

# *Leipzig String Quartet*

ANDREAS SEIDEL, VIOLIN

TILMAN BÜNING, VIOLIN

IVO BAUER, VIOLA

MATTHIAS MOOSDORF, CELLO

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2003

## — PROGRAM —

*String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 18, No. 6 ("La Malinconia")*

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Allegro con brio

Adagio, ma non troppo

Scherzo: Allegro

La Malinconia: Adagio - Allegretto quasi allegro

*Lyric Suite* ALBAN BERG (1885-1935)

Allegretto gioiale

Andante amoroso

Allegro misterioso

Adagio appassionato

Presto delirando

Largo desolato

## — INTERMISSION —

*String Quartet in C Minor, Op. 51, No. 1* JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Allegro

Poco Adagio

Allegretto molto moderato e comodo

Allegro

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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)  
*Quartet in B-Flat Major, Op.18, No.6* (1801)

From written records left by visitors one learns that no city in Europe was more focused on its pleasures than Vienna of the early nineteenth century, during Beethoven's time. Stendhal, an eye-witness to the era, explains it in terms of the political system then in force: public gatherings in the name of art, and particularly for the performance of instrumental music, provided a safe setting in what was in fact a period of political repression, with a system of spies and surveillance fore-shadowing the police state later to be put in place by Metternich. It is in this setting that Beethoven presented his Opus 18 set of six string quartets, premiered by the Schuppanzigh Quartet at the home of Prince Lichnowsky, in 1801.

The last to be published, Op. 18, No. 6 starts out in a light-hearted vein, reminiscent of *opera buffa*, notable for its economy of thematic material and harmonic progressions, as well as its light texture in a classic sonata form. The second movement is an elegant, melodic, even rhapsodic *da capo* aria of great simplicity, in marked contrast to the rollicking *Scherzo-Trio* which follows – in which Beethoven defies the listener to keep time, as duple and triple meter compete for attention. The absence of strong beats and the infrequency with which all four voices come together produces a musical roller coaster which ends only at the conclusion of the movement. This quartet is most famous for its last movement – the *Finale, La Malinconia*, with its soul-searching opening *Adagio*, alternating with a contemplative, good-natured *Allegretto quasi Allegro*. Not only are the mood-swings extraordinary, but Beethoven repeatedly uses an inverted ornamental turn beginning on the lower note, in contradistinction to the standard eighteenth-century start on the upper note, and a modulation to a distant key most unexpected in an otherwise rather harmonically traditional work. The madcap *Prestissimo* coda reassures the listener that he need not pay too much attention to all that serious stuff.

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Alban Berg (1885-1935)  
*Lyric Suite for String Quartet* (1925-1926)

Alban Berg is one of the three composers, along with Webern and Schoenberg, of what is called the Second Viennese School. His music was initially closely akin

to the high romanticism of Wagner, Hugo Wolf and Mahler. During his studies with Schoenberg and his association with Webern, he adopted the twelve-tone method, evolving a style noted for its clarity of design and originality of harmonic and melodic techniques. Of the famous trio of composers, Berg's music remains the most lyrical and expansive, and the least dissonant. Unfortunately, the composer died in 1935 from an abscess which could today be cured with a single dose of antibiotic.

Berg's *Lyric Suite* shows just how passionate and arresting twelve-tone music can be, although not all the movements are based on a twelve-tone row. Fifty years after its composition, the *raison d'être* of the piece was revealed with the discovery of Berg's annotated score, showing that part of the tone row are notes representing his initials and those of a married woman with whom he had fallen in love—the sister of Franz Werfel. Those who knew the history of the work called it “a latent opera,” based as it was on the secret love affair. Each movement represents a specific aspect of the affair: the first movement joyful; the second, a loving dedication to her and her children; the third and fourth movements their growing passions, the fifth descriptive of his “foreboding of the horrors and pains which are to come....” The final movement is a setting of Baudelaire's “De Profundis Clamavi,” a searing lament from the *Fleurs du Mal*. It contains, as well, a quote from *Tristan und Isolde*. Berg wrote and then hid a vocal line for this movement, finally deciphered in 1976 and performed for the first time in 1979 with Katherine Ciesinski.

