

Sunday, March 3, 2013, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Brentano String Quartet

Mark Steinberg *violin*
Serena Canin *violin*
Misha Amory *viola*
Nina Lee *cello*

PROGRAM

Franz Josef Haydn (1732–1809) String Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 33, No. 2,
Hob: III.38, “The Joke” (1781)

Allegro moderato
Scherzo. Allegro
Largo e sostenuto
Finale. Presto

Bela Bartók (1881–1945) String Quartet No. 4, Sz. 91, BB 95 (1928)

Allegro
Prestissimo, con sordino
Non troppo lento
Allegretto pizzicato
Allegro molto

INTERMISSION

Henry Purcell (1659–1695) A selection of *Fantasias*

No. 8 in D minor
No. 5 in B-flat major
No. 7 in C minor
No. 9 in A minor

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) String Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 74,
“The Harp” (1809)

Poco adagio — Allegro
Adagio, ma non troppo
Presto (Piu presto quasi prestissimo)
Allegretto con Variazioni

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Franz Josef Haydn (1732–1809)
String Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 33, No. 2,
Hob: III.38, “The Joke” (1781)

Haydn must have been a great babysitter. You know, the one who picks up three unpromising looking Lego blocks and builds a functioning helicopter, the one who uses the toilet plunger to pick up odds and ends around the house, the one who swaps his white powdered wig for a frizzy brunette one and looks oddly like your aunt, and then appears around corners when you least expect him. In a quartet nicknamed “The Joke” one might expect as much. The nickname of the E-flat major Quartet, Op. 33, No. 2, refers to the ending of its last movement, but Haydn plays at being a delightful trickster in three of the four movements.

In the opening movement Haydn sets forth a fairly balanced, jovial theme. Even here for the performer there is a slight cognitive dissonance: he gives the performing direction “cantabile,” singing, but much of what makes up this theme is more a good belly laugh than any kind of *bel canto*. The diva cannot take herself too seriously. And the chuckling pretty much takes over the proceedings. In fact the entire movement is made up of the elements heard in that first statement. It is a fun sleight-of-hand, never even hinting at monotony, a whole meal somehow conjured out of a scrap of bread. When Haydn uses a chain of chuckling motifs to suggest progress it instead leads to a kind of slapstick stuttering. The pitch that leads where we are going arrives on top in the first violin, but it gets stuck there and desperately repeats as the harmonies underneath shift around. In order to regain a sense of dignity, rather in the vein of Sam the Eagle of the Muppets, Haydn takes the rhythm from the chuckling motif and uses it to puff up the quartet. The quartet does its best playing at being an orchestra. Of course, it is absurd play, and all is merrily shrugged off when the curtain is lifted on the great and powerful Oz to reveal a humble wizard. Haydn loves to keep us off balance, and the movement even ends with the same three notes that introduced the whole piece, the figure that introduces becoming the one that closes, a sort of pun.

Where Haydn would have written a Minuet movement in his earlier quartets he puts a movement marked “Scherzo,” joke, in each of the Op. 33 Quartets. Here in Op. 33, No. 2, we get a rather pompously stomping dance that again and again sheepishly looks around filled with doubt, wondering whether any toes have been trampled. This kind of self-referential rhetoric is one of the wonderful hallmarks of Haydn’s style. The music comments on itself, much to the delight of performer as well as listener. In the trio, one can almost hear the rust on the strings, the hurdy-gurdy on its last legs. The first violin tries so hard to be elegant and suave, but what can be done when dancing on banana peels? Again there is a moment of attempted dignity and orchestral build-up, again coming up woefully empty-handed. Suggestions of orchestral grandeur appear in each of the movements; in the fast movements they seem to grow more preposterous each time.

In the slow movement, Haydn puts aside his clown’s garb to don the enchanted robes of a magician. Starting from the simplest horn call derived melody for the viola and cello he weaves a spell of wonder. As the violins sing their version of the tune, the cello murmurs an unassuming oscillating figure, souging water or wind. Throughout the movement, this figuration adorns and illuminates the proceedings gently and tenderly. The moments of orchestral weight here come as foreign declamatory chords, revelations and admissions of darkness. But the slashes in the aural texture do not rent the fabric of the charmed song. Instead, they are covered over, healed like a wound that becomes part of one’s life story only as anecdote. The movement departs with a series of silvery sighs evaporating into the ether.

