DAVID ROWE
ARTISTS

BRENTANO QUARTET

This press book contains (in order):

- Artist bio
- Press excerpts
- Discography
- Full reviews (beginning with the most recent)
- Feature articles

NOTES: When searching for suitable pull-quotes, be sure to check through the "Full reviews" section. The "Press excerpts" are not comprehensive, and do not necessarily display the best selections.

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The Brentano String Quartet

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."

Within a few years of its formation, the Quartet garnered the first Cleveland Quartet Award and the Naumburg Chamber Music Award and was also honored in the U.K. with the Royal Philharmonic Award for Most Outstanding Debut. Since then, the Quartet has concertized widely, performing in the world's most prestigious venues, including Carnegie 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.

In addition to performing the entire two-century range of the standard quartet repertoire, the Brentano Quartet maintains a strong interest in contemporary music, and has commissioned many new works. Their latest project, a monodrama for quartet and voice called "Dido Reimagined," was composed by Pulitzer-winning composer Melinda Wagner and librettist Stephanie Fleischmann, and will premiere in spring 2021 with soprano Dawn Upshaw. Other recent and upcoming commissions include the composers Matthew Aucoin, Lei Liang, Vijay Iyer, James Macmillan, and a cello quintet by Steven Mackey (with Wilhelmina Smith, cello.)

The Brentano 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. They have also been privileged to collaborate with such artists as soprano Jessye Norman, mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, and pianists Richard Goode, Jonathan Biss, and Mitsuko Uchida. The Quartet has recorded works by Mozart and Schubert for Azica Records, and all of Beethoven's late Quartets for the Aeon label. In 2012, they provided the central music (Beethoven Opus 131) for the critically-acclaimed independent film *A Late Quartet*.

Since 2014, the Brentano Quartet has served as Artists-in-Residence at the Yale School of Music. They were formerly the Ensemble-in-Residence at Princeton University, and were twice invited to be the collaborative ensemble for the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition.

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.

2020-21 season. Please discard previous or undated materials.

Press Excerpts—Brentano Quartet

(NOTE: When searching for suitable pull-quotes, be sure to check through the "Full reviews" section. The "Press excerpts" are not comprehensive, and do not necessarily display the best selections.)

"…fiercely intelligent and expressively pristine." --*New Yorker*

"Exhilarating...this intensely physical quartet is defined by passion."

"The Brentano produced a luxuriously warm sound, yearning lyricism and a palpable frisson of excitement."

"Their gorgeous sound seemed to float and hover blissfully above the stage."

"The Brentano gave a gripping performance."

--*New York Times*

"Balance and intonation reach an almost unearthly level of perfection, yet there's nothing inhuman about these American musicians. And their intimate embrace is marvellous: it's as though each player is inhabiting each others' skin…a splendid quartet."
--*The Times (London)*

"A performance such as this, which combines grandeur of utterance with meticulous attention to dynamics and rhythmic vivacity, is the sort of which legendary chamber music experiences are made….Among younger American quartets, the Brentano here claimed pride of place."
--*Financial Times (London)*

"Perfection may be an impossible goal in art, as in life, but the Brentano comes close….The performance was supple and sweeping…a collaboration of intense cohesion, which allowed the music to soar and sing as if it were being performed for the first time."
--*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"Playing on a different level...seemingly infallible instincts for finding the center of gravity in every phrase and musical gesture."

"The overall effect wasn't that the group was playing music, but releasing it."
--*Philadelphia Inquirer*

"A hair-raising level of focus and intensity...Whew!"
--*Toronto Star*

"Schubert's Quartet [Death and the Maiden] put the Brentano's pure, searching art on high display, and also showed what risks this group is willing to take….What a fabulous group."
--*Globe and Mail (Toronto)*

"Astonishing…this was some of the most sophisticated ensemble playing I can remember."
--*Dallas Morning News*

"[A] remarkable capacity for magical ensemble playing…effervescent."
--*The Washington Post*

“This quartet does not flaunt with opulent sounds, but turns out to be an exponent of a highly filigree structural fabric. Haydn’s humour was therefore dry, with the cantilena in the Adagio elegantly sung out. This restrained elegance, paired with the strength of disposition for further movement perspectives and the precise understanding of roles in the tapestry of sound, made Debussy’s String Quartet into an “artistically patterned carpet of wondrous colourfulness” (Dukas). The fact that it is possible to do wonderful justice to Beethoven without expressionistic vehemence, but instead within a spirit of complexly layered sound intensities and rhythmic responsiveness, was celebrated by the audience.”

--*Sueddeutsche Zeitung, Munich, Germany*

"Spectacular…Superbly balanced…Sublime."

--*The Washington Post*

“The glittering clarity of the Brentano’s sound was intoxicating....a revelatory performance.”

--*The Strad*

“The Brentano String Quartet...is something special….
Their music making is private, delicate and fresh, but by its very intimacy and importance it seizes attention.”

--*The New York Times*

“As usual with this ensemble, the performances were full of life….They seem to be listening to the same heartbeat.”

--*The New York Times*

“Such was their ferocity on Saturday night that the instruments almost burst into flames….Make no mistake: the Brentanos are a magnificent string quartet….This was wonderful, selfless music making.”

--*The Times (London)*

“Hair-raising....an ensemble of exceptional insight and communicative gifts.”

--*The Daily Telegraph (London)*

“Brilliant, virtuosic, and still mellow, its members perfectly meshed in sound while retaining their individual personalities—the Brentano String Quartet....must be one of the great musical hopes of a field overcrowded with contenders….
The [players] made every utterance sing and every phrase connect within the total.”

--*Los Angeles Times*

“The agile, wiry intelligence of their playing, in a constant state of alert, was every bit as good as promised. They followed with as momentous a performance of Beethoven’s Op. 130 quartet as I’ve ever heard live...passionate, uninhibited and spell-binding.”

--*The Independent (London)*

“The concert made it clear that these players could well be the best of the latest generation. Their level of individual technique was superb, while musical dialog necessary for rich chamber music was evident from first to last.”

--*Philadelphia Inquirer*

“The quartet is evidently interested in the magical worlds created when music is allowed to take its course. Whereas Schubert’s Quartettsatz lives from the remarkably consistent equality of voices, the first movement from Debussy is more of a shimming carpet of sound than a gesture articulated down to the last detail. The fact that they also master this is demonstrated by them in the second and fourth movements. The Andantino, however, opens up an entirely different world: a world of light, weightlessness, of infinite tenderness.”

--*Mainpost, Germany*

Brentano Quartet – Discography

BEETHOVEN: The Late String Quartets Op. 127 & Op. 131 Aeon AECD 1110

MOZART: Quartet K 464 and Quintet K 593 Aeon AECD 0747
(distributed in North America by Allegro Music)

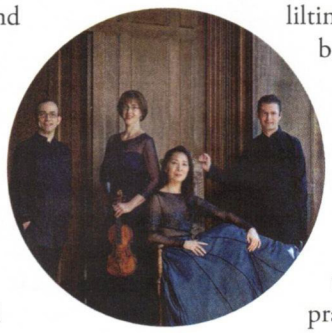
theStrad
ESSENTIAL READING FOR THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

BRENTANO QUARTET

ZANKEL HALL, CARNEGIE HALL 6 NOVEMBER 2019

Mozart's quirky String Quartet in E flat major K428 was brought to life by the Brentano Quartet (*below*), playing with tremendous love, wit and charm. I appreciated the leading from the cello in the Allegro non troppo and the way the quartet created a spacious sense of time. In the Andante con moto, they took Mozart's winding, chromatic line and bestowed it with extraordinary grace and elegance, and time seemed to expand and stand still. The following movement was imbued with jovial, almost naive youthfulness in the crisp articulation, of left hand as well as bow, and the Allegro vivace sparkled with poise and playfulness.

