"Passionate, uninhibited, and spellbinding"
—London Independent

Brentano String Quartet

Saturday, October 17, 2015
Riverside Recital Hall
Hancher
University of Iowa

HANCHER

THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

A collaboration with the University of Iowa String Quartet Residency Program with further support from the Ida Cordelia Beam Distinguished Visiting Professor Program.

THE PROGRAM

BRENTANO STRING QUARTET

Mark Steinberg *violin*
Serena Canin *violin*
Misha Amory *viola*
Nina Lee *cello*

Selections from *The Art of the Fugue*
Johann Sebastian Bach

Quartet No. 3, Op. 94
Benjamin Britten

Duets: With moderate movement
Ostinato: Very fast
Solo: Very calm
Burlesque: Fast - con fuoco
Recitative and Passacaglia (La Serenissima): Slow

Intermission

Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 67
Johannes Brahms

Vivace
Andante
Agitato (Allegretto non troppo)
Poco Allegretto con variazioni

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

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

www.brentanoquartet.com

THE ARTISTS

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."

In 2014, the Brentano Quartet succeeded the Tokyo Quartet as Artists in Residence at Yale University, departing from their fourteen-year residency at Princeton University. The quartet also currently serves as the collaborative ensemble for the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition.

The quartet has performed in the world's most prestigious venues, including Carnegie Hall and Alice Tully Hall in New York; the Library of Congress in Washington; the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam; the Konzerthaus in Vienna; Suntory Hall in Tokyo; and the Sydney Opera House. The quartet had its first European tour in 1997, and was honored in the U.K. with the Royal Philharmonic Award for Most Outstanding Debut.

The Brentano Quartet is known for especially 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 on November 22, 1963. Other recent commissions include a piano quintet by Vijay Iyer, a work by Eric Moe (with Christine Brandes, soprano), and a new viola quintet by Felipe Lara (performed with violist Hsin-Yun Huang). In 2012, the quartet provided the central music (Beethoven opus 131) for the critically acclaimed independent film *A Late Quartet*.

The quartet has worked closely with other important composers of our time, among them Elliot Carter, Charles Wuorinen, Chou Wen-chung, Bruce Adolphe, and György Kurtág. The quartet has also been privileged to collaborate with such artists as soprano Jessye Norman, pianist Richard Goode, and pianist Mitsuko Uchida.

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

PROGRAM NOTES

Selections from *The Art of the Fugue*
Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

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, for 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 which 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 discoursing 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 subjects 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 No. 3, Op. 94
Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

Benjamin Britten's Third String Quartet, written in autumn 1975, is among the very last works he completed. Decades had passed since his first two quartets, written in the early 1940s, just before the opera *Peter Grimes* catapulted him to international fame. After that event, Britten was first and foremost a composer of vocal works, especially opera and large-scale choral pieces; in fact, after *Grimes* nearly every purely instrumental composition he wrote was at the

urging of one performer or another (for example, the five cello works written in the 1960s, for which we have Mstislav Rostropovich to thank).

In the case of the Third Quartet, it was the Amadeus Quartet who approached the composer, being well acquainted with him from his festival in Aldeburgh. String quartet writing could not be further from the operatic genre for which Britten is best known; one wonders how he felt as he re-engaged with this tightly wrapped, economical medium, which he had not used for 30 years. The resulting work is ephemeral, fantastical, delicate, and characterful, a five-movement piece that the composer briefly considered entitling Divertimento for its many colors and contrasts.

The first movement, "Duets," is in a way the most abstract of the five. As the title suggests, it is an exploration of how two voices can be paired. At the opening we hear not so much a duet as a double helix; the two voices are closely twinned, murmuring, nudging each other into gentle, dancelike gestures. Later the idea of a duet becomes more adversarial, with a shift from the easy, triple rhythms of the opening to a rougher, battering duple rhythm. This ultimately melts away to a return of the opening idea, followed yet later by a coda section of great intimacy, marked "very quiet," where the opening twinned idea is now played between strummed and bowed chords. The movement evaporates with an ethereal chord which is intoned a few times between fragments of the opening idea—a duet of materials, so to speak—with the ethereal chord coming last and softest.

