

Sunday, April 10, 2016, 3pm  
Hertz Hall

## Brentano String Quartet



Mark Steinberg, *violin*  
Serena Canin, *violin*

Misha Amory, *viola*  
Nina Lee, *cello*

### PROGRAM

- Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)    Selections from *The Art of the Fugue*, BWV 1080  
Fugues I, V, III, and IX
- Joseph HAYDN (1732-1809)    Quartet in F-sharp minor, Op. 50, No. 4  
Allegro spirituososo  
Andante  
Menuetto (Poco Allegretto)  
Finale Fuga (Allegro moderato)

### INTERMISSION

- BACH    Selections from *The Art of the Fugue*  
Fugues VIII, VI, and XI
- Dmitri SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)    Quartet in F-sharp Major, Op. 142  
Allegretto  
Adagio –  
Allegretto: Adagio

*Cal Performances' 2015-2016 season is sponsored by Wells Fargo.*

### Selections from *The Art of the Fugue*

#### Johann Sebastian Bach

With *The Art of the Fugue*, a veritable Bible of fugal techniques and expression, Bach produced a monumental edifice cloaked in mystery. A compilation of fugues based on a single subject (and its variations), *The Art of the Fugue* seems to be an exhaustive study of the possibilities of the form, a composer testing his mettle, expanding his horizons. Such a mammoth achievement from the great composer's last days comes to us only incomplete, as the final fugue trails off unended, thus inviting romantic speculation. Some see in this series of fugues a sort of last will and testament from arguably the greatest master of contrapuntal music ever to live. There is the most likely apocryphal story of Bach dying as he dictated the final fugue, having just incorporated his own name as a musical cipher into the fabric of the piece. It has long been debated whether the work is in fact a study, theoretical or conceptual, never meant to be performed. Were it meant to be performed there is much speculation on what instrumentation was intended; is it a keyboard work, a work for a consort of like instruments, for a broken consort, a vocal group? The piece is written in "open score"—on four staves, one per part, with no other indications. There is much room for discussion, scholarly musings, and musicological excavation. What is clear to us is that this is a golden treasure trove of riveting musical rhetoric, elevated, intricately woven round-table discussions that make for an engaging concert experience. It is music for which we have a deep love and which we feel we can illuminate effectively through the medium of the string quartet.

*The Art of the Fugue* as a whole forms a sort of treatise comprising a set of discussions related to a common theme. Imagine hosting a series of fascinating evenings devoted to discursing on politics, or a specific political problem, dealing with one main insight on each such evening. In much the same way as such a series of evening sessions would, we find that this set of fugues exhibits a certain shared "aboutness," rooted in descent from a common fugue subject. Sometimes other, secondary sub-

jects are brought in to comment on and shed light on the first (such as in Contrapunctus XI, which has two additional subjects), or a theme is turned upside down to be viewed from a new angle (Contrapuncti IV, VI, and XI), or it is stated rather more slowly or quickly in order to lend it a different weight (Contrapunctus VI). Parts support or challenge one another. All these are familiar concepts to anyone who has been engaged in fruitful debate, and make for stimulating repartee.

—Mark Steinberg

### Quartet in F-sharp minor, Op. 50, No. 4

#### Joseph Haydn

Joseph Haydn composed his Op. 50 string quartets in 1787. Hoping for royal acknowledgement, and perhaps emolument, he dedicated the set to King Frederick of Prussia. Although the monarch's response may have been disappointingly parsimonious—a gold ring and a thank-you—Haydn fared quite well in the end, selling the quartets to two different publishers without either of them knowing, and pocketing his fee twice.

The Quartet in F-sharp minor, Op. 50, No. 4 is the only minor-key quartet of the six. F-sharp minor is altogether an unusual key, as it is difficult for string players and does not take much advantage of the natural resonance of the instruments; but Haydn used it for his *Farewell Symphony* and for one of his late piano trios as well, so he clearly responded to its severe, somewhat astringent tonal flavor. The first movement of this quartet, designated unusually *spirituoso*, features a bold, sometimes symphonic palette with a quite wide range of register. It opens with a bold, rhythmic unison statement from the whole quartet, to which the first violin responds with a lonely, tentative figure. However, it is the strength of the opening gesture, rather than the pathos of the reply, that stamps the movement as a whole, a depiction of restless, celebratory Jovian energy. Only at the end of each major section does the music find a quieter place where it can repose briefly.

The second movement showcases a particular genius of Haydn's, the expression of great

beauty through simple means. Here we have a patient Andante setting wherein a melody walks up and down the scale, harmonized glowingly, measured out in the plainest of musical periods. In the course of the movement, major-key sections alternate strophically with minor-key ones, returning in a different variation each time, a favorite slow-movement form for the composer. The major-key music is radiant, unassuming, reflective; the minor-key darker, more troubled, more sophisticated. The final return of the major-key section sets the cello part in its high, *bel canto* register (a star turn for the cello-playing King Frederick?), where it plays a close duet with the second violin before concluding the movement with emphatic chords.

