

FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC

The Brentano String Quartet

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

November 5, 2000
Faye Spanos Concert Hall
University of the Pacific
Stockton, California



Program

Three Pieces

String Quartet in A Major, Op. 20, No. 6

Allegro di molto e scherzando
Adagio
Menuetto: Allegretto
Finale: Fuga a tre Soggetti

Igor Stravinsky

(1882-1971)

Franz Joseph Haydn

(1732-1809)

—*Intermission*—

Smoke Fragments

Organum
Silver Spheres
Poing
Free Fall
To Ash

Steven Mackey

(b. 1956)

String Quartet, Op. 7, No. 1

Lento
Allegretto
Allegro vivace

Béla Bartók

(1881-1945)



The Brentano String Quartet appears by arrangement with MCM Artists
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Brentano String Quartet

Since its inception in 1992, The Brentano String Quartet has been singled out for their technical brilliance, musical insight, and stylistic elegance.

Within a year's time, the Brentano String Quartet claimed the distinction of being named to three major awards, winning the first Cleveland Quartet Award, the 1995 Naumburg Chamber Music Award and the 10th Annual Martin E. Segal Award. For their first appearance in Great Britain at Wigmore Hall, the Brentano was awarded the Royal Philharmonic Society Music Award for the most outstanding chamber music debut for 1997.

The Quartet is named after Antonie Brentano, whom many scholars believe to have been Beethoven's mysterious "Immortal Beloved," and to whom he wrote his famous love confession.

Program Notes

Stravinsky—Three Pieces

Though seldom heard and little known, these pieces were written in the spring of 1914, a year after the outrageously violent reception of his ballet, *The Rite of Spring* in Paris. That work triumphed on its next performance, along with *Petrushka*, *The Firebird*, and *The Nightingale*. At the height of his neo-classical phase, Stravinsky abandoned works for large forces for the next ten years, and applied the experiments in tonality and rhythm he had discovered to small forms for various groups of instruments and voice.

Intense dissonance robs music of a sense of movement and Stravinsky's achievement was to give a crucial structural importance to rhythm rather than harmony, with the result made more intense by that dissonance. Stravinsky (like Webern) titled his work "pieces" rather than "quartet" because it broke with the established identification of the work with sonata form. Classical quartets were based on dialectical interchange of themes, and the dynamism of switching from tonic to dominant harmony, or other harmonic variations. Stravinsky superimposed tonalities and chordal progressions, so that the elements of

the music were not heard successively but simultaneously. In the classical quartet themes and motives were freely interchanged between the four instruments so the structure was given maximum flexibility. Stravinsky makes it rigid, with the aggregate of themes and motifs side by side like a Byzantine Mosaic. The tonal rigidity is offset by rhythmic plasticity.

In the first piece, "Dance," the first violin repeats a tune of four notes without variation. The cello repeats a shorter, brief rhythmic figure and the two figures never coincide. The viola plays a single note throughout while the second violin sporadically repeats a descending figure of four notes.

The second piece, "Eccentric," is a composition in recitative form; lurching chords are juxtaposed with a tiny tune and a wider idea provokes the impression of atonal wiggling.

The third, "Canticle," a dirge, is suggestive of a mysterious procession. It begins with the notes of the *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath) from the Gregorian Requiem Mass but also evokes an echo of Russian Orthodox chant. A homogeneous timbre for the strings creates a compact mass of sound.

Haydn—String Quartet in A

The quartets of Opus Two date from 1772, a time of expansion in Haydn's symphonic works. The "Sturm und Drang" (Storm and Stress) movement in German literature encouraged greater expressiveness in his symphonies, and the expansion was assimilated into the quartets. The rage and despair arias and the furious rapid dialogue of question and answer in buffa opera style were also likely influences. Behind him were a long list of Divertimentos and Baryton trios that offered the Prince the chance to participate in music making. Haydn may have felt the need to go beyond the limitations of these genres. The new quartets demonstrate a more personal character of themes and motifs, increased harmonic tension, greater expressiveness, and rhythmic emphasis in the quick movements. They are written with greater subtlety and imagination and show a new spirit of inquiry and experiment.

The first movement is high spirited and witty, with the first violin continuously interspersing the motive-like theme with virtuoso flourishes. The *Adagio* has a tranquil cantabile melody supported with repeated figuration in the second violin and "walking" lines in viola and cello. In the *Menuetto*, motive figures with a remote Hungarian flavor are shared between the parts.

