

BRENTANO STRING QUARTET

MARK STEINBERG, VIOLIN

SERENA CANIN, VIOLIN

MISHA AMORY, VIOLA

NINA MARIA LEE, CELLO

WITH JAMES DUNHAM, VIOLA

Tuesday, April 6, 2010

~ PROGRAM ~

String Quartet No. 2 in F Major, Op. 41

ROBERT SCHUMANN

(1810-1856)

Allegro vivace

Andante quasi variazioni

Scherzo - Presto

Allegro molto vivace

"Night Songs for a Desert Flower"

STEPHEN HARTKE

(B. 1952)

(Composed in 2009 for the Brentano Quartet)

Madrigal (Allegretto grazioso ed amoroso)

Lament (Mesto)

Intermezzo (Lontano, dolcissimo)

Rejouissance (Allegro vivace)

~ INTERMISSION ~

Quintet for Strings No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 87

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

(1809-1847)

Allegro vivace

Andante scherzando

Adagio e lento

Allegro molto vivace

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

On the World Wide Web: davidroweartists.com and brentanoquartet.com

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

James Dunham appears as guest artist from Rice University.

On the World Wide Web: jamesdunham.com

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1853)
String Quartet No. 2 in F Major, Op. 41 (1842)

Robert Schumann called the string quartet a "by turns beautiful and even abstrusely woven conversation among four people." To him, the genre was venerable and worthy of deep study; he knew and revered the quartets of Haydn and Mozart, and like his contemporary and close friend Mendelssohn, he was demonstrably influenced by Beethoven's quartets when he wrote his own. In fact, when considered vis-à-vis his fanciful, wildly romantic output for solo piano, Schumann's quartets appear as an astonishingly concise, contained and classical group; the "road map" through each movement is crystal-clear, sometimes severely so. On the other hand, the spirit and intent which invest every note of this music bear the unmistakable stamp of Schumann the Romantic, the yearner, the impulsive.

Schumann wrote his three quartets virtually simultaneously, in a couple of summer months in 1842. It was not the easiest time of his life; married only a short time to Clara, who was one of the most celebrated pianists of her generation, he was reconciling himself to being the moon to her sun, and often living at home without her. His letters and journal entries from this year repeatedly refer to gloomy moods, fatigue, and ill health. However, the quartets contain little indication of this state, being filled with decidedly more sunlight than shadow.

In the F Major Quartet, which is the second of the group, we find a work whose *raison d'être* is the quest for lightness. Each of the four movements is formally traditional—employing a sonata form, a variation form, a simple scherzo-trio form and another sonata form, respectively—but in each case we have the impression that Schumann seeks to give us the leanest, most unencumbered version of each. The first movement, a fleet, ardent *Allegro*, has only one real melody, which is borne along on thermal currents of eighth-notes; the absence of a second theme, structural ballast which we would normally expect in this type of movement, lightens the music's progress. What is more, there are rising sequences everywhere, which only increase the sensation of defying gravity, of rising higher and higher.

The second movement is darker and more intimate in its key and its coloring of the quartet's sound. It recalls unmistakably the slow movement from Beethoven's Op. 127 Quartet, written less than twenty years earlier. In its key, its meter, its swaying rhythms, and its variation form, this movement represents a kind of homage to Beethoven's masterpiece. However, the similarities appear superficial when one considers the intent and the scope of these two movements. Beethoven's soul-excavating variations seem to be imparting a message too intimate and painful for words, and there are

moments where one almost feels the earth move. Schumann's movement, on the other hand, makes no such claim, preferring to illuminate the beauty of the everyday, to paint the ordinary in glowing hues so that it becomes extraordinary. The easy, lilting theme is viewed through many different rhythms and textures as we pass from variation to variation. At first the music merely acquires more and more life, employing ever more active rhythmic textures; then follows a very still and beautiful variation, where the melody is reduced to quiet undulations over an intoned pedal in the cello part. A more chipper, flirtatious variation follows, succeeded at last by a gentle coda.

