions, whether in the form of direct quotations or more obliquely. In later years, his own ideal as a composer would be to absorb the spirit of folk music so internally that his writing would simply carry its essence, rather than alluding to it artificially on the surface; he hoped to construct the edifice of his own music on the foundation of the basic expressive truths that

he perceived in these melodies. Over the years, he was to range all over eastern Europe and as far as Algeria in his quest to collect and catalogue folk tunes. In his personal life, too, Bartók was experiencing upheaval. He rejected the Roman Catholicism of his upbringing and proclaimed himself an atheist, a state of belief that he was to profess for several years. At the same time, he was passionately in love with the talented young violinist Stefi Geyer, a pupil of Jenő Hubay. He wrote her long letters in which he railed against Roman Catholicism and the middle class; Catholic and middle-class herself, she may not have responded well to his point of view. In the end, his love was unrequited, and the Violin Concerto that he had written for her was locked away in a drawer and not published until after the composer's death. It was 1908; within a year of their parting, Bartók married another girl.

In the meantime he had composed his first String Quartet. It is arguably his first masterpiece as well, and depicts vividly the warring impulses and influences from this time in the composer's life. In a letter to Geyer, he described the first movement as a "funeral dirge"; the opening motif, shared between the violins, is a melody from the Concerto he wrote for her, and so this movement may symbolize the death of that passion. It is a movement written certainly from a full heart and a large soul, pensive and grieving; the music is suffused throughout with a sense of yearning and loss. The rhythmic cadence and the harmonic feeling still carry a flavor of Germanic Romanticism, as do the two monumental climaxes.

It is a truism that youth will recover more quickly from a blow than advanced age. Certainly, as the last sad notes of the first movement are fading in the violins, there is already evidence of new life in the viola and the cello. Moving seamlessly into the second movement, we are lifted by a gentle *accelerando* to a new state of grace, a lilting, dancing world that is miles distant from the heavy burden of the previous one. It is probably not meaningful to say that the music of this movement feels "more like Bartók"; but it is hard now to hear the imprint of a Strauss or a Bruckner. Twisting and twirling from lighter textures to darker ones, now singing airily, now stamping with great force, turning easily from major and minor harmonies to completely atonal ones, and back again: before our eyes a composer is finding a voice, integrating seemingly disparate influences into a taut and compelling narrative.

The second movement reaches an ethereal and quiet ending, only to be interrupted by silliness: a noisy tableau that evokes three mischievous children (the upper strings) taunting a grumpy old man (the cello). Once this brief encounter has played itself out, we are ushered into the third movement proper. This is energetic music with a sometimes rustic flavor, evoking the feeling of a peasant dance. Although there is plenty of tension and urgency in the air, the prevailing mood is one of high jinks and good humor. We hear, too, the influence of the folk music that Bartók was beginning to catalogue: the two climactic passages of the movement, set in a broader tempo, feature a melody very much like the pentatonic Magyar folk songs he had collected that year. The composer was still quite a few years away from the period when he would aspire to subsume the folk idiom into his creative bloodstream; this is still the music of a man visiting the countryside, fascinated by the exotic otherness of the folk melodies he encounters. But at the same time, we can

feel that he is hooked. Under the quaintness, the humor and charm that sometimes verges on the precious, there is an authentic response: the composer of these rhythms, these textures and these intervals has just begun to dent the surface, and will be digging ever deeper in future works.

2011 by Misha Amory

Beethoven: String Quartet in A-minor, Op. 132

A poem by Dylan Thomas begins:

Your pain shall be a music in your string
And fill the mouths of heaven with your tongue

Art has the capacity to take on the burdens of existence and lend to them in reflection beauty and nobility which both console and edify. Ludwig van Beethoven was a man within whom the trials and triumphs of being resonated loudly. His ability to translate these into music was not something he took lightly; sensing the pressure of time in his final years he chose to renounce the felicities of life and devote his energies fully to composition. For Beethoven the act of composition was an act of giving, of doing for others, and the last years of his life saw the birth of a remarkable set of works which are indeed a gift. His late period works offer hope of transcendence through penetrating insight into the nature of suffering and difficulty. Inspired, perhaps, by the inherent intimacy and flexibility of the medium, Beethoven wrote five epic string quartets during these years.

