

Sunday, March 2, 2025, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Brentano String Quartet

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

Evocations of Home

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827) String Quartet in B-flat major,
Op. 18, No. 6 (1800)
Allegro con brio
Adagio ma non troppo
Scherzo: Allegro
“La Malinconia” (Adagio) –
Allegretto quasi Allegro

Lei Liang (b. 1972) *Madrigal Mongolia*, for string quartet
(2024, Bay Area Premiere)
Commissioned by the Spiralis Music Trust
in honor of Chou Wen-chung, ProtoStar Group,
Salt Bay Chamberfest with Richard Replin,
and Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts

INTERMISSION

Johannes BRAHMS (1833-1897) String Quartet No. 3 in B-flat major,
Op. 67 (1875)
Vivace
Andante
Agitato: Allegretto non troppo
Poco Allegretto con Variazioni

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Ludwig van Beethoven
String Quartet in B-flat major,
Op. 18, No. 6

The last of Beethoven's Op. 18 quartets, No. 6 seems especially to affirm his debt to Haydn. Like its companions, this quartet, on the whole, favors wit and surprise over melodiousness. Despite hewing faithfully to Classical forms (at least in the first three movements), the piece recalls the fondness of Haydn for sudden stops, changes of mood, rhythmic elegance, and economy of material.

The first movement is extremely compact, a characteristic that is emphasized by the incredibly fast metronome mark added by Beethoven in later life. The piece explodes out of the gate with a brilliant, arpeggiated melody accompanied by a whirling accompaniment. The second theme may lack the kinetic energy of this opening idea, but makes up for it in terseness, as the whole quartet remains in rhythmic unison throughout its statement. The movement leaves the listener with a feeling that not one note more than necessary was used: no digressions, frills, or codas.

The second movement is also strict in its form, but has the quality of a tender aria, and plays on the most beautiful sonorities of the quartet timbre. Perhaps the most memorable moment of the movement is near the end, when the music slips briefly into a glowing, hushed C-major restatement of music that previously was only heard in minor keys.

The Scherzo third movement is humorously off-balance in its syncopated rhythms, which are omnipresent in the main section; a quicksilver trio serves as contrasting material.

The final movement is immediately arresting. It opens with an extended slow section, operatically entitled "La Malinconia" ("Melancholy"). Something more intense than ordinary melancholy is contained in this wandering music, which interrupts its own glassy flow with painfully stabbing

chords. Resolution comes in the form of the movement's main section; this is a rondo with a spinning, cheerful demeanor, never content to remain in one place for long. It has the quality of being compressed, or abbreviated, by the gravity of the "Malinconia," which makes a late second appearance: there isn't enough room for these two incompatible personalities, and they are each vying for the upper hand. Ultimately the lighter music has the final word, as a brilliant Prestissimo brings the work to a close.

—Misha Amory

Lei Liang
***Madrigal Mongolia*, for string quartet**
(2024, Bay Area Premiere)

Madrigal Mongolia sprang from a musical and spiritual heritage that has a special place in my heart—the music of Inner Mongolia.

I have loved this music since my childhood. One of my family's closest friends, the renowned Mongolian scholar Wulalji visited our home in Beijing frequently. With a sip of alcohol, he would start singing, sometimes continuing late into the night. These personal memories date to the years after the Cultural Revolution, when obnoxiously cheerful propaganda music flooded the airwaves. Yet it was these lonely, long songs that evoked in me a deep sense of longing and awakening.

The Mongols were the world's most feared conquerors, yet the music they sing today is not martial in character. Quite the contrary, they sing of a mother's devotion, friendship, loss of loved ones, and homeland. Their melancholy sentiments are understandable, for the warriors were always far from home. These songs remind us of what it means to be away.

Aren't we all living far away from "home" today?

Madrigal Mongolia was commissioned by the Brentano String Quartet, who worked closely with Professor Chou Wen-chung, who once told me these inspiring

words about the cultural heritage of our home: “In calligraphy, every stroke has emotion. Here, lines become waves, and becomes textures.” *Madrigal Mongolia* was written in memory of him.