Composer Matthew Aucoin (b.1990) gave an articulate and helpful introduction to the New York premiere of his String Quartet (2019), a piece inspired by the idea of attention (a lack of it; obsessive, destructive attention; a meditative focus). The Brentano's utter commitment to the piece was impressive and they gave a compelling performance, drawing the audience into the distracted focus of the first movement which was created by repetitions and jarring discordant harmonies. The final movement opened with harmonics which gave way to lilting, syncopated chords that ran beneath a beautifully played cello solo. This blossomed into a tender and very moving viola-and-cello duet before the violins took over the melody.



Ravel's String Quartet finished the programme, and there's little else to say except to express tremendous praise. The Brentano played with pristine intonation and just the right amount of intensity, and their playing of the melodies was absolutely beautiful. The Très lent was exceptional. Never afraid to take risks, first violinist Mark Steinberg played with a whisper-soft *piano*, and yet there was still room for texture beneath his lines: how is it that he plays with such tenderness, so softly, and yet with such pristine articulation? The final movement was packed with turbulent energy but never at the expense of melodic clarity or rhythmic integrity.

LEAH HOLLINGSWORTH

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the Strad

JUNE 2019

"My best advice is never to pass up an opportunity to hear the Brentano Quartet."

BRENTANO QUARTET

KAUFFMANN CONCERT HALL, 92Y 9 MARCH 2019

My best concert advice is never to pass up an opportunity to hear the Brentano Quartet. The New York premiere of Martin Bresnick's String Quartet no. 4 'The Planet on the Table' (2018) opened the evening, providing a 'musical meditation on [a Wallace Stevens poem], on the transformational value of art, on the power of the creative act', according to first violinist Mark Steinberg.

The Brentano Quartet has the ability to captivate the ear, and the intensity and total commitment with which the players approached this work was no exception. Cellist Nina Lee played tremendously in the second movement-- her ponticello was ethereal and her soaring melodic lines were haunting, mournful, and achingly lovely. The players created an atmosphere of stillness and expectation in the third movement, and painted a sound picture of hope in the fourth. The final movement developed material from the first in new ways and the quartet managed a light-hearted sensibility that was neither trite nor blasé. Radio host Fred Child gave a powerful reading of selections of Stevens's poetry after the quartet performance. Beethoven's incomparable String Quartet in A minor op. 132 followed, with projections of Stevens's poetry in the background. The timing of the projections was impeccable: thoughtful, provocative and utterly beautiful, although at times I found it distracted from the experience of the music. Steinberg's playing was both precise and also understated, his power coming not from the richness of his sound or the intensity of his dynamics, but from the intensity and intentionality of each note. The second movement had a lovely lilt, with spacious phrases and a gentleness that was strangely water-like ('flowing always the same / though never the same way twice' projected from the Stevens). The slow movement was breathtaking and perfectly proportioned: 'exquisite' fails to do justice. The quartet ended with balance, intelligence of phrasing, and a rich depth of beauty that comes from only the greatest of artists.

LEAH HOLLINGSWORTH

"The quartet ended with balance, intelligence of phrasing, and a rich depth of beauty that comes from only the greatest of artists."

theStrad
ESSENTIAL READING FOR THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890
JUNE 2016

BRENTANO QUARTET

WIGMORE HALL 7 MARCH 2016

It was said of Benjamin Britten that after heart surgery in 1973, the only things he could bear to read were the string quartets of Haydn and the poetry of T.S. Eliot. Accordingly, the Brentano Quartet poignantly prefaced its lunchtime performance of Britten's swansong Third Quartet of 1975 with one of Haydn's darkest works, the F sharp minor Quartet op.50 no.4.

There are so many consistently great quartets by Haydn that their general neglect in the concert hall (though not so much on disc) is possibly understandable – but nonetheless shameful. This example from the 1787 set hardly ever gets an outing and yet teems with surprises and innovations. Many of the recordings betray the awkwardness of F sharp as a tonality but this was never apparent from the Brentano players, whose sense of poise and polish never slipped. They uncovered the bite of the opening movement's rhythmic obsession (its pattern pointing directly to Beethoven's Fifth) as well as the uncompromising intensity of the bleak fugue that provides the finale – a link nicely brought out by the encore, Contrapunctus I from Bach's *Art of Fugue*.

In Britten's Third Quartet the Brentano immediately captured the emotional and tonal ambiguity of the opening movement. All the technical showstoppers – such as the high-wire first violin solo of the central slow movement – were impeccably delivered but never at the expense of sheer musical logic. I have never heard the Venetian-inspired bell-like sounds of the introduction to the finale conjured so magically, or the following passacaglia so perfectly paced.

GERAINT LEWIS

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AN ONLINE ARTS JOURNAL IN NORTH CAROLINA

CHAMBER MUSIC REVIEW

An Evening of Superlatives: Asheville's Amadeus Festival Opens with the Incomparable Brentano Quartet

By Laura McDowell

March 17, 2015 - Asheville, NC:

EVENT INFORMATION

Asheville -- *(Tue., Mar. 17, 2015)*

Asheville Chamber Music Series, Asheville Symphony Orchestra: Brentano Quartet with Hsin-Yun Huang, viola

$38 -- Diana Wortham Theatre , (828) 575-7427; support@ashevillechambermusic.org , http://ashevillechambermusic.org/ -- 8:00 PM

Asheville, a city teeming with its unique brand of energy and creativity, seems a fitting place to launch a new music festival. The **Asheville Amadeus Festival**, which pays homage to Mozart's genius with both high-brow and whimsical events, culminates in a final concert by the **Asheville Symphony** with renowned pianist **Emanuel Ax**. For this opening concert, the **Asheville Chamber Music Series** partnered with festival organizers to present the **Brentano Quartet** with assisting violist **Hsin-Yun Huang**. A sold-out house packed the **Diana Wortham Theatre**, easily breaking an attendance record for any single event sponsored by the Asheville Chamber Music Series in its 62-year history.

What better way to pay tribute to the master than with two works for strings he not only composed but also probably enjoyed playing! Sandwiched between his String Quartet No. 17, in B flat, K.458 ("The Hunt"), and the String Quintet, No. 3, in C, K.515, was Brahms' String Quartet No. 3, Op. 67, a work that emulates Mozart's "Hunt" quartet by the utilization of the same key and "horn call" motives in its opening movement. Founded in 1992, the Brentano Quartet includes violinists **Mark Steinberg** and **Serena Canin**, violist **Misha Amory**, and cellist **Nina Lee**. Joining them for the Mozart Viola Quintet was violist **Hsin-Yun Huang**.

This is one of the very finest quartets I have heard. Lack of space here precludes detailing their numerous accolades and vast experience as concert artists, artists-in-residence, and creative projects, so I recommend visiting their website for this information. Their strengths as players and interpreters are numerous: the perfect synchronization of each bow stroke, each inflection, and voicing. While they are greatly passionate players, they do not distract from their performance with excessive gesturing and are especially adept at plumbing the depths of the quiet end of the dynamic spectrum.

The program opened with Mozart's "Hunt" Quartet, a piece redolent of nature, with its charming horn call motives encased within elegantly shaped phrases. The ensemble did not overplay this work, but kept it at a generally restrained dynamic level, combining introverted elegance with extroverted exuberance. The Adagio movement showcased in particular their uncanny ability to synchronize the slightest bits of tempo variance with perfectly timed entrances.

Following this was the Brahms quartet, a work that seemed to generate more music than could be played by four players. On the heels of the Mozart, this work is striking for its complex rhythms, intricate contrapuntal workings, and great swells of intensity, which the ensemble performed with finesse. The execution of the beautiful principal theme of the second movement (Andante) by the first violinist was simply stunning, and the whole ensemble worked beautifully together to create moments of great pathos. The third movement was noteworthy for the dialogue between the violist and violinist amid a sea of rhythmically unsettling, agitated figures played in the other instruments. The fourth movement was a bravura variation set, where the consensus of interpretation was both delicately and boldly wrought.