The third movement is on the one hand a typical, genial Haydn minuet; on the other, it is a subtly unifying force for the other movements of the quartet. Like the first movement, it features some “large” writing—grand arpeggios, unison writing to provide emphasis, a wide register. From the second movement, it inherits a preoccupation with the tension between major and minor; although the movement as a whole is in a major key, the main section of the minuet has minor-key “coloring,” and the entire trio is in minor, a grave, contrapuntal examination. It is this trio section that prefigures the Finale, in its rather learned interplay of voices, its evocation of elevated discourse.

The final movement is a fugue, a form where the voices enter one at a time, each in its turn stating the “subject”—the topic that is to be discussed, so to speak. Haydn, in his Op. 20 quartets, had undergone a period of fascination with fugal finales. This one, with its severe intervallic outline and light rhythmic character, recalls the finale of Op. 20, No. 6, which itself can perhaps claim a lineage back to Bach’s *Musical Offering*. With the present fugue, however, there is no claim to a great polyphonic edifice such as that one; here we have a movement less than three minutes long, wherein all is lightness, grace, and wit. Many an erudite fugal trick is employed, but the listener is equally likely to be struck by the movement’s dramatic gestures: sudden silences, sus-

tained suspenseful pedal points, unexpected harmonic shifts, massive unisons, and not least of all, the abrupt strength of the emphatic closing cadence.

—Misha Amory

### Quartet in F-sharp Major, Op. 142 Dmitri Shostakovich

Beginning in stark bleakness with the 11th quartet, Shostakovich’s tetralogy of quartets, dedicated to each of the members of the Beethoven Quartet in turn, finds its peroration with the 14th, open to the fragile possibility of light. The Beethoven Quartet premiered each of Shostakovich’s quartets starting from the second and thus served as the mouthpiece for some of the composer’s most vulnerable and intimate utterances. The 11th had been dedicated to Vasily Shirinsky, the second violinist of the quartet, who had passed away. The Beethoven Quartet considered disbanding at the time and it was in part at Shostakovich’s urging that they continued. The dedicatee of the 14th is Sergei Shirinsky, brother of Vasily and the cellist of the ensemble, still playing when the 14th quartet was written (1972-1973). A genial and enthusiastic man, he had known Shostakovich for nearly 50 years at the time. So this grouping of four quartets begins in absence and finds its way toward a sense of presence, continuity, and the perpetuation of a musical voice.

Shostakovich has always seemed to me to have a sort of spiritual link with Schubert in his depiction of forces that are fateful and inhuman, his lyrical gift, and in his recognition of states of radiance that are clearly seen from without, at a distance. Some of this is in evidence at the start of the Quartet in F-sharp Major. A group of three repeated notes is an favorite Shostakovich motif: a series of knocks, a brutal insistence, a rupture in time. Here are six intoned notes, the idea doubled, a set-up for a serious reckoning with the forces that be. However, as it recedes it reveals an innocent, insouciant theme, goodnatured and scarcely recognizable as the Shostakovich of the previous quartets. As it progresses we are thrown a few cheeky notes as if the composer peeks out from behind to assure us it is still him. What is going on here?

In *Giovanni's Room*, James Baldwin writes "Perhaps everybody has a garden of Eden, I don't know, but they have scarcely seen their garden before they see the flaming sword. Then, perhaps, life only offers the choice of remembering the garden or forgetting it. Either, or; it takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both. People who remember court madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence; people who forget court another kind of madness, the madness of the denial of pain and the hatred of innocence; and the world is mostly divided between madmen who remember and madmen who forget. Heroes are rare." Shostakovich was often criticized for what many considered to be a cowardly stance in the nearly impossible political climate of the mid-20th century USSR. His truer nature, that of an artist, however, evinced heroism in his ability to live as a witness in his world without extinguishing an ember of hope, belief, and goodness. And here in the 14th quartet we find some writing that is utterly guileless, as if Shostakovich is holding on to some part of himself protected as one would protect a child from the harshness of the outer world. It is an uneasy amalgam of Edenic purity and the depiction of struggle, toggling between them and bringing them into confrontation without resolution. (Again, a Schubertian state of affairs.)