The quartet Op. 132, in a minor, begins in shadows, tenuously searching, reaching towards the unknowable. The introductory material of the quartet encompasses the sense of the infinite within the merest of whispers filled with portent and possibility. The voices echo one another with a four note motif which is to permeate the first movement, unstable and yearning. A brief torrent of whirling notes unleashed in the first violin gives way to a restless theme which will be wrestled with throughout the movement. In all of Beethoven this is perhaps the movement which best embodies a sense of process. One gets the feeling of being inside the composer's mind and imagination as he wends his way through the argument, including not only forward progression but distractions and digressions as well, all integrated into the evolving shape of the movement. Beethoven displays here what musicologist Maynard Solomon calls the "potential for coherence within the fragmentary." In embracing disorder, the composer manages to create a compelling structure achieved through careful balancing of musical quanta. Coherence is earned through struggle with confusion, purification through tribulation.

The second movement perhaps owes its inspiration to its counterpart in Mozart's A Major quartet, K 464, a piece of which Beethoven was fond. As in that earlier piece the movement opens with a unison figure gently poised between the graceful

and the austere. A more tender melody is then intertwined with the opening material in a somewhat odd pas-de-deux. Irregular rhythms and slightly anxious expressive markings lend the dance a quirky, uncertain lilt. As if to assuage this unease the trio section could hardly be more open, simpler, or more innocent. Evoking bagpipes and childlike play, the flow of the music gets interrupted once briefly by an ominous and threatening pronouncement initiated by the viola and cello. It is a frightening moment, seemingly unprovoked, the darkness lurking behind our fragile states of happiness. It is quickly dispelled by the return of the bagpipes and then of the main dancing section of the movement, but the sense of portent hovers in the air even at the movement's close.

Certainly one of the most expansive of Beethoven's slow movements, the third movement is entitled "song of thanksgiving to God from a convalescent, in the Lydian mode." This is a profound and deeply personal utterance, rooted certainly in biographical fact, but perhaps in metaphysical metaphor as well. The ancient modes, with a slightly different color than the major and minor scales on which most music of this period is based, and thus exotic in sound, suggest piety and devotion. (Among Beethoven's unrealized plans at the end of his life were a "pious song in a symphony in the ancient modes" and a "chorus in the ancient modes" as part of an oratorio.) Hymn-like sections alternate with sections marked "feeling new strength." In this quicker, far more ornate music, there is the sense of a vibration of the soul as it aspires upward toward heaven, of illumination born of a struggle with darkness. At each return of the hymn-like music it becomes more sensitive, more vulnerable. At its third and final appearance Beethoven writes in the score above the material which weaves through the intoned hymn melody "with the most intimate feeling." The movement builds to a climax of nearly unthinkable intensity, filled with love and recognition of the sublime. Its denouement leads to an almost complete stillness, with only the merest suggestion of a vibration within, a sense of peace. The last moments perhaps relate to something Beethoven had copied into one of his notebooks of this period, from an Indian religious text, "for God, time absolutely does not exist." This movement must be counted among the greatest of Beethoven's creations.

Having reached toward the celestial, Beethoven reestablishes the terrestrial with an "alla marcia." This march is one which continually dissolves into more delicate, playful music, as if unsure of exactly in which direction the march should head, not yet ready for a triumphant conclusion despite all that has preceded it. Uncertainty gains the upper hand with a quickening of the pulse ushering in a recitative in the first violin accompanied by quaking, fearful tremolos underneath. The most famous use of recitative to introduce a large scale final movement is surely in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and in fact the sketches for the theme of the last movement of the Op. 132 quartet were originally intended for a purely instrumental finale of that work. Whereas in the choral finale Beethoven eventually wrote for the Ninth Symphony the recitative serves to cast aside doubt and obscurity in favor of light and joy, the route he chose to take in the Op. 132 quartet is wrought with further struggle. An anxious yearning characterizes this finale, with the composer indicating that the main theme should be passionately expressive. To an even greater

degree than in the second movement, where an inherently dance-like rhythmic meter is slightly distorted by unsettling surface elements, here the same meter is almost rent asunder by heaving, nervous figuration. No respite is to be had, even when more simply lyrical material attempts to assuage the unrest. About two thirds of the way through the movement the tempo accelerates and the music reaches fever pitch, with the cello crying out in the register usually reserved for the violins, approaching a feeling of terror. This is the crisis that at long last brings resolution, although not in one fell swoop. The key of A major is entered into gently, with a sense of freedom attained, open and soaring. The quartet gathers strength toward a conclusion affirming victory of the spirit, only to be thwarted by brief hesitation and uncertainty. When this moment of uncertainty is reached for the second time, however, there is hesitation no longer and the quartet ends having triumphed over adversity. Perhaps this is the greatest gift that Beethoven has given us. He grapples with the vicissitudes of our inner and outer lives, in full acknowledgement of our native suffering, and through the transformative power of art leads us to recognition of beauty and faith in humanity.

2004 by Mark Steinberg

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February 11, 2012 7:30pm

Peery's Egyptian Theater

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