Chamber music

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THIRTY-NINTH SEASON

STUDE CONCERT HALL * ALICE PRATT BROWN HALL * RICE UNIVERSITY
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3, 1998, 8:00 P.M.

This concert is dedicated to the memory of Stephen William Umoff.

THE BRENTANO STRING QUARTET

Mark Steinberg, Violin • Serena Canin, Violin
Misha Amory, Viola • Michael Kannen, Cello

PROGRAM

FRANZ JOSEF HAYDN (1732-1809)
Quartet in B Flat, Op. 71, No. 1
Allegro • Adagio
Minuet: Allegretto • Finale: Vivace

NICHOLAS MAW (1935-) Quartet No. 3 (1994)
Moderato grazioso e simplice • Larghetto pesante
Presto volante • Allegro marcato
Lento molto

...Intermission...

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
Quartet in E Minor, Op. 59, No. 2
Allegro • Adagio molto
Allegretto • Finale: Presto

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QUARTET IN B FLAT, OP. 71, NO. 1

FRANZ JOSEF HAYDN

After his experience with composing for and performing in large halls for the Salomon concerts in London, Haydn seems to have approached the task of writing six quartets for Count Anton Apponyi with some new ideas. In the summer of 1763 Haydn composed the quartets, which were published in two sets, three as opus 71, and three as opus 74. Melvin Berger describes some of the new features of these quartets that make them more suitable for a public hall than a private chamber: the part writing is more brilliant, the melodies more memorable, and there is "a general intensification of all aspects, particularly the emotional content of the music."

The first of these quartets, in B-flat major, begins with a dramatic gesture: five loud chords designed to capture the attention of a larger audience. The movement proceeds with a sedate theme, then quickly becomes more active. A repeat of the first theme leads to a climbing motif in the first violin and cello accompanied by busy middle voices. The first theme returns in quieter guise, and leads to five chords that close the exposition in the dominant key. The exposition is then repeated without the opening chords, followed by the development, which is full of brilliant passagework for the first violin. A more compact recapitulation brings the movement to a brief coda ending in two strong chords.

The *Adagio*, in F major, is in a pastoral 6/8 time, with all parts sharing the frequently chromatic material. The movement begins with two repeated sections; a transitional section modulates into and out of the minor, and when the first section returns, the parts are slightly decorated.

The Minuet begins with contrasting loud and low statements against high and soft answers, and in the second part, counterpoint contrasts with a simpler texture. The Trio, with its staccato eighth notes, contrasts with the smoother Minuet.

The finale is characteristically lively and witty, with rapid passagework in all the parts, syncopation, and ricochet triplets in the violins. The movement is in sonata form, the development beginning with staggered contrapuntal entrances starting in the cello. After much brilliance, the movement ends quietly.

This is the first performance of this work on a Friends of Music concert.

Program note by Edward Doughtie

QUARTET NO. 3 (1994)

NICHOLAS MAW

Nicholas Maw has been a very active composer in his native England as well as in the United States. His output has been extremely varied both in terms of his chosen genres (operas, orchestral works, choral music, songs, and much chamber music) and style. He studied composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London in the 1950s and won the Lili Boulanger Prize which allowed him to study with Nadia Boulanger and Max Deutsch in Paris. His early works used the serial techniques of Schoenberg and Webern, with disparate influences of Bartók, Britten, and Stravinsky. He did not shy away from richly expressive and even violent gestures, however. In spite of such a wide range of emotional and stylistic stances, his music almost always exploits layered harmonies that can be described as "pantonal." His own explanation of his attitude towards harmony is as follows: "My version of tonality is of course not tonality in the old sense at all; it's much more loosely defined. Sometimes, for example, my music

could be said to be not *in* a key but *on* a key, or at least on a triadic area . . . I don't consider it a system, but a language."

This is the Houston premiere of this work.

Program note by Bruce Gustafson

QUARTET IN E MINOR, OP. 59, NO. 2

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

In 1805 the Russian Ambassador to Vienna, Count (later to be Prince) Razumovsky, commissioned Beethoven to write a set of quartets, each of which was to incorporate music from his native country. It was probably he who supplied Beethoven with a printed collection of folk songs from Russia for this purpose. A major patron of the arts in the Vienna of his day, the count had become Russia's ambassador to that city in 1790. Incredibly, this highly educated man was the grandson of an illiterate Cossack peasant. His uncle had become the lover of the Empress Elisabeth, ultimately inheriting a huge fortune through her which he passed on to his nephews, one of whom became the count. Razumovsky used his inheritance to amass an important collection of paintings and furniture which he housed in the Viennese palace which he bought and presented to his government to serve as the Russian embassy. He patronized Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, and it was he who founded and supported the Schuppanzigh Quartet, first of the great string quartets.