The second movement, "Ostinato," evokes a feeling of helpless mania. Writing in a kind of C major, Britten uses the Lydian mode, where one of the scale degrees is raised a half step, with a slightly giddy effect. The idea of an ostinato, where a musical pattern is repeated over and over in the background, here takes the shape of a rising, jagged, quarter-note figure, that is used to drive the music onward. Disconcertingly, total silences interrupt this forward momentum from time to time. In the middle of the movement, a more lyrical section intervenes (with the ostinato still chugging quietly behind the scenes), ultimately winding up in a blissed-out B-major world. The more robust music from the opening returns for a short time, reaches a furious climax, and then ultimately fizzles; the final bars are a kind of musical shrug.

The third movement features the first violin as its "Solo." The writing here is quite spare, and we feel as if we are in a very high place, with thin air and a stark landscape. The lone violin line, moving trancelike through wide intervals, is accompanied mostly by only one other voice at a time, ascending slowly up an alpine slope. In the middle, this suspended texture gives way abruptly to a sudden outburst of bright, hard birdsong, ringed around with major-key triads; it is as if the composer is contemplating his great contemporary, Olivier Messiaen, across the English Channel, and refracting him through a Britten-esque prism.

With the fourth movement, a brief "Burlesque," we are rudely shoved back into the world of parodic entertainment, a violent-textured scene of buffoonery. The main section is full of off-balance, rhythmic jokes, but the atmosphere is rough and almost hostile. This melts away quite suddenly to a middle section of stilted delicacy, a music box on the verge of breaking. After a frozen moment, the main section re-erupts, this time larger than life, muscled and euphoric to the end.

The fifth movement is entitled "La Serenissima," a reference to Venice. The movement's ties to this city are twofold. First, the opening section of the movement, a disembodied, swaying texture punctuated by free solos for each instrument, quotes liberally from Britten's own last opera, *Death in Venice*. Secondly, Britten was actually staying in Venice when he wrote this movement, and the walking bassline that underpins the main passacaglia section is based on chiming bells that Britten could hear from his hotel room. The effect of this main section is mesmerizing: a slow, stepwise melody, played in syncopation against the patient walking bass, evokes a state of deep meditation and sadness. At the same time, the key of E major seems to bestow a special radiance on this sunken state. Gradually, as the theme passes to each of the four instruments, the texture diversifies, awakens, and reaches a swirling, arpeggiated climax. As the music subsides into a quieter texture, the first violin introduces a second theme which is distinguished by an upward sweep to a glowing harmonic; this is passed to the inner voices for a time, and finally the old theme reappears one more time. This time around, it seems not to have the strength to complete even one full cycle, coming to rest on a sustained note while gentle plucked notes ascend into the ether; the passacaglia is breaking down. Finally the bassline makes one last attempt, and the music freezes on an unresolved, forte chord, which Britten called "a question." If this movement depicts an old man confronting death, there is beauty and resignation, but also uncertainty: a life does not close neatly like a book in its two hard covers.

— © Misha Amory

Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 67
Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

In the summer of 1875, the 42-year-old Brahms was summering in the beautiful German town of Ziegelhausen, and trying to avoid working on his special bugbear, the First Symphony. Instead he wrote quite a lot of other beautiful music, including his Third String Quartet, all of which he dismissed in a letter to a friend as "trifles," a way to put off the serious work that lay ahead. In the event, he didn't procrastinate for long, as the symphony was published and premiered the following year; and the Third Quartet, according to Joseph Joachim, was later to become his favorite of the three quartets.

While this quartet may have been a "trifle" to its composer, there is nothing trivial about it—or its predecessors—for string quartets who undertake to play it. It is common knowledge to performers of Brahms's chamber music that the sextets, and many quintets, that he wrote are kinder to their performers than the string quartets. The sound palette of Brahms's musical imagination was of a peculiar richness and depth, to the point that five or six performers provided the right natural sonority, but four would find themselves just that much more taxed, their resources that much more stretched. This difference works its way into the skin of the quartets, making them more interestingly effortful and craggy, subtly altering their essence. As one listens to this music, one senses a tension between the large sound-concept and the slightly smaller box that it has been fit into, which places its own stamp on the piece, independent of the musical content itself.

