



presents...

BRENTANO STRING QUARTET

Mark Steinberg | Violin
Serena Canin | Violin

Misha Amory | Viola
Nina Lee | Cello

Thursday, March 26, 2026 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

FRANZ JOSEF HAYDN **String Quartet in C Minor, Op. 17, No. 4 (1771)**

Moderato
Menuet. Allegretto - Trio
Adagio cantabile
Finale. Allegro

String Quartet in C Major, Op. 54, No. 2 (1788)

Vivace
Adagio
Menuetto. Allegretto - Trio
Finale. Adagio - Presto - Adagio

INTERMISSION

String Quartet in D Minor, Op. 103 (1806)

Andante grazioso
Menuetto, ma non troppo presto

String Quartet in D Major, Op. 20, No. 4 (1772)

Allegro di molto
Un poco adagio affettuoso
Menuetto. Allegretto alla zingarese - Trio
Presto scherzando

This performance is made possible in part by the generous support of Bruce and Carolyn Lowenthal.

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



ARTISTS PROFILES

San Francisco Performances presents the Brentano Quartet for the eighth time. It first performed in March 2006

With a career spanning over three decades, the **Brentano Quartet** has appeared throughout the world to popular and critical acclaim. *The New York Times* extols its “luxuriously warm sound [and] yearning lyricism; and the *Times* (London) hails their “wonderful, selfless music-making.” Known for its unique sensibility, probing interpretive style, and original programming, the Quartet has performed across five continents in the world’s most prestigious venues and festivals, thus establishing itself as one of the world’s preeminent ensembles.

Dedicated and highly sought after as educators, the Quartet has served as Artists-in-Residence at the Yale School of Music for the past decade. They also lead the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival and appear regularly at the Taos School of Music. Previously, the Quartet served for fifteen years as Ensemble-in-Residence at Princeton University.

In the 2025-26 concert season, the Quartet will tour throughout North America, including concerts in New York, Boston, Chicago, Vancouver, Detroit, San Francisco, and Denver. They will perform the complete Mozart Quintets with violist Hsin-Yun Huang in Philadelphia. Further afield, they will tour Spain in November 2025 and elsewhere in Europe in March 2026.

Formed in 1992, The Brentano Quartet has received numerous accolades, including, in 1995, the prestigious Naumburg and Cleveland Quartet Awards. They have been

privileged to collaborate with such artists as sopranos Jessye Norman and Dawn Upshaw; mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato; as well as pianists Mitsuko Uchida and Jonathan Biss. The Quartet has commissioned works from some of the most important composers of our time, including Bruce Adolphe, Matthew Aucoin, Gabriela Frank, Stephen Hartke, Vijay Iyer, Steven Mackey, Charles Wuorinen, Lei Liang, James MacMillan, and Melinda Wagner.

Notable recordings include Beethoven’s Quartet, Op. 131 (Aeon) which was featured in the 2012 film *A Late Quartet*, starring Philip Seymour Hoffman and Christopher Walken, and a 2017 live album with Joyce DiDonato, *Into the Fire—Live from Wigmore Hall* (Warner) Their most recent release features the K. 428 and K. 465 (“Dissonance”) quartets of Mozart for the Azica label.

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.

PROGRAM NOTES

FRANZ JOSEF HAYDN
(1732-1809)

String Quartet in C Minor, Op. 17, No. 4

Ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning both confuse and delight our senses. Misdirection enchants and invites discovery, suggesting richness beyond the immediately apparent. The ability to exploit this to magical effect reveals an artist in full

command of his or her powers.