The final work on the program was the Viola Quintet, with Huang playing second viola. Composed in the spring of 1787, it is one of several fine viola quintets Mozart composed, firmly establishing the genre into the string repertory. The ensemble maintained an admirable and ever flexible balance among the five parts, with each voice easily heard despite the darker timbre. Even though this was last on the program, the energy, interpretive flair and attention to detail were of the finest caliber. Bravi tutti!

That aforementioned final concert in this festival, by the ASO, will be given on March 22, for details of which, click **here**. For all festival events, click **here**.

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The Guardian (London, UK)
January 8, 2015

Brentano Quartet review – a masterclass in eloquence

Wigmore Hall, London

This collegial quartet's varied programme of Mozart, Bartók and Brahms was most gratifying in its more introspective moments

By Martin Kettle

The Brentano Quartet present the listener with one of those unresolvable but intriguing paradoxes of chamber music dynamics: unlike some quartets, their sound is not overtly dominated by their first violinist. Yet the excellent Mark Steinberg's purity of tone and precise articulation, which do so much to make the Brentano's sound so satisfyingly collegial, is at the same time also one of this quartet's defining characteristics.

This self-effacing interplay ensured there was never anything run-of-the-mill about this varied programme of Mozart, Bartók and Brahms. They began with Mozart's "Hunt" String Quartet in B flat, K458, bringing a sprightly freshness and vigorous fullness of sound to the bouncing 6/8 opening movement that gives the piece its nickname. However, it was in the more introspective and harmonically precarious music of the adagio that the Brentanos produced their most gratifying playing.

It was followed by Bartók's Third Quartet, which was more harmoniously precarious still. It became the evening's highlight, not least because this yearning and intertwining score offers so much opportunity for individual players to interact in quicksilver detail, while always working its way towards the explosive ending – in which the boldness of Nina Lee's cello playing was particularly striking and wholly convincing.

Brahms's Third Quartet, so poised and contented in all of its many moods, could not inhabit a more contrasting musical world from Bartók's. The Brentanos met its very different challenges, although there was a brief patch of wobbly intonation in the first movement. The delicacy of Brahms's singing slow movement, however, was beautifully captured, while the third movement allowed Misha Amory to offer a small masterclass in the characteristic eloquence of Brahms's writing for the viola.

dallasnews.com
The Dallas Morning News

Classical music review: An eloquent concert by the Brentano String Quartet

Scott Cantrell

Classical Music Critic

scantrell@dallasnews.com

Published: 13 November 2012 11:26 PM

FORT WORTH — Some of the most eloquent string-quartet playing imaginable came from the Brentano String Quartet Tuesday night. Presented in the Cliburn Concerts series, at Bass Performance Hall, the American foursome supplied stylishly varied approaches, elaborate expressivity and fine finishes in music from Henry Purcell (1659-95) to Béla Bartók (1881-1945).

Given the intimacy of the medium and size of the audience, though, I wished for a much smaller hall. Texas Christian University's Ed Landreth Auditorium would have been much better.

Opening with four fantasias by Purcell, alternating contrapuntal introspections with dancelike passages, was a bold stroke. It was even bolder to imitate the sounds of viols, a parallel family of stringed instruments already facing extinction in Purcell's day.

With only the gentlest vibrato on the occasional long note — the norm in all string playing until the third decade of the 20th century — the Brentano suggested the sweet whine of viols. They also delineated Purcell's counterpoint with bold shaping of phrases and caressing of harmonic crunches — including some tart "cross relations" in the C minor Fantasia.

Right afterward, at the opposite stylistic extreme, came Bartók's Fourth Quartet. In a palindromic five-movement structure, a central slow movement weaves free vocalises of cello and viola through hushed dissonances and suggestions of bird calls. The first and last movements are gutsy and restless; the second is all abuzz, the fourth a celebration of pizzicato.

Just occasionally coordination could have been a little bit tauter, and first violinist Mark Steinberg wasn't flawlessly tuned in a couple of spots. But overall this was a finely structured and executed performance.

A Haydn D minor Quartet (Hob. III:43) was as elegantly nuanced as the Purcell, its dynamic range similarly reserved, vibrato only a little more in evidence.

Most amazing of all may have been the eloquent account of Brahms' A minor Quartet (Op. 51, No. 2). Fortissimos notched up a couple of levels from the Haydn, but never got forced. Quieter playing was a marvel of telling shape and detail. Again, vibrato relatively restrained by modern standards clarified rich, yearning harmonies too often clotted in modern performances. Cellist Nina Lee's subtleties were particularly amazing.

The Brentano, by the way, will be the quartet for the chamber-music round of the next Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, coming up in May and June 2013.

Brentano quartet shuttles between music's past, present

The Boston Globe

By Jeremy Eichler
Globe Staff

ROCKPORT - Sunday's performance by the Brentano String Quartet at Rockport Music had the spirit of a stroll through a painter's studio, with moistened brushes still glistening, and paint-splattered canvases leaning up against the walls. That sense of drawing a concert audience closer into the creative process was one stated goal of the Brentano's "Fragments" project, a rather inspired program for which the quartet gathered musical fragments by Schubert, Bach, Shostakovich, Haydn, and Mozart.

Placing these abandoned pieces together on one half of a traditional recital would have been an intriguing conceit in itself, but the Brentano went one step further. To mark its 20th anniversary season, the group commissioned composers to write individual responses to each of the fragments, with new pieces from Charles Wuorinen, Bruce Adolphe, John Harbison, Stephen Hartke, and Vijay Iyer, joining an older work by Sofia Gubaidulina.

Sunday's program interlayered fragment and response, beginning with the program's one exception, Wuorinen's "Marian Tropes," the sole piece presented without a preceding fragment, as if the composer's new work had fully cannibalized his source materials (orphaned movements of masses by Josquin and Dufay). Traffic on Route 1 regrettably kept me from hearing the Wuorinen so for me the program began in earnest with Schubert's "Quartettsatz" in C minor from 1820, a piece whose first movement Schubert completed but whose Andante he abandoned for unknown reasons. In his response called "Fra(nz)g-mentation," Adolphe deftly picks up the theme of the Andante and retools it as a kind of rhythmically swinging, dense yet playful Schubertian homage.

Harbison's "Finale: Presto," after Haydn's two-movement Quartet Op. 103, also channeled the witty spirit and rhetorical style of the original to an uncanny degree, while drawing on a harmonic palette that placed it far from the domain of the costume drama. Hartke's "From the Fifth Book" replied to a fascinating Shostakovich fragment apparently penned between the Eighth and Ninth Quartets, by impressively grafting two musical worlds. In Hartke's piece,

PETER SCHAAF

eerie muted rumbling in the viola and cello offsets passages of sinuous high-flown writing for the two violins. At one point, a long tentacular second violin solo speaks unmistakably with the tragic-ironic accent of the original. Once again there was no copying of the older master but rather a new work built with a family resemblance.

Iyer's "Mozart Effects" was a freewheeling and almost raucously joyful response to a rather skeletal Mozart fragment in e minor (K. 417D), making it a natural for the program's upbeat close. But the composer who took the assignment in the most novel direction was Gubaidulina, responding to the final unfinished fugue from Bach's "Art of Fugue" with "Reflections on the Theme of B-A-C-H," a deeply felt work of fierce expressive power. Gubaidulina seemed to take inspiration less from Bach's contrapuntal genius than from the deep creative and spiritual wells from which his music was drawn. Her piece employs her signature ghostly whispers and rustles but builds to caterwauling climaxes with music of unusual physicality and plaintive glissandi reaching upward in all directions. Silence presses in on all sides of this piece, and the concluding measures seem to speak of ultimate things.