—Lei Liang

Johannes Brahms

String Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 67

In the summer of 1875, the 42-year-old Brahms was summering in the beautiful German town of Ziegelhausen, and trying to avoid working on his special bugbear, the First Symphony. Instead, he wrote quite a lot of other beautiful music, including his Third String Quartet, all of which he dismissed in a letter to a friend as “trifles,” a way to put off the serious work that lay ahead. In any event, he didn’t procrastinate for long, as the symphony was published and premiered the following year; and the Third Quartet, according to Joseph Joachim, was later to become his favorite of the three quartets.

While this quartet may have been a “trifle” to its composer, there is nothing trivial about it—or its predecessors—for string quartets who undertake to play it. It is common knowledge to performers of Brahms’ chamber music that the sextets, and many quintets, that he wrote are kinder to their performers than the string quartets. The sound palette of Brahms’ musical imagination was of a peculiar richness and depth, to the point that five or six performers provided the right natural sonority, but four would find themselves just that much more taxed, their resources that much more stretched. This difference works its way into the skin of the quartets, making them more interestingly effortful and craggy, subtly altering their essence. As one listens to this music, one senses a tension between the large sound-concept and the slightly smaller box that it has been fit into, which places its own stamp on the piece, independent of the musical content itself.

Brahms’ Third Quartet truly sounds like the work of a man on his summer holiday. Especially in its outer movements there is a feeling of the countryside, of sunshine. The first movement has strong ties to the same movement of Mozart’s *Hunt* Quartet. Aside from sharing its key and its meter—fairly superficial traits—the Brahms evokes the atmosphere of the hunt from the very opening, imitating hunting horns perhaps even more faithfully than Mozart’s music. In many of its most important melodies and motifs it specifically recalls similar material from the earlier piece. And, perhaps most importantly, there seems a conscious effort at simplicity of harmony and texture in many sections, from a composer who, like Mozart, was known for music that was often sophisticated, intricate, and dark. In the main melody at the opening, Brahms uses the simplest call-and-response, a quiet playful idea that is trumpeted back immediately *forte*; this exchange continues, evoking a child’s game of monkey see, monkey do, music rare and disarming in its artlessness. Much later we hear the other main idea of the movement, a basic skipping up and down a few steps of a major scale, again an evocation of child’s play, written intentionally to be rhythmically and harmonically as simple as possible. This is not to say that the movement is devoid of darker or more complicated music—there is quite a lot of shadow, as well as plenty of involved counterpoint—but at the movement’s close we are left with a recollection of sunny, care-free laughter, a conscious setting-aside of worry and convulsion.

The second movement is one of the most beautiful and extraordinary slow movements Brahms ever wrote (despite a crowded field of contenders). A hushed unison opening branches out into harmony, introducing a tender and reaching aria for the first violin. Again we are struck by the simplicity of the rhythm in this melody (al-

though the harmonic underpinnings are now richer and more chromatic, more typically Brahmsian); perhaps the singer is young, sweetly naive, discovering first love. The contrasting middle section presents a fiercer, prouder idea in dotted rhythms, which alternates with a smoother, more mysterious choral response; this world is plural, the many voices in concert rather than the single, private one. From here, the first violin embarks on a wandering fantasy of 16th notes, meeting a partner (the second violin) with whom he conducts a difficult, searching conversation. Ultimately the music reaches an anguished climax, after which we are eased into a return of the opening song—this time shared between the cello and first violin, an easier, more graceful exchange than the earlier one. An expressive coda returns to the arching gesture that opened the movement, exploring it more fervently, and reaches another passionate climax before closing at last with a prayerful cadence.