Brahms's Third Quartet truly sounds like the work of a man on his summer holiday. Especially in its outer movements there is a feeling of the countryside, of sunshine. The first movement has strong ties to the same movement of Mozart's "Hunt" Quartet. Aside from sharing its key and its meter—fairly superficial traits—the Brahms evokes the atmosphere of the hunt from the very

opening, imitating hunting horns perhaps even more faithfully than Mozart's music. In many of its most important melodies and motifs it specifically recalls similar material from the earlier piece. And, perhaps most importantly, there seems a conscious effort at simplicity of harmony and texture in many sections, from a composer who, like Mozart, was known for music that was often sophisticated, intricate, and dark. In the main melody at the opening, Brahms uses the simplest call-and-response, a quiet playful idea that is trumpeted back immediately in forte; this exchange continues, evoking a child's game of monkey see, monkey do, rare and disarming in its artlessness. Much later, we hear the other main idea of the movement, a basic skipping up and down a few steps of a major scale, again an evocation of child's play, written intentionally to be rhythmically and harmonically as simple as possible. This is not to say that the movement is devoid of darker or more complicated music—there is quite a lot of shadow, as well as plenty of involved counterpoint—but at the movement's close we are left with a recollection of sunny, carefree laughter, a conscious setting-aside of worry and convolution.

The second movement is one of the most beautiful and extraordinary slow movements Brahms ever wrote, despite a crowded field of contenders. A hushed unison opening branches out into harmony, introducing a tender and reaching aria for the first violin. Again we are struck by the simplicity of the rhythm in this melody (although the harmonic underpinnings are now richer and more chromatic, more typically Brahms); perhaps the singer is young, sweetly naïve, discovering first love. The contrasting middle section presents a fiercer, prouder idea in dotted rhythms, which alternates with a smoother, more mysterious choral response; this world is plural, the many voices in concert rather than the single, private one. From here the first violin embarks on a wandering fantasy of 16ths, meeting a partner (the second violin) with whom he conducts a difficult, searching conversation. Ultimately the music reaches an anguished climax, after which we are eased into a return of the opening song—this time shared between the cello and first violin, an easier, more graceful exchange than the earlier one. An expressive coda returns to the arching gesture which opened the movement, exploring it more fervently, and reaches another passionate climax before closing at last with a prayerful cadence.

The third movement is a different story: troubled, elusive, and restless, yet graceful too, evoking an unnameable dance. Now the viola is the hero, singing out boldly while the other instruments, muted, band together in shadowy support. The "Agitato" in the movement's title is felt rhythmically—in the persistent, obsessive rhythms of the opening idea, in the tendency towards hemiola (grouping beats in twos against the movement's triple meter), and in moments that halt and jar ill-fittingly. But there is also a latent agitato feel in the harmony of the music, which wanders, changes key constantly, and shades towards minor even in major-key passages. The first violin often steps forward, a counterpart to the viola, sometimes agreeing with him, sometimes interrogating and confronting him, providing a kind of balance without which the music might tilt dangerously out of control. A shorter middle "Trio" section provides a lighter, more tightly structured contrast: at first the three muted instruments play a fragmented, graceful tune, then the viola enters and sings a mournful melody against its repetition. After the return of the main section, and the climax which it attains a second time, a strangely calm coda follows, bringing a disconsolate almost-peace, an uneasy conclusion to the movement.

With the finale, the mood of the piece returns to the geniality of the opening movement, though not at first matching its energy. Here we have a set of

variations, which recalls the finale of Beethoven's "Harp" Quartet so strongly that it seems like an homage of sorts. As with the Beethoven, the movement is a lighter companion to three more intense preceding movements. Both the Beethoven and the Brahms feature a quite short, slightly irregular theme in two repeated sections, charmingly laconic, playing it close to the vest. The two movements also share many details: a variation where the cello plays repeated triplet notes under legato duple rhythms in the other instruments, an early variation featuring the viola, and a fantasy-like coda. However, the Brahms movement deviates from the script when, after several variations have gone by, the music from the first movement stages a kind of invasion, crashing in and assuming command of the proceedings for a while. But the variation structure persists, despite the intrusion, and ultimately we perceive that the invading forces are subsumed in the landscape of the music, though they never disappear entirely. Late in the coda, the storyline flags, gently losing momentum and finally coming to a near-halt, before the movement is swept to a close in one joyous flourish.