The Brentano gave it an excellent performance, and filled the whole afternoon with taut playing that amounted to more than the sum of its parts. The fragments humanized the frail strivings of the old masters, and the new responses made manifest the long tendrils with which living composers are always reaching backward toward tradition. There is also something deeply resonant about a concert that fastens onto the very notion of incompleteness. Memory after all retrieves the personal and historical past only in fragments; history can preserve completed works of art but not the context in which to understand them as whole.

OCTOBER 18, 2011

The Boston Globe

THE BRENTANO QUARTET'S 'FRAGMENTS' PROJECT

At the Shalin Liu Performance Center in Rockport on Oct. 16 at 3 p.m. 978-546-7391 or www.rockportmusic.org

In music as in sculpture or painting, unfinished works by great masters of the past often carry a magnetism all their own. It stems from how they allow us to glimpse the creative act not as a closed and completed deed but as an organic process; the fragment gives us a kind of freeze frame of a work still coming into being, vibrating with contingency and possibility.

Over the decades, various hands have tried picking up where Mozart, Mahler, Bruckner, and Puccini - to name just a few - left off, devising completions of various grand operatic and symphonic works. The chamber music literature too has its share of alluring fragments, yet they have more often been simply left to lie incomplete.
A few years ago, Mark Steinberg, first violinist of the New York-based Brentano Quartet began collecting such fragments. He had big plans for them.
The Brentano had often enjoyed performing what is perhaps the best known fragment in the chamber repertoire, Schubert's Quartettsatz (D. 703), abandoned after one full movement and a partially sketched Andante. But how exactly do you follow this truncated masterpiece on a program? Steinberg had the idea of commissioning a response from a living composer, or even better, a series of responses from a range of living composers, all commenting on the works left incomplete by their musical forebears. The "Fragments" project was born.

The purpose of the "Fragments" project is "to help people listen through the ears of a composer, through the ears of a creator," says Mark Steinberg (left, with Brentano String Quartet colleagues Misha Amory, Serena Canin, and Nina Lee).

"Once a piece is complete and reified, there's a sense that you can't touch it anymore," said Steinberg by phone from a festival in Maine. "And yet with these fragments, the raw nerves are still showing, and you see that there's an actual human being that was writing and sculpting the piece. There's something that's very moving about that, something that's wonderfully suggestive. The piece points in more directions than it would otherwise. And I thought that this might be inspiring to [today's] composers as well."

For the project, conceived to mark the Brentano's 20th anniversary season, the group chose six living composers, matching all but one of them with an individual fragment. Bruce Adolphe wrote a response to the Quartettsatz; John Harbison has composed a "Finale" to follow the two existing movements of Haydn's Quartet Op. 103; and Sofia Gubaidulina, a Russian composer of mystical leanings, has responded to the famous unfinished concluding fugue of Bach's "Art of Fugue." Additionally, Stephen Hartke has responded to an orphaned opening quartet movement by Shostakovich, probably written between the composer's published Eighth and Ninth Quartets; and Vijay Iyer, best known as a jazz pianist, chose a Mozart quartet fragment in E minor (K. 417d), and wrote his own reply titled "Mozart Effects." As a kind of framing work, the program begins with a piece by Charles Wuorinen called "Marian Tropes," which itself contains references to abandoned movements of masses by Josquin and Dufay.
The Brentano premiered the program this summer in Portland, Ore., and will be bringing it to Rockport Music's Shalin Liu Performance Center on Oct. 16. Given the array of living composers presented, the rare chance to hear the older fragments themselves, and the program's thoughtful framing of the complex negotiation between past and present that churns in the background whenever new music is forged within an older tradition, the Brentano's "Fragments" project is, for me, the most enticing chamber music offering of the fall season.

It won't be the first time that the Brentano has taken a creative approach to presenting new or challenging repertoire. Past projects in a similar vein have involved commissioning Mark Strand to write poems responding to Webern's aphoristic music for string quartet, and building an entire program around the responses of living composers to Bach's "Art of Fugue."

"We try to get into the language of music itself and the way music talks to other music," Steinberg said. The goal, he added, is "to help people listen through the ears of a composer, through the ears of a creator, and to almost feel involved in the process of creation themselves, while listening."

Jeremy Eichler can be reached at jeichler@globe.com.

GRAMOPHONE
The world's authority on classical music since 1923
March 2012

Beethoven

String Quartets - No 12, Op 127; No 14, Op 131
Brentano Quartet
Aeon Ⓟ AECD1110 (78' • DDD)

Late quartets from Princeton's ensemble-in-residence

A coupling of Op 127, the most approachable of Beethoven's late quartets, with Op 131, the most strikingly radical, could not be more attractive, particularly in performances like these, which in every way are exceptional. The Brentano Quartet was founded in 1992 by four American players and it is not a backhanded compliment to say that they do not sound like an American quartet, with no hint of the sort of thrusting super-efficiency that marks some of the very finest American groups.

What is so satisfying about these performances recorded at Princeton University is the overall warmth of the playing, with speeds ideally chosen and never forced, with natural rubato and shading, and with wonderfully sustained *pianissimos*, as in the slow fugue which opens Op 131, leading to a perfectly judged climax. The second-movement *Allegro* is then light and clear before the brief recitative-like movement which leads into the great set of variations on the *Andante* main theme, marking the very heart of this visionary work.

The high contrasts in that long movement are perfectly controlled, with the quirky comments in the penultimate variation deliciously pointed, with the right hint of humour. This is music, as has been said, that sounds as if it has only just emerged into human hearing, and that is what the Brentanos make you feel. The *Scherzo* of the following movement is then lightly pointed, with perfect clarity of detail and resonant *pizzicatos*. The brief *Adagio* which leads into the finale makes up for brevity in its intensity, before the dashing finale brings crisply pointed dotted rhythms and a finely judged close.

The comparable account of Op 127 also centres around the long set of slow variations of the second movement, soothing in its sweetness yet full of mystery. This again is ethereal music, before the cheekily jaunty *Scherzo* with its nonchalant throwaway close, leading to the finale with big contrasts naturally brought out. This is a disc that makes one want to hear the Brentanos in the other late Beethoven quartets. Anyone who fancies this generous coupling need not hesitate. **Edward Greenfield**

New Zealand Herald
June 9, 2011

Concert Review: Brentano String Quartet

By William Dart

Tuesday's concert by the Brentano String Quartet made it clear that four years is too long a wait for a return visit.

The Americans had given us one of the highlights of Chamber Music New Zealand's 2007 season, playing Haydn, Monteverdi and Bartok, as well as treating us to a preview of a newly commissioned work by Gabriela Lena Frank.

This time around, Mozart's D minor Quartet K421 set the evening off, revealing just how in tune the group is with the emotional intimacy of this score.

These musicians understand the mysteries of Mozartian light and shade, the sigh of falling cadences within the cut and thrust of musical dialogue. The finely tuned teamwork of Mark Steinberg and Serena Canin's violins in Mozart's Andante was inspirational; for the final movement, each variation found its own voice and character.

The contemporary offering was Stephen Hartke's Night Songs for a Desert Flower. Cellist Nina Lee responded passionately to Hartke's well-tempered lyricism and the opening Madrigal did justice to both the grazioso and amoroso that its composer had stipulated.

A Renaissance bracket was delivered without vibrato and with a real sense of the material journeying around from player to player. Introspective and slightly mournful pieces by William Byrd sat alongside vigorous Fantasias by Orlando Gibbons, wending their way from style to style.

Serena Canin had explained to me just how hard the Brentanos work to connect the often disjunct threads of the late Beethoven quartets; their success at doing just this was apparent when they played the composer's F major Quartet Opus 135.

The first movement, with its myriad fluctuations of tempo and dynamics, combined precision and poetry. The Scherzo took wildness to the very brink of being possessed while the Lento that followed caught the soul of the piece in rich, glowing harmonies.