The *Scherzo*, an agile, arpeggiated movement, showcases one of Schumann's favorite tricks, where he shifts the rhythm of the music back and forth between true and false downbeats. The result is a kind of fake-out game, with the listener kept perpetually on rhythmic tenterhooks—just as we get accustomed to the “false” location for the beat, we are tersely corrected by the true one. The trio, amiable and straightforward by comparison, is a conversation of trivialities, held between the cello and the upper instruments. The return of the quicksilver *Scherzo* ensues, and the movement closes with a coda, wherein the trio and the scherzo materials are merged against an unexpectedly darkening backdrop.

The finale opens with a gesture like a band striking up for a village dance. What follows is in fact a rather intricately textured movement, full of gaiety and wit. The main idea is a perpetual motion in the first violin, played against a simple rhythmic accompaniment. This idea soon gives way to other striking events: a syncopated, slimy rising figure that passes through all the instruments, and a more charming idea that gets explored thoroughly in the middle, developmental section of the movement. Especially notable is a section where the tempo suddenly speeds up, and the cello somewhat buffoonishly goes slipping and sliding up and down the banister. That section heralds the return of the opening music, and resurfaces later at the end of the movement; in this second sped-up section, the cello apparently inspires the other instruments to join more completely in the fun, and the movement comes to an exuberant close.

Program Note © 2009 by Misha Amory.

STEPHEN HARTKE (B. 1952)

“Night Songs for a Desert Flower” (2009)

“Night Songs for a Desert Flower” is, at heart, a book of madrigals for string quartet. I began the work thinking that I would be exploring the

fundamentally abstract nature of the medium, but quickly found that its intensely focused emotional qualities pushed me towards a work in which the structure of the movements was determined much more by the emotional element in the same way that the madrigal responds to the expressive demands of the text. As in madrigal cycles, there is a drama played out here, with the main arc contained within the first three movements. The last movement offers a dance of celebration followed by a brief *envoi* in a coda that disappears into the night.

“Night Songs for a Desert Flower” was commissioned for the Brentano String Quartet by the Harvard Musical Association and by Carnegie Hall.

Program Note © 2009 by Stephen Hartke.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

Quintet for Strings No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 87 (1846)

1809 was a momentous year. Franz Josef Haydn, the guiding hand and patron saint of music of the Classical Age, died; Austria was defeated by Napoleon once again and forced to accept a humiliating peace, while in Germany, Felix Mendelssohn was born to a newly prosperous and hard-working banking family, and the grandson of arguably the most important philosopher of the age.

During his lifetime, Felix Mendelssohn was first admired as a musical *wunderkind* then honored as a mature musician of miraculous gifts by an enthusiastic public and by royal patrons on both sides of the English Channel (Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in England and King Frederick William IV of Prussia). After his premature death in 1847 his fame began to wane and from the latter decades of the 19th Century through the first decades of the 20th, Mendelssohn was condescendingly viewed as a lightweight, a precocious boy whose genius, never tested by trials of poverty, professional *contretemps* or illness, failed to mature. This was in great part due a malicious campaign of targeted, anti-Semitic writings enthusiastically undertaken by Richard Wagner and others. But nothing, in fact, could have been further from the truth. Although raised in a privileged household, he worked as a man driven, urged on by his hard-working parents who never had reason to forget that only two generations before Felix, their famous ancestor, Moses, son of Mendel, had, at age 14, walked 80 miles to Berlin from his impoverished Jewish ghetto in Dessau in search of an education.