— © Misha Amory

The following additional note about Brahms' Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 67 has been provided by Arthur Canter, the longtime and much loved writer of Hancher's program notes.

Brahms, as an advocate of Classical principles, remained faithful to the tradition of the sonata-form, rondo, passacaglia, fugue, and variation at a time when there was increasing interest in composers to adopt the Romantic style of compositions. He avoided intensification of his melodies in his compositions and argued against harmony with exaggerated colorization. He was reputed to have despised programmatic music which uses sound as a means of painting pictures or telling stories. However, despite his being branded as a die-hard anti-Romanticist, Brahms composed delightful melodies, fluid rhythms, and rich harmonies that were more musically in tune with his own era than those of many of his critics. In essence, he succeeded in reconciling two seemingly conflicting musical styles, the Classic and the Romantic.

Brahms was also known to be a perfectionist. He once counseled a friend regarding composition to "go over it again and again until there is not a bar you could improve on." His attitude was that for a piece to be beautiful or not was one thing, "but perfect it must be." Considering his personality traits and his allegiance to the logic of Classical music, it is not surprising that he should have delayed so long in producing the two forms of music which Beethoven had mastered—the string quartet and the symphony.

Brahms himself spoke of having spent some 20 years working on 20 trials at string quartets. How many of these works were completed or only partially worked on before being destroyed was never revealed. He began work on a string quartet at the instigation of violinist Joseph Joachim in the early 1850s, and it is known that he spent at least ten years revising and reworking this quartet. When questioned about his apparent difficulty with a quartet, he is known to have remarked, "It is not hard to compose, but what is fabulously hard is to leave the superfluous notes under the table." Finally, in the summer of 1873, he completed two string quartets to his satisfaction and submitted them for publication a few months later as opus 51.

For the next three years Brahms followed his usual busy schedule of concerts and working on several compositions at one time. Among them were the B-flat Major String Quartet and his First Symphony. During the summer of 1875, while on a relaxed vacation in Ziegelhausen, near Heidelberg, he completed the Quartet after having put the finishing touches on the First Symphony. It has been suggested that the final structure of the Quartet may have served as a vehicle to celebrate the end of his years of labor and suffering to complete the First Symphony. Some even consider the Quartet as a parody of the Symphony. Whatever its inspiration, the B-flat Major Quartet, his last work in that medium, is regarded as the most carefree and lighthearted of the composer's chamber works. It was given a private hearing by Joachim and his ensemble in the home of Clara Schumann on May 23, 1876. Then it was performed again on June 4, 1876, for a small circle of friends at Joachim's home before the composer was satisfied to have it published as opus 67 and ready for its public premiere. This took place in Berlin, performed by the Joachim Quartet, on October 30, 1876, only five days before the long awaited premiere of his First Symphony.

While the formal and thematic structure of the Quartet follows a classical pattern, there are many innovative alterations. The first movement (Vivace) opens with a fast-paced merry dance theme first sounded by the hunting horn. It is caught up and tossed around with shifts in accents that lend a playful character to the music. The horn call returns as if to signal the second theme, which proceeds in the same joyous mode with contrasting accents before changing into a rhythmic slow polka-like dance. The two different meters are bandied about, back and forth, at times overlapping, and brought to a conclusion in the cadence of the opening hunting horn call.

The second movement (Andante) is constructed in three parts (ABA). After a brief introduction, the violin "sings" a long peaceful melody that overrides a rather thick accompaniment. It is interrupted by a sequence of angry-sounding bursts which subside, and the opening material returns to bring the movement to a quiet close.

Although the third movement, a scherzo in form, is marked *Agitato* (agitated), its tempo is waltz-like. Brahms referred to the third movement as "the tenderest and most impassioned movement I have ever written." It is a lyrical piece with a most remarkable sound in that all instruments, except the viola, are muted. (Considering the composer's fondness for this husky voice, whether for instrumental or vocal pieces, it is not surprising that the viola should be so featured.) The trio section continues to emphasize the sound of the viola.