As to Beethoven, in the six years since he had published his Opus 18 quartets, Napoleon's army had come and gone from Vienna; he had struggled to come to terms with his growing deafness, successfully weathering a deep, possibly suicidal depression. By 1805 he had completed his first version of *Fidelio*, the Fourth Symphony and the Violin Concerto as well as most of the "Appassionata" Sonata and the Fourth Piano Concerto. He started work on the quartets in the Spring of 1806, finishing all three by the end of the year. They were not well received. Even the most musically sophisticated were unprepared to grasp his new vision of string quartet writing which encompassed increased intricacy of ensemble, an extension of the physical range for each instrument, more democratic distribution of musical material as well as a musicical language often fragmented, condensed, rhythmically complex and more abstract. All of this gave a symphonic scope to what had previously been a more restricted and modest *genre*. Beethoven's biographer Thayer describes the resentment inspired by these changes: a cellist who flung his score off the music stand and trampled on it; an audience which burst into laughter during a scherzo; a pronouncement that another movement was "a patchwork by a madman." The quartets were deemed "not generally comprehensible," "a waste of money," "not music," "crazy music," "very long and very difficult." But also: "deep in thought, well-worked out" —the sentiment which was ultimately to prevail.

The opening movement of Opus 59, No. 2, marked *Allegro*, is in sonata form. It begins with two stormy chords immediately followed by silence, then by three short related subjects of sharply contrasting mood from which the fragmented melodic themes and vigorously exploited rhythmic elements of the rest of the movement are derived. The energy and tension of this movement stem from the alternation of a gentle 6/8 rhythm against slashing chords, silences, changes of rhythmic accent, sudden dynamic changes, and false harmonic cadences. The supremely concise development section focuses on rhythmic elements and harmonic modulations. The coda, too,

emphasizes the rhythmic and harmonic so that the arrival of the *Molto adagio* comes as an enormous contrast in mood. This grandly melodious second movement marked "to be played with great feeling" was inspired, according to Beethoven's student Carl Czerny, "when contemplating the starry sky and thinking of the music of the spheres." It too is in sonata form. It opens with an elegiac chorale richly decorated with long, sustained, archaicly harmonized chords. The chorale then appears in a variety of musical settings—as an aria, a march, and a musette before ending in a long coda .

The third movement, a Scherzo and Trio marked *Allegretto,* starts out as a three-legged waltz, stumbling and off-balance. It leads abruptly to the famous Russian folk tune, "Slava Bogu ne nebe, Slava!" ("Glory to God in Heaven, Glory!"), later used by other composers, notably Moussorgsky in the Coronation Scene of *Boris Godounov.* Beethoven plays with this cheerful, dance-like theme, giving it first to the viola, then writing a set of three variations featuring each of the other instruments. Thereafter he allows the melody to accompany itself, turning it into a "round" in the manner of "Frere Jacques." Thus, this simple peasant tune cleverly contorts itself into a scholarly maze of dissonance which Beethoven, with sublime indifference, allows to spin out before relieving the listener with a merciful return to traditional harmony. We can only hope that with this display of contrapuntal mastery Razumovsky, at least, felt he had gotten his money's worth!

The finale, a *Presto* in sonata rondo form, starts out in the wrong key, settling firmly into the "right" key of E minor only after a series of dramatic shifts through a variety of harmonic regions. Thus, it is no simple rondo. It provides an immensely energetic and provocative finale—a furious gallop on horseback—to this varied and richly complex quartet.

This is the eleventh time this work has appeared on a Friends of Music program; it was last played by the American Quartet in February 1998.

Program note © by Nora Avins Klein

THE BRENTANO STRING QUARTET

Named for Antoine Brentano, a candidate for Beethoven's "Immortal Beloved," the quartet was formed in 1992 when Serena Canin, Mark Steinberg, and Misha Amory, who had met while studying at Juilliard, joined with cellist Michael Kannen. In its relatively short lifetime, the quartet has won praise for its technical brilliance, musical insight, and stylistic elegance. The quartet won the 1995 Naumberg Chamber Music Award and the 10th Annual Martin E. Segal Award. For their first appearance in Great Britain, the quartet was given the Royal Philharmonic Society Music Award for 1997. The first quartet in residence at New York University, the quartet was chosen by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center to participate in the inaugural season of Chamber Music Society Two. They have performed at Alice Tully Hall in New York, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and at other cities in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. They have participated in such festivals as the Caramoor International Music Festival, Festival De Divonne, Chatauqua, Interlochen, Chamber Music Northwest, and the San Luis Obispo Mozart Festival, and have been heard on Public Radio's "St. Paul Sunday Morning." The Sixth String Quartet of Milton Babbitt and two quartets by Bruce Adolphe were written especially for them.