Throughout his childhood Felix was awakened by his father every morning at 5 a.m. to begin his studies. Before the age of 20 he was not

only a widely-acknowledged musical genius but a gifted graphic artist and accomplished linguist whose entry to the University of Berlin was granted on the basis of his translations from the Greek. The last years of his life were darkened by severe headaches and fatigue, despite which he continued a fast-paced schedule of conducting, organizing musical events, and travel. His many letters and essays shine with clarity of thought and elegance of expression. In the 1950s, when the Mendelssohn family archive was found and permission given to open it, 800 letters and several hundred unpublished compositions were discovered. This resulted, in 1963, in publication of the first serious biographical study, exposing the many inaccurate biographical sketches floating about, all resting on the same censored and inaccurate excerpts from his published correspondence—some still on library shelves to this day—and even forged material. A re-assessment of the scope and depth of his music, as well as a better understanding of a more appropriate performance esthetic restored him to the high esteem he had enjoyed during his too-brief life (like his father and his sister Fanny, he died of a cerebral hemorrhage. He was 38 years old).

Hearing this evening's beautiful, infrequently-played string quintet - one is struck by the sheer beauty and compelling nature of the music. It pulls you right in. Although there are no innovations of form or harmony or instrumentation, it is impossible to mistake this music for that of anyone else. It is unmistakably Mendelssohn by virtue of its sweeping phrases—as if blown by urgent winds of change—a sustained high energy, long, beautiful and lyrical melodic lines perfectly proportioned, a rich sense of warmth and comfort, and sheer sonic beauty.

It is not known what inspired Mendelssohn to write this late, impassioned work. It is in four movements, each with its own interest. The brilliant opening *Allegro vivace* is built entirely around a single theme, an inversion of that theme, and a striking rhythmic motif consisting of repeated triplets. It glows with triumphant energy and a masterful handling of his dignified harmonic language. The second movement, an ingratiating *Andante scherzando*, is a minuet in 6/8 time. Mendelssohn's characteristic motoric rhythm underpins the entire movement.

The melancholy lament that forms the third movement, *Adagio e lento*, is relieved at moments by a sublimely comforting hymn played on the cello and later the violin (the influence of a late Beethoven quartet?). It serves as a reminder of Mendelssohn's death the following year. In fact the Quintet was published posthumously from his exquisitely beautiful manuscript.

The fourth movement, *Allegro molto vivace*, is reminiscent of the finale of Mendelssohn's Octet. It presents a high-octane virtuosity, always on the move with passages of contrapuntal complexity whizzing by, only

occasionally slowed down by richly harmonized chordal passages. This delightful movement provides low anxiety for the listener—but not necessarily for the performer!

Program note © Nora Avins Klein, January, 2010.

Suggested reading:

Mendelssohn, A New Image of the Composer & His Age, by E. Werner (1963)

Mendelssohn, A Life in Music, by R. L. Todd (2003)

Brentano String Quartet

Since its inception in 1992, the Brentano String Quartet has appeared throughout the world to popular and critical acclaim. Within a few years of its formation, the Quartet garnered the first Cleveland Quartet Award and the Naumburg Chamber Music Award; and in 1996 the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center invited them to be the inaugural members of Chamber Music Society Two, a program that was to become a coveted distinction for chamber groups and individuals. The Quartet had its first European tour in 1997, and was honored in the U.K. with the Royal Philharmonic Award for Most Outstanding Debut at London's Wigmore Hall. This relationship continues with the Brentano serving as "Quartet-in-Residence" in 2000-2001 and regular appearances there since then.

In recent seasons the Quartet has traveled widely, appearing all over the United States and Canada, in Europe, Japan and Australia. It has performed in many of the world's most prestigious venues. The Quartet has participated in summer festivals at Aspen, the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, the Edinburgh Festival, the Kuhmo Festival in Finland, the Taos School of Music and the Caramoor Festival.

In addition to performing the entire two-century range of the standard quartet repertoire, the Brentano Quartet has a strong interest in both very old and very new music. It has performed many musical works pre-dating the string quartet as a medium, among them madrigals of Gesualdo, fantasias of Purcell, and secular vocal works of Josquin. The Quartet has commissioned works from Charles Wuorinen, Bruce Adolphe, Steven Mackey, David Horne and Gabriela Frank. The Quartet celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2002 by commissioning ten composers to write companion pieces for selections from Bach's Art of Fugue.