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JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

### *String Quartet in C Minor, Op. 51, No. 1* (1873)

In the summer of 1873 Brahms wrote to his friend Theodor Billroth, the famous surgeon, “I am on the point of publishing string quartets – not the first, but for the first time.” Indeed, of the many he admitted to writing over the years, only three string quartets ultimately survived his self-scrutiny. Brahms was deeply preoccupied with traditional, classical forms which he saw as a necessary generating basis for his musical ideas. It was his belief that “a piece of music organized around the traditional sonata form should be nothing less than the unfolding of a single musical idea.” The *String Quartet* Op. 51, No.1 in C Minor is a wonderful example of this. Motifs throughout the composition are



related to each other not only within a single movement but throughout all four, and even the choice of key from one movement to the next forms a harmonious whole.

Each movement except the *Allegretto*, is focused around a single idea or two contrasting motives forming two halves of a whole. In the opening *Allegro*, these motives rise and fall with urgency, giving an overall sense of angst to this music.

The *Poco adagio (Romanze)* starts out with a three-note phrase which is a paraphrase of the opening of the first movement, albeit in a major key, with the first violin playing as it were a counter theme. One could look at this movement as a loose variation or expansion of the first movement.

Although not clearly thematically related to the other movements, the *Allegretto* is, like the first movement, agitated, almost breathless, and made up of contrasting rising and falling motives with seamless interplay among the four instruments. In the *animato* middle section, which shifts into a major key, Brahms makes use of a favorite device known as *bariolage* in which an instrument plays the same note on two different strings, setting up rich, penetrating overtones as a background to the other instruments.

The work ends with an *Allegro* whose main theme is generated from the opening movement. It is symphonic in its powerful utterances and contrasting tenderness, again making masterful use of counterpoint – the interweaving of the voices. Brahms seems to have known with a certainty that he had produced a masterpiece. Performers and audiences have never lost their love for this glorious work.

*Program note* © Nora Avins Klein, 2003

## *Leipzig String Quartet*

The *Neue Züricher Zeitung* has described the Leipzig String Quartet as “one of the towering and most versatile quartets of our time” and in 2002 *The New York Times* wrote “if there is a Leipzig sound, this is it!” The ensemble was founded in 1988 by Andreas Seidel and Tilman Büning, violins, Ivo Bauer, viola, and Matthias Moosdorf, violoncello – three members were first chairs in the famous Gewandhaus Orchestra. After studies with Gerhard Bosse, the Amadeus Quartet, Hatto Beyerle and Walter Levin, the quartet went on to win numerous prizes and awards, such as the 1991 international ARD Munich competition, and the Busch and Siemens prizes.

Today, the Leipzig String Quartet has concertized extensively on all continents. In North America, engagements include Carnegie Hall's quartet series at Weill Recital Hall, the 92nd St. Y, the Frick Collection, Wolf Trap, the Library of Congress, and chamber music series in major cities. Often offering its own thematic cycles, the Quartet was also one of the initiators of the 1996 and 1997 Beethoven Quartet Cycle offered jointly with five other quartets as a sign of European friendship in more than fifteen European music centers.

Since 1991, the ensemble has had its own concert series "Pro Quatuor" at the Gewandhaus where it presently offers a multi-year cycle of the major quartets of the First and Second Viennese School. Within that series the quartet played the world-premieres of Schnittke's *With Three* for string trio and orchestra as well as premieres of works by Steffen Schleiermacher, Viktor Ullmann, Wolfgang Rihm, and others. As of the 2003-2004 season, the ensemble will also have its own series at Amsterdam's Concertgebouw.

As a member of the Leipzig Ensemble Avantgard, the Quartet is dedicated to contemporary music and works by the classical moderns. With this ensemble, the Quartet ten years ago formed the "Musica Nova" series at the Gewandhaus, and was awarded the 1993 Schneider-Schott prize of the City of Mainz.

The Quartet's close to sixty recordings, spanning from Mozart to Cage, have been met with international critical acclaim and brought the group many awards. Their recordings of the complete Schubert quartet literature, a first, was considered by many the most important release for the Schubert year. Of eighteen recordings of the *Trout Quintet*, the French magazine *Répertoire* voted their recording with Christian Zacharias, piano, as the best recording there is of this work. The Quartet records exclusively for MDG.

Chamber music partners Michael Sanderling, Christian Zacharias, Alfred Brendel, Christiane Oelze and others enrich and expand the Quartet's already large repertoire.

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