It is the *Finale*, a fugue in three voices, which receives the most comment. Besides the Rococo style prevalent with its use of single melody and light harmony, quartet writers were using the "learned" contrapuntal style of the High Baroque. For Haydn, counterpoint was not an end in itself but a means of heightening the contrasts in the music and widening its emotional range. This counterpoint is lighthearted and ingratiating.

Mackey—Smoke Fragments

Born in Frankfurt, Germany, Mackey was educated in the United States. His early performance training was as a classical and electric guitarist and Baroque lutenist. After touring Europe as a lutenist, sponsored by the University of California, Davis, he graduated *summa cum laude*. He followed that with a Ph.D. in composition from Brandeis University, and is now a Professor of Music at Princeton.

Mackey's idiom is a multi-layered world of rhythm and sonority. His expanded harmonic style is drawn from Western Art Music but he draws wit and vivacity from the transformation of popular music. Mackey has toured with the Kronos Quartet, performing a trilogy of works for electric guitar and string quartet. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra commissioned and performed a lively seven-movement work entitled *Eating Greens*. His most recent orchestral work is *Lost and Found*, commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony and given its premier under Michael Tilson Thomas in September 1996.

Mackey has commented on the fascination of musical miniatures. Webern's *Bagatelles* for string quartet, for example, are pieces that delineate

rich and highly nuanced gestures. Because of their brevity, the listeners can momentarily savor, in memory, the entire shape of the piece like a miraculous smoke wreath before it evanesces. Miniatures can have shapes that are intrinsically expressive, as the smallest quirk becomes a structural pillar.

Mackey comments, "My *Smoke Fragments* are written in the spirit of the Webern *Bagatelles*; idiosyncratic, detailed movements that hold their shape for an instant before vanishing. These five miniatures were written in 1987 as Part 2 of a larger two-part work entitled *Fumeux Fume*. Part 1 is a twelve minute-long, continuous movement that journeyed freely through a variety of landscapes. The miniatures of Part 2 in that context were intended to consider and savor some of the incidents that gave the trip character and texture but at the same time seemed incidental."

Bartók—String Quartet No. 1

In the heyday of European music, an abundance of works arranged in an opus of six or more began to change by the time of Beethoven, when the extensive gave way to the intensive, a transformation of the individual character and social function of musical creation. Compare Beethoven's nine symphonies to Haydn's hundred or so. There occurred a change in internal weight and density of content. Bartók's string quartets, through their internal weight, are representative of his whole output. They also contain in condensed form the most typical musical advances of the first half of the twentieth century.

The first quartet of the series was given its first performance in Budapest in March 1910 at a "composer's evening." This was a memorable date in the history of Hungarian music, acclaimed by the young nationalist avant-garde but received coolly by the establishment whose allegiance was to the German-Viennese music of the Austrian court.

The quartet is intense, serious and moving. The first movement begins with a fugue, after the example of Beethoven's c sharp minor Quartet, though a fugue was most often used

in the last movement. Two plaintive falling sixths in the violins lead, and the material gradually unfolds with subsequent convolutions. After the fugue exposition, a little syncopated motif appears with the disappearance of the contrapuntal fabric. The motif is developed in the middle section, and a recapitulation of the fugue follows, the falling sixths embedded in harmonic blocks.

The *Allegretto* begins with a rising line in the lower strings, taken by the violins and the basic thematic and motive ideas interweave through the movement. In the middle is a graceful, genial cantilena, homophonic in contrast to the polyphonic character of the rest.

A self-contained introduction prepares for the closing movement. Rhythmical and chordal music are opposed to soloist parts; the cello monologue is continued by a violin monologue. The lonesome melody soars to the highest registers of the instrument and dies away.

The *Allegro vivace* begins with an energetic subject, three rising seconds, which descend into the lower strings under pedal points in the violins, played tremolo. An episode, marked adagio, has a melody in the violins of a marked Hungarian character. It shows the more ancient type of Hungarian music that had an effect on Bartók: he had just completed his first major foray into the peasant music of his country. All the thematic elements of the movement are held in an organic relationship. He makes exhaustive use of several expressive devices and the profusion of melody creates multiple-tonality. The melody seems to flow almost disembodied, without harmonic ballast through various keys. The quartets illuminate Bartók's attitude to tonality. It is more accurate to say the quartet is on A, than in the key of A. A is the orientation point, the music is organized around it, chromatically fluctuating with the key note as point of departure and repose; harmonic problems are resolved horizontally.

The quartet is a sign-post to Bartók's progressive growth, and the six quartets are true classics of twentieth century music.

—Notes by Catherine Roche

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