In 1998, cellist Nina Lee joined the Quartet, succeeding founding member Michael Kannen. The following season the Quartet became the

first Resident String Quartet at Princeton University. The Quartet's duties at the University are wide-ranging, including performances at least once a semester, as well as workshops with graduate composers, coaching undergraduates in chamber music, and assisting in other classes at the Music Department.

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.

*Visit the Brentano String Quartet on the World Wide Web at
brentanoquartet.com.*

James Dunham

James Dunham is an internationally known soloist, chamber musician and teacher. Formerly violist of the Grammy Award winning Cleveland Quartet, he has collaborated with such renowned artists as Emanuel Ax, Joshua Bell, Richard Goode, Lynn Harrell, Cho-Liang Lin, Sabine Meyer, Bernard Greenhouse and members of the American, Guarneri, Juilliard, Takács and Tokyo Quartets. He has also worked with such composers as Milton Babbitt, Elliott Carter, Paul Chihara, Gunther Schuller and others.

Mr. Dunham is a frequent guest artist with groups such as Houston Friends of Music, Da Camera of Houston, Musicians from Marlboro, the Boston Chamber Music Society and the Borromeo, Cassatt, Cavani, Colorado, Fine Arts, Mendelssohn, Miami, Pacifica and Ying Quartets. In addition to his chamber music activities, Mr. Dunham has given concerto and recital performances throughout the U.S. and served as guest principal viola with the Boston Symphony under Seiji Ozawa and the Dallas Symphony under Andrew Litton in their home cities as well as at Carnegie Hall.

Currently Professor of Viola and Chamber Music at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music, he directs their Advanced Quartet Studies Program. Mr. Dunham formerly taught at the New England Conservatory where he also chaired the String Department. As a member of the Cleveland Quartet he also served as Professor of Viola at the prestigious Eastman School of Music. A devoted teacher, he frequently presents viola and chamber music master classes at leading schools and universities including Tokyo's Toho School, Freiburg's *Hochschule für Musik*, Beijing's Central Conservatory, Boston and Northwestern Universities, USC, UCLA and the Royal Conservatory in Toronto.

Mr. Dunham was violist of the renowned Cleveland Quartet from 1987 through its final recordings and concerts in December 1995. The Quartet

won the 1996 Grammy for "Best Chamber Music Performance" for their Telarc recording of John Corigliano's String Quartet, written for their final tour. Mr. Dunham received his Bachelor and Master of Fine Arts degrees from California Institute of the Arts. While at Cal-Arts, he was a founding member of the Sequoia Quartet, winners of the 1978 Naumburg International Chamber Music Award, and in 1991 he received the Cal-Arts Music School's first Distinguished Alumni Award.

Mr. Dunham is much sought after as a jurist for events such as the Fischhoff, Coleman and William Primrose Competitions, and has also been a featured soloist at the International Viola Congress. His summer activities include teaching and performing at many festivals, including those of Marlboro, Domaine Forget, Aspen, Sarasota, Amelia Island (FL), Yale at Norfolk and Musicorda. He served as principal violist of the San Diego Mainly Mozart Festival for ten seasons, and is a regular participant in the Festival der Zukunft in Ernen, Switzerland.

Visit James Dunham on the World Wide Web at jamesdunham.com.

PLAN AHEAD FOR OUR 50TH!

Houston Friends of Chamber Music will celebrate its 50th anniversary during the 2010-2011 season. In addition to a newly commissioned composition by Shepherd School faculty composer, Pierre Jalbert, to be premiered by The Emerson String Quartet, the season will include many of your favorite ensembles.

Pick up the 2010-2011 brochure in the lobby tonight!

Subscribers to our current season who renew for the coming 2009-2010 season will have the first choice of seats when they then renew again for the 2010-2011 season. The anniversary season is expected to be well attended and will include some special events to celebrate this exciting milestone.

We hope you will be there to celebrate!