

The Brentano String Quartet

Mark Steinberg, violin
Serena Canin, violin
Misha Amory, viola
Nina Maria Lee, cello

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.”

Beginning in July, 2014, the Brentano Quartet will succeed the Tokyo Quartet as Artists in Residence at Yale University, departing from their 14 year residency at Princeton University. The Quartet also currently serves as the collaborative ensemble for the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. 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 had its first European tour in 1997, and was honored in the U.K. with the Royal Philharmonic Award for Most Outstanding Debut.

The Brentano Quartet is known for especially imaginative projects combining old and new music, such as “Fragments: Connecting Past and Present” and “Bach Perspectives.” Among the Quartet’s latest collaborations with contemporary composers is a new work by Steven Mackey, “One Red Rose,” commemorating the 50th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963. Other new commissions include a piano quintet by Vijay Iyer, a work by Eric Moe (with Christine Brandes, soprano), and a new viola quintet by Felipe Lara (to be performed with violist Hsin-Yun Huang).

The Quartet has worked closely with other important composers of our time, among them Elliot Carter, Charles Wuorinen, Chou Wen-chung, Bruce Adolphe, and György Kurtág. The Quartet has also been privileged to collaborate with such artists as soprano Jessye Norman, pianist Richard Goode, and pianist Mitsuko Uchida. 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.

November, 2013 – please discard previous or undated materials.

Notes on the program

[IMPORANT NOTE TO PRESENTER: The members of the Brentano Quartet have taken great care in compiling the following program notes. If possible please print them in their entirety. If for reasons of space considerations you find it necessary to cut or otherwise edit them, that is okay but in that case please DO NOT list the authors.]

Felix Mendelssohn String Quartet in D major, Op. 44, No. 1

The 28-year-old Felix Mendelssohn composed his three Opus 44 quartets over the course of about a year, from 1837 to 1838. This was a period of success and happiness for the young composer; he had been appointed conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra two years earlier in 1835, had had a great success with his oratorio "St. Paul" in 1836 and had gotten married in 1837. He was also emerging as a respected authority on music of the past: he was responsible in great part for re-introducing the masterpieces of Bach and Händel to European audiences, and in 1839 helped Schumann bring Schubert's C major Symphony to light, eleven years after that composer's death. Equally, he intersected with the great musicians of his time -- Chopin, Berlioz, Schumann, the pianist Ignaz Moscheles and the violinist Joseph Joachim -- not to mention other luminaries such as Goethe and Hegel. With Mendelssohn we have a creative figure who was no secluded hermit; he was bent on forging the connections in the musical world of his time, be they from the music of the past, among his many contemporary fellow geniuses, or in the discovery of the next musical generation. Often one can hear this social quality in his music as well: a peculiar grace, light or joy that is calculated not to awe, but rather to welcome the listener, to extend an inspired hand in fellowship.

The D major quartet, opus 44 #1, is decidedly filled with light and joy. Although it was actually the last of the three opus 44 quartets to be composed, it seems that Mendelssohn was particularly proud of it, which may be the reason it was published as the first of the set. D major is a brilliant key for stringed instruments, and the composer plays to that quality. The first movement is a rather epic creation, built on a grand scale. Full of energy, it seems in its biggest moments to have trombones and timpani straining to make themselves heard through the slender medium of the quartet. Although it is technically composed in a sonata-allegro form, the experience of hearing it evokes not so much a strict form as an odyssey, a journey to many different lands. There are two reasons for this. First, there many different thematic ideas that turn up one after the other, like so many islands in an archipelago: the exuberant opening melody, with a rocketing figure in the first violin; a sweet chromatic figure in a softer dynamic; a momentary tender aside in the viola; a hushed, choral utterance in a minor key; and a merry caper to the end of the exposition. Second, there is a musical "ship": an omnipresent rolling 8th-note texture that creates an inexorable motion, bearing us from one island to the next.

The second movement is a kind of homage to the minuet, insofar as it carries that title; but this music seems far removed from the dance floor. It is whispered, evanescent, gliding; if dancers are suggested, their feet do not touch the ground. The contrasting Trio section in the middle is even more surreal: here we are in a minor key, and the fairies from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* start to take form in an eddy of rising 8th-notes. By and by the main section steals back in and rounds off the movement, with a coda that recalls a fairy shadow or two.

Next comes the extraordinary slow movement of the work. The first violin sings a melancholy "song without words", a simple melody whose plucked accompaniment in the lower strings transforms the singer into a solitary troubadour. But it is the rolling 16th-note figure in the second violin part that stamps the scene most memorably. Handed from instrument to instrument, this 16th-note texture persists all the way through the movement almost without interruption, the vehicle that carries the listener through periods of sunlight and shadow. Ultimately the first violin reaches an anguished peroration, bringing a sense of true grief well beyond the tender sorrow that came before; after which nothing remains but to bring the movement to a resigned close.

With the final movement we return to the celebratory atmosphere of the first movement. After a euphoric opening salvo, the music whirls away in a tarantella-like dance. An almost giddy joyfulness pervades this material; but it has a habit of suddenly getting stuck in a repeating rhythmic groove, quieting, and then recovering itself, spinning off in another harmonic direction. Contrasting with all this energy is another melody, more tender and personal but no less blissful, that intercedes from time to time to offer relief from the dance. A remarkable, Jovian coda rounds off the work, wherein the imagined brasses and drums of the first movement make their appearance one final time.

Note by Misha Amory

Dmitri Shostakovich
String Quartet No. 11 in F minor, Op. 122 (1966)

We are sorry, we do not have notes for this work at this time.

“A Selection of Short Works”

We like a good Haydn-Bartók-Beethoven quartet program as much as the next guy. Maybe more so. But every once in a while it's nice to vary the menu a bit, perhaps enjoying a light tasting menu in lieu of a complex main course. There was a time, not so long ago actually, when one might go to hear a favorite artist give a violin recital and the program would consist of a couple of sonatas followed by a cornucopia of short works, varying in character. On this program we are hoping to recapture that spirit. Our selection is slanted toward Americana. It is bookended by Steve Mackey's arrangement of Bernstein's "I Feel Pretty" from *West Side Story* and his arrangement of Robert Pete Willaims' blues tune "I've Grown So Ugly." Things change. We also have Ives' selfexplanatory scherzo "Holding Your Own," and Elliott Carter's early, meltingly beautiful *Elegy*. The remainder of the works are Eastern European, dances and songs. The Dvorak Waltzes sway and swirl, while the Shostakovich Polka displays a rather different attitude, hardly nostalgic or sweet. We include as well the justly famous Andante cantabile from Tchaikovsky's D Major quartet, the movement that famously caused Tolstoy to break down in tears. Tchaikovsky based the main theme of the movement on a tune he heard a carpenter singing. Since our 'cellist is married to a carpenter it seemed an apt thing for us to celebrate.

Note by Mark Steinberg