The finale is a merry romp of a rondo, quick-silver and pure good spirits. Toward the end, pompous, regal music announces itself. The movement steps outside of itself, taking on the role of narrator, of explicator, and makes a last ditch effort at stately dignity. This is the final, most farcical of the futile orchestral tropes. Laughing it off, what happens next leads to the joke of the piece’s nickname.

Surely you didn’t expect me to reveal the punch line!

Mark Steinberg

Bela Bartók (1881–1945)
String Quartet No. 4, Sz. 91, BB 95 (1928)

In the late 1920s, Bartók was living in Budapest, and was starting to be known all over the world. Despite this fame, however, he remained an intensely private and introverted person. He was not fond of teaching or performing, although he had to do both to support his family. He spoke and wrote very little about his own compositions, preferring to let the music represent itself. The one topic that made his eyes light up was the collection and study of folk music—Hungarian, Romanian, Bulgarian, and even Arabian—that had occupied him from his youth and continued to be central to his life. To Bartók’s thinking, folk music was of more than scientific interest: It was the life-giving seed without which there was no way forward in musical creation. His ideal was to internalize the rhythms and contours of the folk melodies he collected, to a point where his own compositions were the natural result.

He composed his Fourth Quartet in 1928. Considered by many to be among his very greatest compositions, it represents in some sense an extreme case. Taut, economical, almost geometrical in its arguments, it is music that wastes not a single note, and thus conveys a kind of athletic exuberance.

Everything about the piece betrays Bartók’s obsession with mirror-images and symmetry, a hallmark of his mature style. In every movement, one hears a melody in one voice, which is answered by the same melody upside-down in another voice. Elsewhere, there are abundant examples of a motif answered by its duplicate on a different pitch, echoed back across the quartet. Once in a while, a melody is even replied to by its retrograde: the same melody played backwards. These contrapuntal games are hardly unique to Bartók among composers, but he saturated this music with them to an unusual extent. The obsession with symmetry, imitation,

and mirror-reflection is so omnipresent that it virtually defines his style during these years.

Nor is the pursuit of symmetry confined to local neighborhoods: The entire, five-movement layout of the quartet is symmetrical as well. Bartók cast the piece in an “arch form,” much as he did later in the Fifth Quartet and the *Concerto for Orchestra*. That is, he coupled the first movement with the fifth movement, and the second movement with the fourth movement, with the third movement standing alone as the work’s solitary capstone. The paired movements share various characteristics: basic soundscape, motivic material, and emotional heft.

Both of the outer movements are lively, energetic, and bold. The first movement, on the face of it, might seem somewhat more serious, developing its material in an orderly and considered fashion; one might even say that it is forbiddingly heavy in its dense textures and its forests of semitones. At the same time, though, there is an enormous energy in this movement’s activity, and it has a positive, not a destructive, aspect; with every imitation, every reflected melody, every exclamatory chord, one hears the verve of new creation, of musical DNA being mapped and remapped. Central to the movement is a galloping, six-note idea, consisting of three rising chromatic notes followed by three faster falling ones, which is first heard about ten bars in. This “motto” idea returns in the last movement and binds the piece together.

The fifth and final movement, for its part, is a rugged, stamping folk dance. The main melody of this movement reminds us Bartók’s deep connection to folk music: a simple, primal idea that goes up and down four notes of an exotic scale. The accompanimental rhythms that punctuate the texture of the first section recall, superficially, the irregular and exciting rhythms in Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*; undoubtedly Bartók sought here to evoke a rustic, vital energy of his own. In the central, more quiet episode of this movement, the galloping “motto” idea from the first movement starts to sneak back in, first in the cello part and eventually moving up through the whole quartet. The main material from the finale returns to do battle with this intruder, and they vie to the end of the movement, but the

“motto” theme gets the last word, with an ending that resembles the first movement’s conclusion, only in a more extended and emphatic form.

