

**THE BRENTANO STRING QUARTET (USA)**

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2019 • 8PM  
THE CLARICE SMITH PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

**ABOUT THE PROGRAM****Quartet in E flat major, K. 428****Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

*Note written by Misha Amory*

When I was younger I aspired to be a serious composer. It seemed to me that a good approach to composing would involve choosing one of the received forms – sonata allegro form, for example – and, having devised a couple of striking melodic ideas, fit them into that form and follow the rules for getting from one structural point to the next, while maybe, I don't know, throwing in two or three unexpected twists and turns along the way.

Studying the music of great composers, I often felt that I could detect a similar creative system in use, where, on a very good day, I could imagine myself coming up with something nearly that good using my assembly method. But, then there was music which seemed to defy this logic, where I was unable to imagine a method that would summon this music into being. Where my approach to writing music was like taking a boxy, pre-fab house, cutting some doorways between the rooms and populating the rooms with furniture and things, this other music evoked the contemplation of lovely objects, the exploration of unknown passageways and then, eventually, a realisation that the form itself, an airy mansion that contained these things, had risen up around us, called into being by its contents.

Very often, the composer of that music turned out to be Mozart. The first movement of his E flat Quartet, K. 428, is a perfect example of it. Why should he attempt to construct his opening theme out of ungainly, awkward intervals, using nine of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale in the process? And how can that ill-advised approach lead him, as a result, to a melody so full of grace and equipoise? Again, how did he think of taking the last two notes of this melody, a falling step, and expand it gradually to four falling steps, then to six, creating in effect a magic carpet that transports the music joyously to its next key area? Having reached that new key area, B flat major, what inspired him to write a second theme that, instead of consolidating B flat major as it's supposed to do, spends its time flirting with three other keys? Or again, in the middle, development section of the movement, by what alchemy did he excise the rather elegant opening flourish of that second theme, and repurpose it as a kind of nefarious muttering in a minor key, beset by phantasmagorical triplet arpeggios that come from who knows where?

In movements like this one, the sonata form seems not like an uncomfortable suit of clothes into which the complaining composition must fit, but something bespoke: the form is called into being by the substance. Mozart doesn't seek to satisfy the form, but rather to justify its very existence, to explain with his music why it is beautiful and needful.

Likewise with the slow movement. On the one hand it lives in a binary-form “house,” one which gives it a nominal definition and direction; on the other hand, the gentle, melancholy inhabitant of that house takes no particular notice of its surroundings as it wanders from chamber to chamber. Again, we have to ask the unanswerable questions. How do the contents of the opening — awkward contours, grinding chromaticism, almost bitter dissonance — become endowed, in this composer’s hands, with such luminosity? And how did Mozart, that greatest of melodists, choose to write this music, which contains no melody that can be articulated as such? Rather, we are preoccupied here with shadowy chromatic motion, with shifting planes of chordal progressions like the surfaces of a great Abstract painting, out of which the melodic element seems always about to be born, but in the end remains a thing alluded to, not revealed.

The E flat Quartet was one of six quartets that Mozart dedicated in a group to his great contemporary, Joseph Haydn, and the Minuet movement is the moment of frankest homage to the older composer. The affect of the main section lies close to the particular flavor of Haydn’s humor and spirit, opening with a guffawing figure, and tending to make jokes out of stuttering motions, as well as passages that get stuck and go around in circles before finding their way out again. By contrast, the central Trio section is pure Mozart. Written in a nearby minor key, and set against brooding bass pedal points, it presents a drifting, mesmeric tableau containing classically Mozartean paradoxes: grace by dint of asymmetry, consolation through the expression of sadness.

The finale starts with a children’s tease: a few little fillips of tunefulness, wrapped up innocently enough, and then abruptly interrupted by a rambunctious blizzard of activity, tearing all over the map. The teasing continues in the next passages, as the moment of the outbreak shifts, becomes unpredictable — a game of musical “gotcha.” Later melodies are graver, sweeter; it is ever Mozart’s way, in his chamber music as in his operas, to get us chuckling, and then to transfix us with a moment whose tenderness is all the more affecting because it came out of nowhere. At the end of the movement, when the children’s tease returns for the last time, it is adorned with a graceful upper melody, a kind of birdsong, which might seek to forgive or relax the earlier fakery. However, the horseplay persists right up to the end, as the music dwindles almost to a pinpoint before clobbering us with four final, triumphal chords.

### **String Quartet in F minor, Op. 96**

**Ludwig van Beethoven**

*Note written by Mark Steinberg*

The music from Beethoven’s middle period of creativity, sometimes known as the “heroic” period, is justly beloved. A keen observer and portrayer of our pains and foibles, our struggles and desires, Beethoven in this period displays our capacity for strength and dignity. He depicts our power to restore order and justice in the face of chaos and tyranny, to assert the potent human will, to triumph. He speaks to us of the importance of our place in the grand scheme of things, of a privileged point of reference. He tells us that we matter, that we can enjoy responsibility for the world in which we find ourselves. For Beethoven in this period our inner states are reflected in the truth of the outer world. The middle period works are works of Ego, works that make us feel vibrantly alive and embodied.