This was another Chamber Music New Zealand presentation that deserved a much larger audience than it received. But all is not lost. Thanks to Radio New Zealand Concert, next Monday Aucklanders can hear a broadcast of the Brentano's Wellington concert, with a repeat playing of the Hartke and other works by Haydn and Beethoven.

Sydney Morning Herald
May 25, 2011

Quartet plays the line in concert of simple beauty and musical clarity

Peter McCallum

FROM the first two notes, it was clear this was not to be an ordinary performance of Mozart's great D minor String Quartet, K. 421.

The first two notes are two Ds an octave apart and rather than assuming a perfunctory seriousness and giving the downbeats an authoritarian shove, Mark Steinberg, first violinist in the Brentano Quartet, played them with expressive shape that pointed the music towards the culmination and point of the phrase, creating an interest in what was to come.

It is a simple principle - don't play two points, play the line that connects them - yet it is surprising how often it is forgotten.

The Brentano Quartet's collective musical thought was informed by such clarity of musical purpose.

Their other virtues were care with intonation, creating luminous moments, and an unforced approach to tone production, making their point by persuasiveness rather than by overbearing emphasis.

They brought to the second movement of the Mozart a formality and precision interrupted by Mozart's surprising harmonic changes as though the mind had wandered into reflection.

The concert's last work, Beethoven's final quartet in F major, Opus 135, had comparable transparency of thought, so the multiplicity of ideas in the first movement unfolded in abundance.

There were no false dramatics in the finale, where Beethoven creates a union of opposites - profundity and capriciousness - with his motto idea ''Muss es Sein? Es muss sein!'' (Must it be? It must be!). The tragic and the comic were expounded with care, sitting alongside one another in unexplained enigma.

The slow movement unfolded in simple beauty, the transcendent climax stealing up upon the listener unawares.

Ian Munro's String Quartet No. 1: From an Exhibition of Australian Woodcuts takes its inspiration from an exhibition in Ballarat, the composer's home town, and could be seen as a continuation of the tradition of linking music and image.

The Brentano Quartet also included string ensemble music from before the quartet age, creating rich thick sounds of pristine evenness in two In nomines by Byrd.

BRENTANO STRING QUARTET - MUSICA VIVA
City Recital Hall May 23

Denver Post
January 28, 2010

String quartet delivers power, emotion at Gates

By Sabine Kortals

Special to The Denver Post

No surprise, Wednesday night's Friends of Chamber Music concert was **an inspiring, memorable experience.**

On stage at Gates Concert Hall was the Brentano String Quartet, named for Antonie Brentano, who was believed to be the recipient of Beethoven's legendary declaration of love.

Familiar to Colorado audiences, the quartet delivered a polished and insightful interpretation of Beethoven's "String Quartet in E-flat Major". With tremendous power and endurance, each group member -- first violinist Mark Steinberg, second violinist Serena Canin, violist Misha Amory and electrifying cellist Nina Maria Lee -- drew on the others for a connected, emotive performance.

Upon the strident opening chords, a tender melody ensued. The chord-melody pattern repeated several times, was expertly delivered by the quartet in contrasting keys and through nuanced dynamics. The theme and variations of the weighty second movement further drove home the quartet's clear, unified sound, as did the joyfully rhythmic third movement.

In the finale, the quartet closed the evening with finesse, verve and vitality.

The centerpiece was a new work by Stephen Hartke, composed for the Brentano quartet and premiered by the foursome in October 2009. "Night Songs for a Desert Flower", dedicated to Hartke's wife, is a compelling, often severe abstraction of human emotions.

Spotlighting the cello as narrator, the well-constructed, four-movement work is replete with tight harmonies played over rhythmic motifs.

Especially gripping was the warmth of the intermezzo that led into the festive, rejoicing conclusion.

The program opened with Franz Schubert's masterful "Quartettsatz" in C minor, a vigorous, tantalizing start. **Playing to a full house, the Brentano quartet quickly established its distinctive synthesis of drama, animation, visceral ferocity and soulful expression.**

Each time the main theme returned, it was delivered as if for the first time, always crisp and concise, and always simmering with meaning.

The Friends of Chamber Music series continues on March 17 with pianist Arnaldo Cohen.

New York Times
February 8, 2010

Music Review | Brentano String Quartet

A Quartet Illuminates the Passion of Beethoven

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

Beethoven, inspired by the tomb scene from "Romeo and Juliet," wrote "les derniers soupirs" ("the last breaths") in his sketch for the Adagio of his String Quartet in F (Op. 18, No. 1). The Brentano String Quartet played the work with the requisite passion and tenderness at Alice Tully Hall on Friday evening.

The event was part of the Beethoven Cycles series of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, which features his sonatas for cello and piano, for violin and piano, and his string quartets. The Brentano was the first of six quartets participating in the series.

The group is named after Antonie Brentano, thought to be the mysterious Immortal Beloved Beethoven addressed in a love letter of 1812. The members — Mark Steinberg and Serena Canin, violinists; Misha Amory, violist; and Nina Lee, cellist — perform with a vigorous physical intensity that translates into sharply defined, dynamic interpretations.

Beethoven composed his Opus 18 string quartets from 1798 to 1800, challenging the musical status quo established by Mozart and Haydn. But the influence of those predecessors is still evident, as in the sunny, Haydnesque Scherzo of the F major, played vividly by the Brentano musicians.

Bach's influence is notable in the concluding Allegro Molto of the "Razumovsky" Quartet in C (Op. 59, No. 3), named after the count who commissioned a set of three quartets. The ensemble plunged into the fugue with fiery verve, racing through the complex counterpart with virtuosic aplomb and providing a lively conclusion to the evening.

The program opened with a late work, the magisterial Quartet in E flat (Op. 127), which begins with searing declamatory chords that reappear throughout the first movement. The Brentano offered an interpretation notable for its passion and sharply accented phrasing in the first movement and burnished tone in the poignant Adagio.

The Courier-Journal

"If the spectacular, whirling final Allegro molto didn't send you out of Comstock feeling utterly joyful, then I'm afraid there's little help for your soul."

Brentano String Quartet offers superb performance

By Andrew Adler
aadler@courier-journal.com
Courier-Journal Critic

REVIEW

Brentano String Quartet
at Comstock Concert Hall

Recipe for a Sensational Concert:

Take four parts of the Brentano String Quartet — violinists Mark Steinberg and Serena Canin, violist Misha Armory and cellist Nina Maria Lee. Combine one part each of composer Stephen Hartke's "Night Songs for a Desert Flower," Benjamin Britten's String Quartet No. 3 and Beethoven's Quartet in C Major, Opus 59, No. 3 ("Rasumovsky"). Add a dash of the acoustically splendid Comstock Concert Hall at the University of Louisville School of Music.

Shake well, and pour over listeners gathered Sunday afternoon for the Louisville Chamber Music Society's first program of the season.

It's hard to communicate the sheer exuberance of these four artists, and the remarkable insight and discipline they brought to works that demanded impeccable musicianship. They devoted themselves not simply through supreme energy, but via complete authority and involvement. Nobody coming out of Comstock could doubt they'd heard something vivid and vital.

Sunday marked only the second performance of Hartke's "Night Songs for a Desert Flower," written for the Brentano and completed this past summer. It is a boldly conceived score, cast in four movements that give the cello unusual, sustained prominence. With clusters of harmonics stabbing into space and dissolving just as quickly, coupled with exceptional nuance of dynamics and specifics of attack, this piece is a substantial addition to the contemporary quartet repertoire.

Each member of the Brentano played the work with laudable commitment and appreciation for its elements of appealing quirkiness. Yet it was Lee's cello that kept rising up and seizing the moment at hand. I can't recall any quartet cellist, at least in my recent memory, extracting such magisterial depth of tone from the instrument.