This quartet marks the end of a nearly year-long fallow period that caused the composer much anxiety. His compositional voice was his truth; lack of access to that voice left him bereft. At the same time as he was writing the quartet, Shostakovich was planning a one-act opera based on Chekhov's short story "The Black Monk," a project that was ultimately to go unrealized. But themes in this story may illuminate some of the characteristics of the 14th quartet. In the story, a glorious, fertile garden, a sort of Eden, plays a large role, and there is much concern about the garden becoming barren and unkempt. Chekhov describes as well an apparition, the eponymous Black Monk, who appears to the protagonist to tell him that he is a genius writer, that he is divinely chosen to be

the bearer of eternal truth, the rational, and the beautiful, in service of eternal life, the object of which, he claims, is enjoyment. Kovrin, the writer, frets that he is mad, that the monk is not real, to which the apparition replies "I exist in your imagination, and your imagination is part of nature, so I exist in nature." Later in the tale, Kovrin's wife spies him talking to what seems to be an empty chair (speaking of joy as the normal state of man) and declares him mad. Doctors are called on to "cure" him of his madness. Parted from his hallucination he grows weary, heavy, ordinary, and unhappy. The garden is in ruins. His marriage is in ruins. At his deathbed, the Black Monk appears to him one last time and says to him, "Why did you not believe me? If you had believed me then, that you were a genius, you would not have spent these two years so gloomily and so wretchedly." Upon his death, Kovrin is found in a puddle of blood with a "blissful smile" on his face.

Analogies with Shostakovich's own fraught life and the radiance of his gift are easily made. The tale speaks of joy that is perpetually available, even when it looks to all the wretched world to be madness. And it may be that Shostakovich wanted to make a connection between this story and the 14th quartet. There is a reference to Braga's *Angel's Serenade* in the story, sung by Kovrin's wife with the accompaniment of a violin, about "a maiden...who heard one night in her garden mysterious sounds, so strange and lovely that she was obliged to recognize them as a holy harmony which is unintelligible to us mortals, and so flies back to heaven." Shostakovich arranged the serenade in the same year as he wrote this quartet (surely in preparation for the opera), and the climax of the second movement of this work may very well refer to it (an idea put forward by Laurel Fay). Shostakovich called this his "Italian bit" and it gave him much pleasure. The second movement begins with a first violin line that is a pre-echo of the confessional song of the cello, the main protagonist of this work, to follow. It is a sort of empathy offered before the fact, and when the climax is reached with the cello singing up high with parallel support from the first violin (the two remaining original players

of the Beethoven Quartet) there is a sense of a partnership that enables a reaching beyond.

There is a possibility that Shostakovich at one point contemplated suicide and intended the eighth quartet to be his final work in 1960. In that work, the motif of three repeated notes is used often to chilling and disturbing effect. Here the last movement of the 14th quartet starts with the same repeated notes (used already at the start of the piece), in this instance, however, cautiously impish, and Shostakovich uses them to spell out in musical notes cellist Sergei Shirinsky's nickname, Seryozha, There is

a powerful sort of alchemy here, a return to a childlike state of play, an ability to see without being overtaken. (César Aira: "Children have a very special attachment to the incomprehensible; there's so much they don't understand at that age, they have no choice but to love it, blindly, like an enigma, but also like a world. It teaches them what love is.") The movement deals in memory and the holding of memories, some intense and painful, without being consumed. The music wanders and drifts and finally vanishes, despite everything, with a blissful smile on its face.

—Mark Steinberg

---

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

The **Brentano String Quartet** has appeared throughout the world to popular and critical acclaim since its inception in 1992. In 2014, the ensemble succeeded the Tokyo Quartet as artists-in-residence at Yale University, departing from their 14-year residency at Princeton University. The quartet also currently serves as the collaborative ensemble for the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition.

The group 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, DC; the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam; the Konzerthaus in Vienna; Suntory Hall in Tokyo; and the Sydney Opera House. The Brentano String Quartet made its first European tour in 1997, and was honored in the UK with the Royal Philharmonic Award for Most Outstanding Debut.

The ensemble is known for its imaginative projects combining old and new music, such as *Fragments: Connecting Past and Present* and *Bach Perspectives*. Among the quartet's latest collaborations with contemporary composers is a new work by Steven Mackey, *One Red Rose*, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Other recent commissions include a piano quintet by Vijay Iyer, a work by Eric Moe (with soprano

Christine Brandes), and a new viola quintet by Felipe Lara (performed with violist Hsin-Yun Huang). In 2012, the quartet provided the central music (Beethoven Op. 131) for the acclaimed independent film *A Late Quartet*.

The Brentano String 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 ensemble has also been privileged to collaborate with such artists as soprano Jessye Norman and pianists Richard Goode and Mitsuko Uchida.

The ensemble is named for Antonie Brentano, whom many scholars consider to be Beethoven's "Immortal Beloved," the intended recipient of his famous confession of love.

The Brentano String Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists.

[www.davidroweartists.com](http://www.davidroweartists.com)

The Brentano String Quartet records for AEON (distributed by Allegro Media Group).

[www.brentanoquartet.com](http://www.brentanoquartet.com)