The second and fourth movements are light-er *scherzo* movements. The second movement is muted, weightless, and fleet, a four-way game of catch on fast-forward. The movement is mainly concerned with rapid-fire counterpoint—the passing around of ideas; but at times it seems as if the music evaporates into pure texture, just a few cirrus clouds scudding about in the sky, before it descends back to the plane of reality. Other striking effects abound: glissandi that smear the canvas, the glassy sound of *ponticello* (playing near the bridge), harmonics and *pizzicati*.

The fourth movement is a close variant of the second; it is possible actually to map one movement onto the other, section by section. Here, however, the feet stay on the ground: this is a charming, somewhat rustic tableau wherein the quartet plays only *pizzicato*. We seem to have stumbled across a village scene where a band of four balalaika players (or perhaps cimbaloms) are entertaining the locals. The strings are often strummed back and forth, guitar-like, and sometimes snapped harshly against the fingerboard: the celebrated “Bartók *pizzicato*.”

The third movement foreshadows, in its atmosphere and role, the same movement in the *Concerto for Orchestra*, still 15 years in the future. This is night music, solitary and mournful. A chord fades in, note by note, at the beginning, and becomes a backdrop for a melody in the cello part, which sings, weeps, and yodels, questing ever upward through three ascending verses. The first violin responds: nervous, improvised, altogether more airborne, a winged creature expressing its own very different frame of mind. Gruffly, the second violin cuts in, having its own say on the G-string, bringing the movement to its point of greatest intensity; and the outer voices effect a kind of return, singing sorrowfully in mirror-image canon. At last, the first violin flutters off into oblivion, and the chord that ushered in the movement fades away again, once more note by note.

Misha Amory

Henry Purcell (1659–1695) Fantasias

Purcell’s Fantasias represent a final hurrah for viol consort music. The ensemble was no longer fashionable at the time of these works, having ceded ground to the instruments of the violin family. It is a great loss in the history of musical performance, as the reedy, plaintive voice of the viols has a poignant flexibility of nuance and the blend of consort instruments offers unparalleled unctuous richness. Often the opening of the chest of viols was an invitation to an evening to music making among friends, convivial and intimate. In spirit and perhaps in timbre, the closest modern institution to the consort is the string quartet, and we believe that a translation of these works into our language is apt, beautiful, and potent. We aim to draw our audience into the parlor, to invite our listeners to consort with us.

Clearly the viol consort ignited Purcell’s heart and imagination, and these pieces are, as the title indicates, filled with fantasy. They both lament and dance, wail and playfully scurry. They seem to explore the boundary between private and public music, now on this side now on that, and do so with the utmost guileless naturalness. The blend of the parts and their confrontations give a visceral thrill. Particularly exciting are the wild dissonances that blossom in the texture, each with a special frisson. At times a pleading dissonance slips into one even more spicy and anguished. In the spirit of a great massage, these harmonies hurt in the most delicious way and give us a sense of the physicality of musical discourse. Perhaps the more modern game that approximates the sense of being part of a viol consort is Twister! Certainly here limbs converse and collide and all involved are intertwined and intimately connected.

Mark Steinberg

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) String Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 74, “The Harp” (1809)

The year 1809 was a difficult one for Vienna and for Beethoven. In May, Napoleon invaded the city with enough firepower to send the residents scurrying and Beethoven into the basement of his brother’s house. The bombardment was close enough that he covered his sensitive ears with pillows to protect them from the concussion of the blasts. On July 29th, he wrote to the publisher Breitkopf und Härtel, “We have passed through a great deal of misery. I tell you that since May 4th, I have brought into the world little that is connected; only here and there a fragment. The whole course of events has affected me body and soul.... What a disturbing, wild life around me; nothing but drums, cannons, men, misery of all sorts.” He bellowed his frustration at a French officer he chanced to meet: “If I were a general and knew as much about strategy as I do about counterpoint, I’d give you fellows something to think about.” Austria’s finances were in a shambles and the annual stipend Beethoven had been promised in February by several noblemen who supported his work was considerably reduced in value by the end of the year, placing him in a precarious pecuniary predicament. As a sturdy tree can root in flinty soil, however, a number of significant musical works grew from these unpromising circumstances—by the end of that year, 1809, Beethoven had completed the Piano Sonatas, Op. 78 and Op. 81a (“Lebewohl”), the Sonata Op. 79, the Op. 77 Piano Fantasy, the “Emperor” Concerto, and the String Quartet in E-flat, Op. 74.