Although it is most often classified as one of the middle period quartets, the Quartet in F minor, Op. 95, is philosophically cut from another cloth, a prescient gateway to the late style. This is the only one of his quartets with a nickname given by the composer: the “serioso.” Indeed it wrestles with serious issues; for most of its compressed length it is a rather tortured piece. But Beethoven is not one to represent suffering without catharsis. Here that catharsis seems born of eternal, omnipresent freedom recognized, rather than freedom hard-won.

Many have been puzzled by the ending of this work. Not dissimilarly many have been perplexed by Chekhov's description of his four great plays as comedies, with their vivid depiction of heartbreak and difficulty, of souls estranged and asphyxiated. Perhaps Chekhov saw them thus through recognition of a greater peace and purpose in the unfurling progression of historical time, that which renders all human concerns miniature and illusory. Beethoven's F minor quartet concerns itself predominantly with a sense of oppression; often the music is immured, airless. Visions of escape, resistance and control over Fate present themselves, but in the end understanding comes from elsewhere.

The material of the piece is tightly coiled, often as if trapped in a cage: figures dart upwards only to collapse down on themselves, test foundations by digging downwards only to claw their way back up. The opening gesture of the first movement does both, then stops dead in its tracks as if to assess the situation. The phrase that answers throws itself against the bars of its cage, desperate to escape, to no avail. When there are intimations of escape in the movement the music is as if wrested from its foundations by an outside hand into the vulnerable realm of untethered vision, the far realm of hope and dreams. These moments of being artificially lifted out of the plane of earthly existence all revert to brutal actuality, and by its end the first movement exhausts itself railing against inevitability, evaporating.

Throughout the work the most basic functions of melodic direction upward and downward become powerful archetypes, reaching, plummeting. The second movement introduces itself with a hesitant echo of the first movement's opening, tentatively feeling its way downwards with a short upward turn which, instead of closing the loop as in the initial statement in the first movement, leaves the door ajar. The Stygian opacity of the first movement has given way to shadow, and through the shadow some moonbeam coolly penetrates, softly radiant, the phrase drifting upwards. This music in D Major replicates the same key relationship in Beethoven's predominantly F minor music for *Egmont*. In that work the D Major material represents Liberty appearing as a vision to the imprisoned Egmont. (I am indebted to an essay by Seow-Chin Ong for this insight.) This is followed by a rather extraordinary single note exchange between the inner voices, each calling out across a chasm, the other perpetually beyond reach. These notes are pulled from the opening cello gesture, now stripped of its will to explore further. It is reminiscent of a Beckett scene, characters suffering doubts in parallel, unable to connect. This ushers in a fugal section whose subject, after an initial leap up, spirals inevitably downward. The voices again do not so much empathize and discuss as experience their loneliness side by side. The movement ends with the calls across the chasm, again leaving the door ajar.

What enters is a wrathful form of the downward spiral of the fugue subject from the second movement: jagged, galloping downhill, inexorable. Jovian thunderbolts fly. But as in the first movement, some outside force comes to lift the music away, again a prisoner's vision, this music ever floating upwards. The two ideas alternate, but the energy of the movement's ending is that of the guillotine.

This leads to the darkest moment of the piece, the opening of the last movement. It would not be out of place to assign this wrenching music to one of the Seven Last Words on the Cross: "Father, father, why hast thou forsaken me?" And the first two such questions confront silence. Bleakness gives way to anxiety and broken sighs throughout the main section of the movement, and again figures reach up with no stability only to fall back on themselves. And then, when the music has all but vanished, there is the coda.

In his book *A Journey in Ladakh: Encounters with Buddhism*, Andrew Harvey writes "Buddhism is, in fact, essentially "comic," in the highest, philosophical sense...[its] vision is in the deepest sense comic because it denies any final significance to individual striving or tragic awareness, any ultimate importance to the agonies and vicissitudes of the Ego." So Beethoven seems to feel here. The music flutters, ascends, evinces a sort of liberated joy. Some commentators have seen this as a reflection of the ideas of political liberation which were much in the air and certainly much in Beethoven's consciousness at that time. Perhaps. But my

own reaction to this extraordinary peroration is that it may be something different from the exultation of victory; it is instead a leave-taking from the Ego's tribulations. Here is awareness of some greater space, a space that holds and allows the suffering without succumbing to it. The relationship of this coda to the rest of the piece is that of the resurrection to the crucifixion. All is let go and rises.

### **String Quartet No. 2 in A minor, Op. 13**

**Felix Mendelssohn**

*Note written by Misha Amory*

Anyone who wishes to make the case that Felix Mendelssohn is Western music's "Greatest Teenaged Genius" has a substantial body of compositions to draw on as evidence. Probably the most celebrated of these are the Octet and the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, written at 16 and 17 years old, respectively. If one were to choose one more "greatest" work from Mendelssohn's teenaged years, it would almost certainly be the Op. 13 String Quartet, the astonishing product of an 18-year-old.