She and her colleagues had prepared this difficult score so that its diverse attributes could be easily appreciated. And unlike some accounts of new works that can sound over-rehearsed, this one expressed its impetuous quality at every phrase. Whether during movements titled Madrigal, Lament, Intermezzo or Rejouissance, the proportions were clear and the moods beguiling.

Britten's Quartet No. 3 — written in 1975, a year before the composer died — is in some respects an even more audacious score than the Hartke. Its five sections, with names like Duets and Burlesque, can shift in moments from utter calm to manic excitement. The final section, laid out in a spare passacaglia recalling a cornerstone Baroque form, closes the piece with a kind of intensely wrought quiet.

Sunday's performance was altogether superb, making light of every complexity. So too was the account after intermission of Beethoven's third and final "Rasumovsky" quartet. If the spectacular, whirling final Allegro molto didn't send you out of Comstock feeling utterly joyful, then I'm afraid there's little hope for your soul.

Reporter Andrew Adler can be reached at (502) 582-4668.

theStrad
VOICE OF THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890
June 2009

"The Brentano players are unafraid of risk, and their Haydn showcased this dedication to brave originality."

"...transformative, filled with exploration, elegance and power."

Brentano Quartet

ZANKEL HALL, NEW YORK 6 MARCH 2009

The intensity of the Brentano Quartet's playing at this concert was exceptional. Lee Hyla's *Howl* began the programme, pairing the text of Allen Ginsberg's eponymous poem with music inspired by its striking rhythms and bold objectives. While the piece felt brutally confrontational – not unlike the poem – the players performed it with flawless ensemble,

Brentano Quartet: a dedication to brave originality

CHRISTIAN STEINER

capturing its angularity and complex rhythms while bringing elegance to the melodic moments.

The second half of the programme interspersed Haydn's *Seven Last Words* with a poem commissioned from Mark Strand, who read it from the stage. The poetry offered a provocative commentary on the original text, but it was the musical performance that shone. The Brentano players are unafraid of risk, and their Haydn showcased this dedication to brave originality. While their intonation was utterly pure, the depth and lushness of their sound was not for the faint of heart. This rich base allowed the imaginative playing of first violinist Mark Steinberg to swirl, float and cascade in almost improvisatory gestures. The last movement was transformative, filled with exploration, elegance and power. The Brentano proved itself the perfect match for a programme pairing text with music – its sound is one filled with so many words.

LEAH SWANN

Washington Post
April 20, 2009

Brentano Weaves Warhorses and Wuorinen

By Anne Midgette
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Brentano Quartet is known for its sense of exploration. It has given concerts juxtaposing music and the spoken word; interleaved the movements of a Mozart quartet with pieces by Webern. On Friday night at the Library of Congress, it lived up to its reputation with a vivid, challenging program with the pianist Peter Serkin -- the same it played at Baltimore's Shriver Hall in March -- in which Haydn received the same probing, exploring treatment as Charles Wuorinen.

It was a beautifully balanced program: rooted in Vienna, playing off new against old, tearing away the trappings of familiarity so that everything seemed equally fresh and exposed. The old was represented by Haydn's Op. 76, No. 2, and Beethoven's "Grosse Fuge," neither exactly easy-listening pieces, for all their canonical status. The newer pieces were Wuorinen's Second Piano Quintet, written for the ensemble and Serkin in 2008, which modulates the composer's uncompromising intellectual standards with a kind of genial nod at tonality, and Schoenberg's eccentric "Ode to Napoleon," written in 1942 and intended as a gesture of protest against Nazism, which is about as expressionistic and quasi-tonal as late Schoenberg gets.

The Wuorinen was a highlight, as engaging a piece as he's ever written. Each of its four movements gives slight preference to each of its four instrument groups -- the first of the two slow movements had some beautiful solos for Misha Amory's viola -- but each bats the ear around between all the instruments, between tight groups of ideas, between slow playing and fast, so that one is caught up in a narrative the thread of which keeps flying just out of the listener's reach, like a game of monkey in the middle, and keeps you running after it. Nothing is quite what it seems; even the four movements are not really four, since the first short allegro is more of an introduction, and the long slow fourth movement is bracketed by the third movement, which returns to have the last word at the end. The piece was commissioned by the Rockport Chamber Music Festival, and the quartet and Serkin have been touring with it since its premiere last June; one hopes for a recording.

The quartet flings itself into its music, playing with a kind of abandon that might be excessive -- Mark Steinberg, the first violinist, is prone to thwacking his foot on the stage at moments of passion -- were it not so consistently effective. **They play in a way that leaves no doubt that the music matters**, be it a discussion between violins and the low strings in the third movement of the Haydn, conducted back and forth with a sense of productive debate, or the fierce, almost childish outcry of the Schoenberg. (This piece, a setting of a Byron poem about Napoleon, was narrated by the fine baritone Thomas Meglioranza, who captured the occasional lilt of a spoken line that flirts with lapsing into song, although the text is so dense and indigestible that the music, though it sounded the most old-fashioned thing on the program, actually acts as a leavener.)

The "Grosse Fuge," rather than being merely a welter of intense sound, as it can often become, opened to reveal a gentle, clear transparency at its heart, and the whole piece was characterized by a sense of precision that helped it cut even more deeply home.

Deseret News (Salt Lake City, UT)
March 18, 2009

Brentano Quartet gives lush, expressive performance

By Edward Reichel

BRENTANO STRING QUARTET, Libby Gardner Concert Hall, University of Utah, March 17

With the kind of playing the Brentano String Quartet exhibited Tuesday in Libby Gardner Concert Hall, the future of the medium is ensured.

The Brentano (violinists Mark Steinberg and Serena Canin; violist Misha Amory; cellist Nina Lee) is a wonderful ensemble. Its members have amazing musicality and stunning interpretative talents. **They capture the heart and soul of the music they play. But not only do they bring a keen perceptiveness to their interpretations, they also bring an exuberance that ignites the audience.**

For anyone keeping track of such things, 2009 is an important year. Not only does it mark the 200th anniversary of Joseph Haydn's death, it's also Felix Mendelssohn's 200th birthday. And both composers' works have been receiving extensive play time this year. And the Brentano had both on its program Tuesday.

They opened with Haydn's Quartet in D minor, op. 76, no. 2, subtitled "Quinten," or "Fifths," since the theme of the first movement is based on the interval of a fifth. It's a luminous work that the foursome played with passion and intensity. Their clean, crisp and articulate playing underscored the classicism of the work, but they also infused their reading with a fervor that gave it a romantic sheen.

Their penetrating reading was wonderfully crafted and executed. It was vibrant and radiated an intensity that grabbed the listener right from the start and didn't let go until the final measures of the last movement. This was a performance that any quartet would be proud to own.

The first half continued with Mendelssohn's Quartet in A minor, op. 13. One would never guess this was a youthful work, written when the composer was only 18, for all the power and emotional intensity in it. And the Brentano foursome captured all this with their marvelous playing. The storminess of the opening movement was given an electric charge that eased into the tranquility of the slow movement and the unexpectedly light Intermezzo, before reigniting for the tense finale.

This was a wonderfully impassioned and emotionally charged reading that was intense, but which was also infused with subtle lyricism.

The program concluded with Robert Schumann's Quartet in A major, op. 41, no. 3. Once again, the Brentano mesmerized the audience with its sensitive interpretation that captured every subtle inflection and nuance in the score. **The group's playing was lushly romantic, with long sweeping lines and large gestures, but it was also infinitely intimate and inviting. Gorgeously expressive and wonderfully lyrical, this was a polished and eloquent reading that didn't miss a thing.** This is how Schumann deserves to be played.