The finale (Poco Allegretto con variazioni), which has been called by the biographer Karl Geiringer "the nucleus of the whole work," is a set of eight variations on a simple melody that is likened to a folk song. The first two variations feature the viola while the following two find the first violin playing its usual dominant role. The next two variations play off the different note configurations of the various instruments against each other. In the seventh variation, the hunting horn tune from the first movement suddenly pops in, and the eighth variation takes on a transition passage from the first movement. The finale closes with the brilliant union of the melodies of the first and last movements of the Quartet.

—Arthur Canter

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IOWA STUDENTS FIRST IN THE QUEUE WITH LUCKY PLUSH

Dance theatre company Lucky Plush Productions participated in a week-long residency leading up to their performance of *The Queue* this past September. Ensemble members engaged with students in several departments in the Division of Performing Arts, facilitating workshops in dance, choreography, arts education, and arts management. Students participating in workshops at Mann Elementary were treated to a short performance before being invited to create dance theatre pieces of their own.

All photos by Miriam Alarcón Avila

Above: Lucky Plush company member Melinda Myers led three UI dance classes.
Below: Lucky Plush founding artistic director Julia Rhoads spoke to students in an Arts Leadership Seminar at the University of Iowa.
Opposite: Company members Benjamin Wardell, Elizabeth Luse, and Marc Macaranas conducted workshops at Horace Mann Elementary School.


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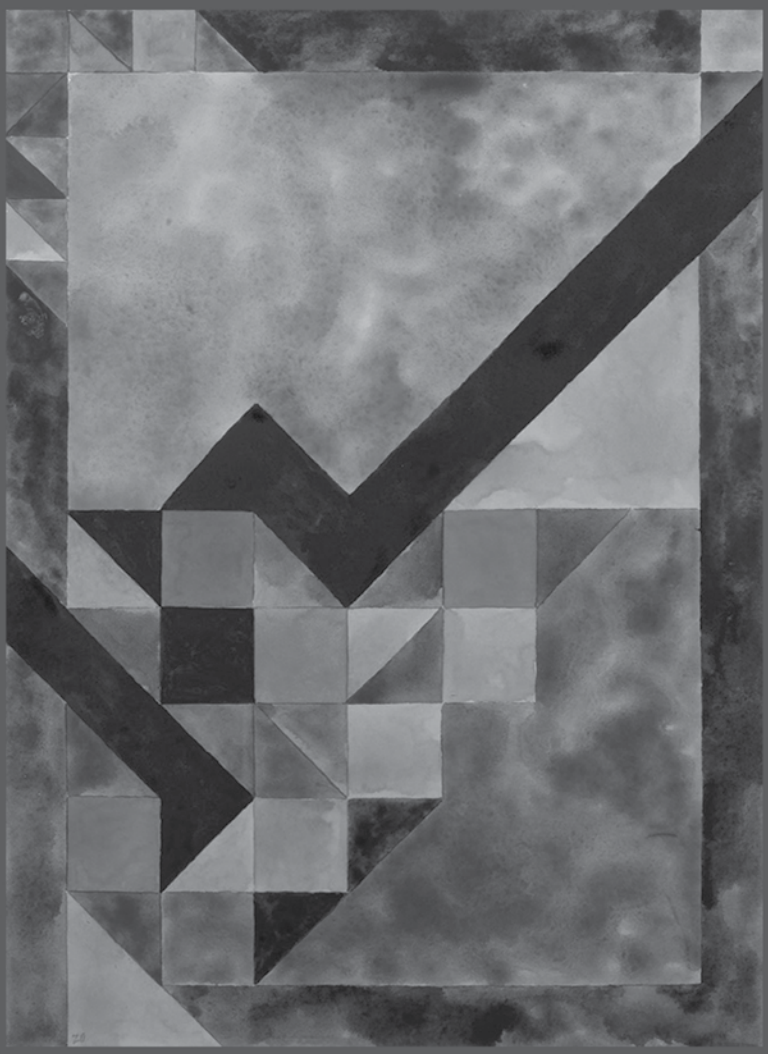

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