One such artist is Diego Velázquez, who, in his seminal painting *Las Meninas*, from 1656, creates a canvas in which the viewer is made aware of the presence of the painter, the space around the scene depicted, and the coexistence of multiple focal points. Velázquez, himself, is shown in the act of painting a portrait of the king and queen, here seen only in a mirrored reflection, alongside the five year old Infanta with her ladies in waiting, as well as two dwarves, a dog, and other figures. We look at the painting, and some of the people in the painting seem to be looking at us, in turn, some beyond us, some at each other. Mastery in steering the gaze makes for a particularly complex and textured experience. In some sense, this is art about art, a vision created to explore the phenomenon of looking, itself. The painting reaches far beyond its two dimensional canvas, engaging the act of viewing with self-conscious artifice, rendering the scene vibrantly alive in the moment of its apprehension. It is a nearly impossible task to examine the painting without feeling included in the captured moment, the eye primed for manipulation, sent from place to place in the hope of gathering the scene into sense.

Just over a century later, in 1771, Joseph Haydn pens his *Quartet in C Minor, Op. 17 No. 4*, and the opening movement of this work, too, is conjured through magical and self-aware misdirection. Tonal harmony is largely predicated on collections of three notes creating chords with varying qualities, the most common being major and minor. Just as two points define the possibility of a line (two dimensions), while a third is needed to suggest a plane (three dimensions), of which there are still infinite possibilities available while only two points are known, likewise in music two notes leave open multiple interpretations of harmony, each with a different sense of space and texture. Haydn masterfully capitalizes upon this ambiguity. He chooses a key here, C Minor, that is often dark and melancholic. But the most obvious interpretation of the unaccompanied first two notes of this movement, as the ear gathers them toward a chord, would be as a launchpad for the key of E-Flat Major, rather more optimistic and noble. Only at the arrival of the third note are we made to understand where we truly stand. (Haydn wrote a piano sonata in the same key in the same year, and uses the exact same technique in the opening of that work, though it is far more quickly resolved there.) This

feint is used again and again in the movement, creating a sense of drift and discovery; we first see only the pointing finger, and only in the fullness of time come to see, each time anew, where it is directing our gaze. We are left guessing again and again, and revel in the cleverness and artful machinations of the composer. This is not unlike the breaking of the fourth wall in the theater, or the drawing of attention to the craft of narration in the midst of that very narration found in *Tristram Shandy*, by Laurence Sterne, an author to whom contemporaries often compared Haydn. There is formal misdirection here, as well: the composer twice leads us to believe, falsely, that we have come back to the opening idea before, at long last, once we have likely given up hope of finding our way back, allowing the recapitulation of the opening to take hold.

The *Minuet* movement is jovial, untroubled, and resonant, having cast aside the shadow of C Minor. But that shadow reasserts itself, in spades, in the contrasting trio section, which, oddly for a dance movement, competes in intensity and pathos with the more substantial first movement. Perhaps here, again, we become uncertain of our own vantage point, whether to find more truth in the scene before us or the hidden regions around its periphery.

The slow movement is an effulgent aria sung by the first violin, in the radiant key of E-Flat Major, the key we seem to have been promised at the opening of the work. The movement is earnest and highly sensitive. The playing style at that time would have been full of sentiment, featuring a wide variety of vocal inflections and colorations. Mozart owned a copy of Haydn's Op. 17 quartets in which he made multiple notations indicating the nuances of interpretation that would have been expected and appropriate, a highly stylized and mercurial way of playing, immediate and emotionally protean. Haydn himself indicates a florid ornamentation of the initial song when it returns for a second time. Perhaps if we were in Velásquez's painting we would be seeing the opera singer in the mirror.

The final movement of the work also refers outside of itself, often gesturing toward the symphonic in its energies and textures. Haydn wrote only a single symphony in C Minor (#95, out of 104!), much later than this quartet, but, strangely, the figuration that introduces the last movement here is nearly identical to the first motif of the opening movement of

that symphony. C Minor is also the key in which Haydn depicts Chaos at the start of *The Creation*, preceding the eruption of C Major where the Lord says "Let there be Light!" And, again, it is the key in which Haydn writes the movement illustrating the earthquake that followed the Crucifixion in the *Seven Last Words of Christ*, the ending of which is uncannily akin to the ending of this quartet. The movement is a marvel of at times feverish excitement, featuring textures both sophisticated and contrapuntal, and, in other moments, purely theatrical and tempestuous.