Financial Times
March 19, 2009

Brentano String Quartet/ Peter Serkin

By Allan Ulrich

The steadfast American serialist Charles Wuorinen may never inspire outpourings of affection from audiences or critics primed to embrace the latest new thing, but respect has a way of engendering something close to affection. In their current tour, the sleek Brentanos and their illustrious keyboard collaborator are proselytising for Wuorinen's Piano Quintet No. 2, and the work's West Coast premiere suggested that the composer has found a way to indulge the ear without abandoning artistic first principles.

Cast in four movements, the quintet, prepared last year for these forces, opens in a familiar contrapuntal thicket, but Wuorinen soon sweeps away the underbrush. He permits the soloists in turn to dominate a section. The viola almost gushes with lyrical abandon, the cello dances through a propulsive scherzo and the piano launches a contemplative episode, to which tremolo string passages provide a wry commentary; a reiterated scherzo affirms Wuorinen's formal sophistication and flair for theatricality. The Brentanos proved ever alert and tonally bewitching. Serkin's pianism wanted nothing in digital mastery and (essential in this context), a sense of fantasy.

Later, all five musicians supported the charismatic bass-baritone Dean Elzinga in a dangerously fervent traversal of Schoenberg's odd Ode to Napoleon . Adapted from the Lord Byron poem, this second world war scena about the fate of dictators possesses a clarion urgency, which, in spite of the soloist's metrical sophistication, simply degenerates into ranting.

On their own**, the Brentanos imparted a wondrous vigour to Haydn's D minor Quartet, Op.76, No. 2. A performance such as this, which combines grandeur of utterance with meticulous attention to dynamics and rhythmic vivacity, is the sort of which legendary chamber music experiences are made.** No slackers, the foursome followed the Schoenberg with Beethoven's Grosse Fuge . First violin Mark Steinberg, despite a solo career of his own, proved an exceptional leader in clarifying this contrapuntal juggernaut. **Among younger American quartets, the Brentano here claimed pride of place.** ****

Toronto Globe and Mail
October 18, 2008

Politicians could learn something from these four

TAMARA BERNSTEIN

BRENTANO STRING QUARTET At the Jane Mallett Theatre in Toronto on Thursday

Music Toronto opened its 37th season with a return visit by one of the classiest string quartets in the business: the Brentano. Based at Princeton University, the ensemble is prized (literally and figuratively) around the world for its eloquent, highly personal interpretations and fascinating, out-of-the-box programming.

As it turned out, Thursday's program of Haydn, Mozart and Mendelssohn was as conventional as can be - a pity, since I still cherish the memory of the Brentano's mind-blowing juxtapositions, four years ago at the University of Toronto, of tortured music by Renaissance composer Don Carlo Gesualdo, contemporary music and Schubert. (Thursday's program originally included a Schoenberg quartet, but a few weeks ago the performers pulled the piece, candidly admitting that they did not yet feel ready to perform it.)

But as interpreters, **the Brentano's flame burned as brightly as ever** on Thursday night. From the first notes of Haydn's Quartet in G Minor, Op. 20 No. 3, you felt the **extraordinary dynamic between the four players**. I would be hard-pressed to say who leads this quartet: First violinist Mark Steinberg never dominates in a tiresome, conventional way; his affinity for the soft, sweet end of the violin's sound spectrum, and his alertness to whatever his partners have to say, sets the passionate yet unforced tone for the group.

If there is a discreet engine in this quartet of equals, it is cellist Nina Maria Lee, which is as things should be: She energizes the bass line - the harmonic foundation - through spirit and understanding, never heaviness or force. Second violinist Serena Canin and violist Misha Amory effortlessly find their places in the music's shifting textures.

By the end of the concert, I found myself musing that if the various forms of music-making in the world offer metaphors for ways of living together, then anthropologists, not to mention politicians, should study and emulate the Brentano's enlightened example of flourishing equality.

The Haydn and Mozart were anything but the tame throwaways that modern quartets often make of them. Indeed, Mozart's Quartet in B Flat Major, K. 589, was the highlight of the evening. Commentators always mention its prominent cello part, reflecting the fact that Mozart wrote the piece for a cello-playing Prussian king. But the piece also dates from the period of Mozart's opera Cosi fan tutte, which is all about love, betrayal and questions of identity.

And on Thursday, the dovetailing of all four parts in the opening of K. 589 was what **took your breath away**: Who could tell which instrument was playing what?

That sensuality, and an alertness to emotional complexity, filled the performance with life - in the sublime slow movement, when Steinberg repeated exactly what the cello had just "said," you felt that he was nevertheless putting different words to it - just as Mozart often does in his operas. The disproportionately big Trio of the Menuetto was sheer bliss, as you felt the plot thickening - hearts racing, sighs heaving, caresses ventured, and mounting tension as if two versions of reality were about to collide. This is precisely the "zone" one wants to be transported into, during a performance of Mozart's instrumental music.

The Brentano changed styles markedly for their passionate performance of Mendelssohn's Quartet No 2 in A Minor, Op. 13, beefing up their vibrato (which they mercifully cut back in the 18th-century works) and wearing their hearts on their sleeves. It was highly enjoyable, but not, I felt, as seasoned as the Mozart - Steinberg could be much freer in the declamatory, recitative-like sections of the last movement, for instance.

Let's hope we don't have to wait another four years to hear the Brentano in Toronto

The Star (Toronto, ON)
October 17, 2008

Quartet tells a beautiful musical story

John Terauds - CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

You expect much from the season-opening concert for Music Toronto, the city's premier chamber-music series. Yet last night's offering at the Jane Mallett Theatre exceeded even such high expectations.

Onstage was the 16-year-old American Brentano String Quartet, which is working its way up to being one of the top such ensembles in the world. On the program were three string quartets from the core of the repertoire: Haydn's Op. 20, No. 3 in G Minor from 1772, Mozart's 1789 "Prussian" in B-flat Major and Mendelssohn's Op. 13 in A Minor, written in 1827, when he was 18.

Violinists Mark Steinberg and Serena Canin, violist Misha Amory and cellist Nina Maria Lee played them in chronological order, not only giving us a lesson in the evolution of the form but, best of all, giving us a rare and beautiful lesson in musical storytelling.

It may seem pompous to invoke 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, but such seriously purposeful music-making deserves serious attention. Kant wrote about the art of expression in his Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, a work that people listening to this music for the first time could have been familiar with. In the book, he writes how rhetoric is the art of expressing serious ideas in imaginative ways while poetry is the art of using the imagination towards serious purposes. The best music from this period combines both poetry and rhetoric – and finding the ideal combination of the two is what leaves us with that warm, fuzzy, sense of the world being set right at the end of a concert.

The Brentanos applied their tremendous technical skills to making this intricate music sound easy and balanced. Each phrase was turned just so to make a clear point, always with abundant polish. Best of all, this wasn't academic playing. **These were performances brimming with energy.** In the Mozart, the third-movement Minuet positively danced with life.

Throughout the evening, most notable in the Brentano's sound was its unflagging balance between the instruments, the sense that none of them would be able to stand alone.

This was chamber music at its best, a hopeful augur for the rest of the Music Toronto season.

MUSICAL EVENTS

END NOTES

The Brentano Quartet performs late works.

BY ALEX ROSS

Whatever it is that allows artists to maintain their powers of invention as they grow older, composers possess it more richly than most. Musical figures from Monteverdi to Messiaen have had careers that can be plotted as steadily rising curves. In old age, certain composers reach a state of terminal grace, in which even throwaway ideas give off a glow of inevitability, like wisps of cloud illumined at dusk. It's hard to think of another art form in which so many peak achievements—Bach's "Art of Fugue," Beethoven's late string quartets, Verdi's "Otello" and "Falstaff," Wagner's "Parsifal," to name a few—arrive at, or near, the close of day. More than, say, poetry, which tends to thrive on youthful passion, composition seems a cumulative labor, a long process of trial and error, of possibilities rejected or exploited. And, perhaps because writing music is such a purely mental exercise, composers can go on working even after age takes its toll. Think of Handel writing "How Dark, O Lord, Are Thy Decrees" as his sight was failing, or Beethoven creating his most visionary pieces after deafness had set in, or Shostakovich carving final messages of flickering hope and deepening despair as Lou Gehrig's disease and other ailments immobilized him.