This quartet is an unquestioned masterpiece in its own right. It has an immense narrative and dramatic arc, a wide spectrum of compelling characters and moods and impeccable compositional craftsmanship. However, the work has importance in a more special sense, because it depicts the composer in a parley with Beethoven, a composer who cast his shadow over generations of composers who followed him.

Beethoven died in March 1827, and Mendelssohn wrote Op. 13 just a few months later. His quartet is virtually a homage to the older composer's quartet writing, particularly his Op. 95 and Op. 132 quartets. The first movement patterns itself after Op. 132's first movement: an Allegro that explodes out of the slow opening in a flurry of 16th notes, a main melody that is airborne, seeming to pose restless questions that have no answers, an overall trajectory that alternates between turbulence and grace without ever finding true repose. Like Op. 132, Mendelssohn's work is full of operatic fancy, most obviously at the opening of the finale, where he imitates Op. 132's passionate first-violin recitative over shuddering tremolandi. And at the center of Mendelssohn's lovely slow movement, just as in the slow movement of Beethoven's Op. 95 quartet, there is a plaintive idea that starts in the viola and is taken up by each of the other voices in turn, a melancholy fugue that gradually increases in complexity and intensity.

The Beethoven-Mendelssohn bond that exists in this quartet is so well known that it is easy for us to miss the extraordinary part of it, which is that in 1827 most of the world was flummoxed by Beethoven's late style, either professing bewilderment or else dismissing the composer as having gone off the rails. But, the 18-year-old kid from Berlin not only recognized the importance of this music, he powerfully subsumed it and reflected it back in his own language. It is striking that these "Beethoven moments," when we hear them in Mendelssohn's piece, sound almost like quotations, and yet they are pure Mendelssohn and belong completely to the younger composer's original creative vision.

Despite the Beethovenian preoccupation, the quartet can also be seen as part of the continuum of Mendelssohn's own composerly evolution, deeply connected to his other youthful efforts. A superficial example of this is the third movement, a quaint and playful scherzo. The outer sections, which feature a poised, charming melody over a strummed accompaniment, recall powerfully the world of the *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* from one year earlier — elfin, peculiar, not quite of this world. The quicksilver inner section takes to the air with fluttering wings; whoever we thought we saw has disappeared, leaving a trace of laughter behind.

But, the more interesting connection involves a song that Mendelssohn wrote just short time before, named *Frage* (Question). This song is directly quoted in the quartet, first in the opening section of the first movement and again at the very end of the piece. The “question” in the song is as follows:

Is it true?  
Is it true that over there in the leafy walkway,  
you wait for me constantly by the vine-covered wall?  
And that you ask for news of me from the moonlight and the little stars?

When this music is quoted at the opening, we get only the three syllables of the question — “is it true?” The adolescent hope and uncertainty of this question provide the dramatic tension that drives the entire work, and only at the very end do we hear the music that accompanies the answer in the song: “What I feel, only she grasps — she who feels with me and stays ever faithful to me.” From this perspective the piece becomes a musical evocation of a young person in turmoil, grappling with the anxieties of his time of life and seeking to resolve them. Strikingly, when the answer arrives at the piece’s conclusion, the tempo loosens forward into a gently flowing tempo, and the completeness of the quoted answer, in contrast with the inarticulate, fragmented question, has a deeply reassuring effect. Again returning to Beethoven’s Op. 132, it is tempting to compare the psychological import of the *Heilige Dankgesang* (the “holy song of thanks” that is Beethoven’s slow movement) with the end of Mendelssohn’s quartet. Both are evocations of a state of mind after a crisis has passed. Beethoven, the aging agnostic, is expressing thanks to a deity that he cannot even name with any certainty; he does this with music that spirals ever outwards, towards ever greater richness and complexity, filled with awe. The music does not reach a firm conclusion, of necessity, as it is engaging with something infinite. Mendelssohn, still half a child, is describing the resolution of a crisis of youthful love, and the beauty of his music rests on feelings of utter security: being sure of his beloved, coming home after a long and turbulent journey of the soul, being enfolded, consoled. It is a common enough mindset for someone so young; the ability to express it so transcendently is anything but.

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Mark Steinberg, violin  
Serena Canin, violin  
Misha Amory, viola  
Nina 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.”

Since 2014, the Brentano Quartet has served as Artists in Residence at Yale University. Formerly, The Quartet served as the collaborative ensemble for the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition and were Artists in Residence at Princeton University for many years.

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 UK with the Royal Philharmonic Award for Most Outstanding Debut.

In addition to their interest in performing very old music, the Brentano Quartet frequently collaborates with contemporary composers. Recent commissions include a piano quintet by Vijay Iyer, a work by Eric Moe (with Christine Brandes, soprano) and a viola quintet by Felipe Lara (performed with violist Hsin-Yun

Huang). In 2012, the Quartet provided the central music (Beethoven Op. 131) for the critically-acclaimed independent film *A Late Quartet*.

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 the late soprano Jessye Norman and pianists Richard Goode, Jonathan Biss and 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.