The third movement is a different story: troubled, elusive, and restless, yet graceful too, evoking an unnameable dance. Now the viola is the hero, singing out boldly while the other instruments, muted, band together in shadowy support. The “*Agitato*” in the movement’s title is felt rhythmically—in the persistent, obsessive rhythms of the opening idea, in the tendency towards hemiola (grouping beats in twos against the movement’s triple meter), and in moments that halt and jar ill-fittingly. But there is also a latent *agitato* feel in the harmony of the music, which wanders, changes key constantly, and shades towards minor even in major-key passages. The first violin often steps forward, a counterpart to the viola, sometimes agreeing with him, sometimes interrogating and confronting him, provid-

ing a kind of balance without which the music might tilt dangerously out of control. A shorter middle trio section provides a lighter, more tightly structured contrast: at first the three muted instruments play a fragmented, graceful tune, then the viola enters and sings a mournful melody against its repetition. After the return of the main section, and the climax which it attains a second time, a strangely calm coda follows, bringing a disconsolate almost-peace, an uneasy conclusion to the movement.

With the finale, the mood of the piece returns to the geniality of the opening movement, though not at first matching its energy. Here we have a set of variations, which recalls the finale of Beethoven’s *Harp* Quartet so strongly that it seems like an homage of sorts. As with the Beethoven, the movement is a lighter companion to the three more intense preceding ones. Both the Beethoven and the Brahms feature a quite short, slightly irregular theme in two repeated sections, charmingly laconic, playing it close to the vest. The two movements also share many details: a variation where the cello plays repeated triplet notes under legato duple rhythms in the other instruments, an early variation featuring the viola, and a fantasy-like coda. However, the Brahms movement deviates from the script when, after several variations have gone by, the music from the first movement stages a kind of invasion, crashing in and assuming command of the proceedings for awhile. But the variation structure persists, despite the intrusion, and ultimately we perceive that the invading forces are subsumed in the landscape of the music, though they never disappear entirely. Late in the coda, the storyline flags, gently losing momentum and finally coming to a near-halt, before the movement is swept to a close in one joyous flourish.

—Misha Amory

With a career spanning more than three decades, the **Brentano String Quartet** has appeared throughout the world to popular and critical acclaim. The *New York Times* extols its “luxuriously warm sound [and] yearning lyricism; and the *Times* (London) hails the ensemble’s “wonderful, selfless music-making.” Known for its unique sensibility, probing interpretive style, and original programming, the quartet has performed across five continents in the world’s most prestigious venues and festivals, thus establishing itself as one of the world’s preeminent ensembles.

Dedicated and highly sought after as educators, the members of the quartet have served as Artists-in-Residence at the Yale School of Music for the past decade. They also lead the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival and appear regularly at the Taos School of Music. Previously, the quartet served for 15 years as Ensemble in Residence at Princeton University.

During the 2024–25 concert season, the quartet premieres a program called *Evocations of Home*, featuring a new work by Lei Liang in honor of the late composer Chou Wen-chung. During spring 2025, the group will perform Haydn’s complete Op. 33 quartets at New York’s Carnegie Hall and in several other US cities. Other recent projects include *Dido Reimagined*, a monodrama for quartet and voice with soprano Dawn Upshaw, composed by Pulitzer-winning composer Melinda Wagner and librettist Stephanie Fleischmann, as well as a viola

quintet, *Heart Speaks to Heart*, by composer James MacMillan.

Formed in 1992, the Brentano String Quartet has received numerous accolades, including, in 1995, the prestigious Naumburg and Cleveland Quartet Awards. The members have been privileged to collaborate with such artists as soprano Jessye Norman and mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, as well as pianists Mitsuko Uchida and Jonathan Biss. The quartet has commissioned works from some of the most important composers of our time, including Bruce Adolphe, Matthew Aucoin, Gabriela Frank, Stephen Hartke, Vijay Iyer, Steven Mackey, and Charles Wuorinen.

The quartet’s notable recordings include Beethoven’s Quartet, Op. 131 (Aeon), which was featured in the 2012 film *A Late Quartet*, starring Philip Seymour Hoffman and Christopher Walken, and a 2017 live album with Joyce DiDonato, *Into the Fire—Live from Wigmore Hall* (Warner.) The ensemble’s most recent release features the K. 428 and K. 465 (*Dissonance*) quartets of Mozart for the Azica label.

The Brentano String 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.

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