The quartet rejected the stereotype of the "late work" as a zone of pathos and quietude.

Every so often, a music theorist tries to determine what late works have in common, with interesting but murky results. In 1937, Theodor W. Adorno wrote an essay entitled "Late Style in Beethoven," in which he hazarded the idea that late works are "furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation." This is apt enough for Shostakovich's final pieces or Stravinsky's "Requiem Canticles," but it hardly accounts for the austere bliss of Handel's "Theodora," the radiance of Strauss's "Four Last Songs," the sonic waterfalls of Messiaen's "St. Francis." Some late works consolidate early gains; others spin off in fresh directions. Franz Liszt, around the age of seventy, began writing something like atonal music, to the consternation of Wagner, who thought that his friend had gone senile.

In the past few months, the Brentano String Quartet has presented three concerts under the Adornian heading "Examining Late Style." The performances took place at Weill Hall, the most intimate space in the Carnegie Hall complex. For the program book, the quartet commissioned various writers, from the novelist Richard Powers to the poet Mark Doty, to grapple with the concept of "lateness." Powers sounded a skeptical note, pointing out that Shakespeare continued writing after "The Tempest," spoiling our sense of that work as his grand farewell. "Perhaps half the meaning that we find in last wills and testaments lies not in late style but in ourselves," Powers wrote. But the composer Bruce Adolphe set out a late-style rule that rang true for a lot of the music under examination: "To say exactly what one means without complication but also without compromise." That idea, which is essentially a call to artistic honesty, *does* explain Shostakovich's existential desolation as well as Messiaen's religious delirium; in each case, the composer's technique has no purpose other than to express the underlying emotion.

In chronological terms, the Brentano's syllabus stretched from Carlo Gesualdo, an inspired eccentric of the Renaissance, to the living American master Elliott Carter, who remains creatively active in his hundredth year. (Mark Steinberg, the Brentano's first violinist, introduced a performance of Carter's 1997 Piano Quintet, with Thomas Sauer, by joking that the work might lose its "late" status if Carter keeps composing much longer.) The survey also included Contrapunctus

LARA TOMLIN

XIV, from the "Art of Fugue," which eerily trails off after two hundred and thirty-nine bars; Beethoven's Quartet Opus 127; Brahms's Clarinet Quintet; Shostakovich's Fifteenth Quartet; and Bartók's Sixth Quartet. And there were three valedictions from composers who died young: Mozart's "Prussian" Quartet in B-Flat, Mendelssohn's Quartet in F Minor, and Schubert's Quintet in C.

In a way, "Examining Late Style" was simply an excuse for one of America's finest, brainiest young quartets—besides Steinberg, the members are Serena Canin, violinist; Misha Amory, violist; and Nina Lee, cellist—to demonstrate its command of a vast range of repertory. Moving beyond the sheer technical control that is to be expected in a Carnegie-approved ensemble, these players thought and rethought each bar of the music, resisting the temptation to round all the corners and produce a uniformly polished sound. Occasionally, their capacity for cogitation impeded the musical flow; Brahms's Clarinet Quintet, with Todd Palmer as the guest, was surprisingly agitated, sometimes missing the liquid lyricism that this most consciously autumnal of late works seems to require. The Shostakovich, too, felt a touch too "hot." Yet the quartet made a point of rejecting the stereotype of "late style" as a zone of pathos and quietude.

Fittingly, the last concert in the series, which took place on April 16th, was the best. It began with Steinberg's arrangements of two madrigals by Gesualdo, the Prince of Venosa, who, like Liszt, explored strange new regions in his final years: ordinary chords glance against one another with little regard for conventional logic, creating fractured, kaleidoscopic patterns. One can look to Gesualdo's biography for a psychological explanation; in his youth, the composer discovered his wife in bed with her lover and ordered both of them killed, and he displayed symptoms of a troubled mind ever after. But similar oddities color the late-period motets and madrigals of Orlando de Lassus, which appeared a decade or two earlier. The hothouse atmosphere of the Mannerist period in art allowed, even demanded, idiosyncrasy, and it was no different in music; Gesualdo, toward the end of his not very long life, chose instability as his natural idiom.

Beethoven's Opus 127 followed, like balm on a wound. Adorno, in his essay on late Beethoven, pointed out that some of the composer's most daring gestures take the form not of outlandish harmonies but of familiar decorative formulas—clichés, almost—that have been removed from their customary contexts and are strewn about as fragments. The scholar Michael Spitzer, in a recent book entitled "Music as Philosophy: Adorno and Beethoven's Late Style," amplifies the point, saying of the first movement of Opus 127, "Each of the movement's ostensible eccentricities actually has a precedent in Classical practice." The Brentano players underlined such subtleties throughout. As Steinberg observed, in remarks from the stage, the quartet begins with emphatic, maestoso music in E-flat major, the key of Beethoven's revolutionary, middle-period "Eroica" Symphony. Then, in the sixth bar, the heroic fades into something much more intimate and introspective. The maestoso chords return twice more, but after an expectant bar of silence they don't appear again, and the inward mood prevails, setting the stage for the great fifteen-minute Adagio that is the heart of the piece. The Brentano managed to convey the fascinating discontinuities in the music without stinting on the fundamental eloquence of Beethoven's hymnal writing. And, at the end of the Adagio, Steinberg rendered the closing solo in touchingly elegant, sweet-toned fashion—a case of a formula that somehow takes on transcendent meaning.

Finally came the Quintet in C, which Schubert wrote in the last months of his life, when he was thirty-one, and which seems not to belong in this series at all. It is the work of an enormously ambitious young man, albeit one suffering from syphilis: the scale is huge, the contrasts extreme, the melodic material superabundant. Yet there are long stretches suggesting the serenity and wisdom of someone much older. Again, the Brentano, augmented by the cellist Michael Kannen, pushed away received ideas. This was a muscular, unsettled, at times angrily expressive reading of a work that is often enacted as a ritual of consolation. In keeping with the tone of the series, you had a picture of a man fighting off death, instead of welcoming it. He goes backward through the stages of grief and ends in a dance of denial. ♦

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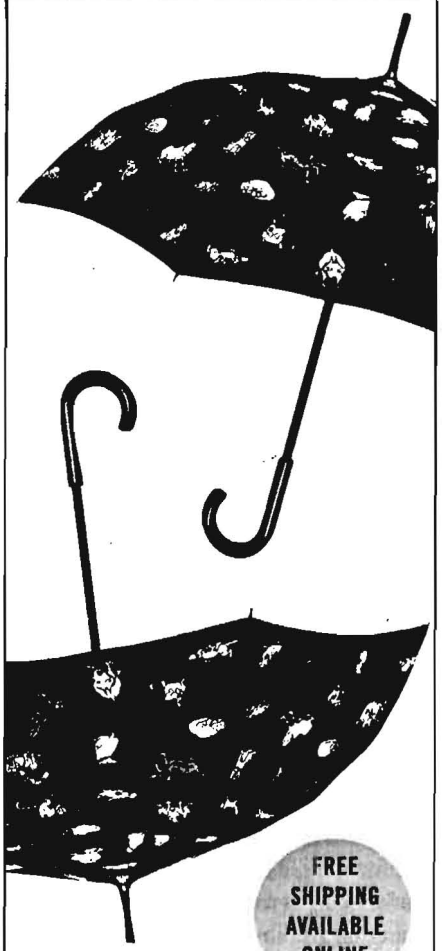

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