

The Brentano String Quartet

Mark Steinberg, violin

Serena Canin, violin

Misha Amory, viola

Nina Lee, cello

Guest Artist Series

Katzin Concert Hall | Friday, October 28, 2011 | 7:30 PM

Program

String Quartet in F-Major, Op. 135

Ludwig van Beethoven

Allegretto

1770-1827

Vivace

Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo (Variations)

'The difficult resolution'-Grave, ma non troppo tratto

('Must it be?')-Allegro ('It must be! It must be!')

*****Intermission*****

String Quartet in A-minor, Op. 132

Ludwig van Beethoven

Assai sostenuto-Allegro

1770-1827

Allegro ma non tanto

Molto adagio-Andante

Alla Marcia, assai vivace-Allegro appassionato

The Brentano String Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists

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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 Quartet 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. 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. The Quartet has been invited to collaborate and perform with the competitors in the renowned Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in 2013.

The Brentano Quartet 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 also 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. 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. A forthcoming release on Aeon will feature the Beethoven Quartets Op. 127 and 131.

The Brentano Quartet became the first Resident Quartet at Princeton University in 1999. 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.

Revised August, 2011. Please discard all previously dated bio material.



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Beethoven: String Quartet in F-Major, Op. 135

The String Quartet in F, opus 135, was the last complete work Beethoven composed, only a few months before his death in March 1827. It is traditionally grouped together with his other late quartets, opp. 127, 130, 131, 132 and the *Grosse Fuge*; but it's hard not to wonder what Beethoven would have thought of that grouping. Certainly opus 135 is the black sheep of this bunch. Where the other quartets are monumental in scale, sprawling in their expressive reach and scope, and often searching for a new formal basis for the quartet genre altogether, opus 135 stands apart: tightly reasoned, having an airy and transparent texture, playful and teasing in so many places, it is the work of a composer who seems to have suddenly attained some new, simple truth after miles of struggle. It is more similar in length and structure to his early opus 18 quartets than to the later ones, and yet it could not be mistaken for an opus 18 quartet: it is a greater and deeper achievement than those quartets, yet somehow less ambitious, less reaching, at the same time.

The first movement is as spare in texture as any quartet movement Beethoven ever wrote. It begins with a four-note question in the viola, colored with a mock-serious minor note in the cello; the first violin answers with a giggling echo. Right away the composer is signalling that here he will have nothing to do with the old, earnest questions of existence or fate; this is to be put aside, at least for the time being. What ensues is a genial, often Haydn-esque Allegretto in 2/4 time, which ambles along, four friends sharing a melody or two between them, breaking it into fragments so that everybody gets a piece. The movement is a typical sonata form, with all the responsible sections of exposition, development and recapitulation; but it feels more like an airy distillation of that form, with its spareness, its fragmentation, and its economy of means. It is music that speaks to us about the process of creating, a blueprint where we see all the parts laid out before our eyes, and are given a glimpse inside Beethoven's mind as he fits them together.

The second movement is a quicksilver scherzo. The parts at the beginning stage a rhythmic comic act, ill-fitting and awkward, everyone sitting on the wrong beat, then suddenly falling heavily onto a unison E-flat that is also off the beat, stuck in the wrong meter for awhile before righting itself (sort of). This section is abruptly succeeded by a more brilliant one featuring a set of rapid upward scales in the first violin, playful and yet tense and expectant. Then an extraordinary eruption occurs, a fortissimo section where the lower instruments are stuck in an infinite whirling loop while the first violin, berserk, goes off on an impossible tangent. This eventually spirals down to a quiet unison, where, for a brief instant one hears the four simple pitches that the movement is based on. Finally the opening section returns in all its bumptiousness.

The third movement: a dark hymn, a whispered prayer. In early sketches, Beethoven designated it "Süsser Ruhegesang oder Friedengesang", a sweet song of calm or peace. It is one of the half-dozen slow movements that stand at the pinnacle of his late-period achievement, and it serves as the expressive center of gravity for this quartet. In fact it is a theme with four variations, but



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they unfold in such a continuous fashion that this is not immediately obvious. Set in D-flat major, it feels a universe away from the sunny F major key of the rest of the quartet; we have been pulled out of the public eye and find ourselves hearing an intimate confession. The theme is in the lowest register for all four instruments, husky and sorrowing. The first variation lifts us higher up, visiting some painful harmonic moments, but maintaining much of the tone of the original. In the second variation, we are taken to the minor key; the flowing rhythms of the earlier music are lost, and replaced with stony, halting steps. This is one possible answer to the prayer, an unthinkable rejection, a bereft state. Some measure of relief comes in the final two variations, as we return to the major, and the cello reassuringly takes the melody. The last variation is the most extraordinary part of the movement: the first violin, winged, hints at the theme in gentle, gasping rhythms, while the other instruments describe simple upward arpeggios. It is a movement that overflows with forgiveness and love, but is also full of great sadness.

The final movement bears a strange inscription: “Der schwer gefasste Entschluss”, or “The Difficult Resolution.” The slow introduction, which features a rising minor-key question in the lower instruments, is marked “Muss es sein” -- must it be? Here we have the Beethoven who poses difficult questions, literally. This brief introduction reaches an anguished climax before subsiding. Then follows the main Allegro section, joyful and affirmative, marked “Es muss sein!” -- it must be! Two-thirds of this movement then unroll with barely a cloud on the horizon. All is happiness, high jinks, carefree melody, playfulness. It is all the more shocking when the minor-key introductory question -- muss es sein -- returns gigantically, terrifyingly, and almost without warning. It is one final struggle; and this time, it appears, the beast is tamed, the doubts laid to rest. The music dances away through the coda, teasing, pianissimo, and is crowned by one final boisterous affirmation.

There has been endless debate about just what this “difficult resolution” was, and many theories have been advanced. Is it about facing and accepting death? Is it another weighty philosophical question? Is it the laundry bill that has to be paid? Beethoven’s note to his publisher hints that it might simply be the necessity of finishing the composition, and bidding farewell to a favorite genre: “Here, my dear friend, is my last quartet. It will be the last; and indeed it has given me much trouble. For I could not bring myself to compose the last movement. But as your letters were reminding me of it, in the end I decided to compose it. And that is the reason why I have written the motto: “The difficult resolution--Must it be?--It must be, it must be!”

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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



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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



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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.

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