The Op. 74 Quartet, apparently composed during the summer and early autumn of 1809, was dedicated to Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz, who, with Prince Kinsky and Archduke Rudolph, had contracted to provide Beethoven with a generous annual income if he would remain in Vienna and not accept a proffered position in Germany. So confident did Beethoven feel with this turn of events that he proposed marriage to Therese Malfatti,

a teenage pupil of his. Though the deaf, gruff, notoriously untidy, 39-year-old composer was hardly a likely partner for an aristocratic debutante, he was deeply wounded by the family’s rejection of his suit. (The thought of Beethoven as a husband threatens the moorings of one’s presence of mind!) It is the optimism and confidence of that year, however, rather than its disappointment and destruction that are reflected in the E-flat Quartet.

The Quartet opens with a hushed introduction into which is woven a preview of the upcoming principal theme. A quick crescendo leads directly to the fast-tempo main body of the movement, which commences with three ensemble chords followed by the principal subject, a smoothly flowing eighth-note figuration in the second violin upon which is draped a melody with dotted rhythms in the first violin. The *pizzicato arpeggios* heard in the transition and frequently thereafter in the movement suggested the Quartet’s sobriquet: “The Harp.” The second theme is made from long winding scales given by the instruments in imitation. The development section treats chiefly the principal theme, especially its dotted-rhythm motive, before the *pizzicato arpeggios* return to serve as a bridge to a full recapitulation of the exposition’s themes. An extensive coda, with much *pizzicato* writing, closes the movement. The *Adagio* consists of three increasingly elaborate presentations of the hymnal melody given at the outset. The tightly woven part-writing, harmonic daring, and deep stillness of this music look forward to the peerless series of quartets that Beethoven was to undertake a decade later. The third movement is a furious, minor-key *scherzo* grown from the same elemental musical force (and rhythmic motive: dot–dot–dot–dash) that had spawned the Fifth Symphony the year before. A whirlwind trio in flying scalar figures twice intervenes: A (*scherzo*)–B (trio)–A–B–A. The finale is a set of variations on a long theme of short phrases. The Quartet ends with a flurry of unison scales and a kittenish surprise.

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Peter Schauf

Since its inception in 1992, the **Brentano String Quartet** has appeared throughout the world to popular and critical acclaim. Within a few years of its formation, the Quartet garnered the first Cleveland Quartet Award and the Naumburg Chamber Music Award. 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, D.C.; the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam; the Konzerthaus in Vienna; Suntory Hall in Tokyo; and the Sydney Opera House. The Quartet has participated in such summer festivals 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 Takács Quartet.

The Brentano String Quartet provided the central music (Beethoven's Op. 131) for the critically acclaimed independent film *A Late Quartet* (2012). The feature film, directed by Yaron Silberman and starring Philip Seymour Hoffman, Catherine Keener, Christopher Walken, and Mark Ivanir, was screened in

major cities throughout North America, including Toronto, New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.

In addition to performing the entire two-century range of the standard quartet repertoire, the 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.

Among the Quartet's latest collaborations with contemporary composers is a new work by Steven Mackey, *One Red Rose*, which was commissioned by Carnegie Hall, Yellow Barn and the Nasher Center to commemorate 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 which had its premiere in September 2012 (with Christine Brandes, soprano), and a new viola quintet by Felipe Lara (to be performed with violist Hsin-Yun Huang).

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.

In April, 2012 the first of three recordings featuring the late Beethoven quartets was released on Aeon Records. Previous recordings include a disc of Mozart (also on Aeon), and the Op. 71 quartets of Haydn. 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 Adolphe, 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 is named for Antonie Brentano, whom many scholars consider to be Beethoven's "Immortal Beloved," the intended recipient of his famous love confession.

The Brentano String Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists (www.davidroweartists.com) and records for Aeon (distributed by Allegro Media Group). Visit www.brentanoquartet.com.