Throughout Haydn is the master of guiding our perceptions, directing and redirecting our gaze, suggesting slippages away from the conclusions the rhetoric suggests, and beyond the instrumental forces involved. Velásquez would have recognized a kindred spirit here, and we are all the richer for being taken in along the way.

—Program note © by Mark Steinberg

Quartet in C Major, Op. 54, No. 2

By the time Joseph Haydn composed his Opus 54 string quartets, he had been the house composer at the rural Hungarian estate of Esterhazy for more than 25 years. Living miles from Vienna and other cultural centers, it was rare for him to cross paths with a fellow creative artist, and he was largely on his own for inspiration; as he wrote, "I was cut off from the world; there was no one to confuse and torment me, and I was forced to become original."

Become original he certainly did, and the string quartet among other genres owes him abundant thanks. In his hands the quartet evolved from a light, harmless divertimento into a compelling art form full of color, drama and pathos; he not only channeled his natural musical imagination into the quartet, but also plumbed the textural, orchestrational and coloristic potential of four stringed instruments playing together in totally new ways. After composing several dozen quartet works, he could be said to have evolved a template of his own. The connoisseur of Haydn quartets, even as he would find fresh new surprises and beauties in each work to delight him, might claim to have certain expectations: a substantial, varied first movement, a lovely slow movement, a charming *Minuet* and a lively *Finale*. It is not only a sign but a defining feature of his genius that Haydn easily threw large parts

of this expected design into the trashcan when he pleased; and in his *Quartet Opus 54, No. 2*, he so pleased.

Not right away: the first movement is genial, sunny, brilliant Haydn at his usual best. The gates fly open with the first forte burst, a pirouetting melody which forges confidently forward—and runs almost immediately into a silence. Trying again, equally confidently, the melody answers itself and is halted yet again by a second silence. These rhetorical pauses are among Haydn's favorite devices, the blithely confident melody halted by a moment of doubt that calls everything into question, a higher intelligence teasing the presumptions of ordinary mortals. Although the music ultimately is able to find its way forward, the deal is clear: the listener is on guard, delightfully ready/unready for the next interruption. The music in this movement owes its elastic, dynamic motion to an almost uninterrupted flow of rapid notes, often virtuosically present in the first violin but passed also among the four voices; equally important is a two-note leaping idea, always athletically off the main beat, which appears in many guises and lifts the music upwards and forwards. When the beginning music returns, instead of the silences, the music mimics itself an octave higher: some rascal, offstage, is thumbing his nose, having fun at the main character's expense.

With the second movement we encounter an entirely different world. In 18th and 19th-century Europe, particularly within the Austro-Hungarian empire of the time, music in the "German tradition" existed side by side with Romani, or "gypsy" music, and no musician could fail to be aware of the soulful, darkly powerful energy of that other style. It is fascinating to observe how each tradition bore the marks of the other, and despite enormous differences, what an overlap there is in expressive devices, tropes and instrumental conventions. Haydn would often infuse his music with a fiery character and rhythm that are recognizably Romani-inspired. In this movement he goes farther and evokes the Romani style much more explicitly. The music starts with a mournful, shadowy, nearly choral idea which describes a grave, regular arc. Then the same music is restated, but now the first violin lays a free, improvised, florid line on top of it—the lead fiddle player riffing crazily and expressively on the sorrowful mood. The music progresses; always the violin line goes harmonically against the grain, locating

dissonant notes and dwelling on them, seeming to lean into the pain that they cause. The improvisatory idea is a child born out of the chorale, but a rebellious one, protesting and fighting back against that music's inexorable sureness, even as it shares its grief. Finally, exhausted, the music comes to rest on an inconclusive, questioning chord.

This chord is answered by a genial *Minuet*, pulling us instantly back into the courtly sphere. This is nearly the Haydn of the first movement—nimble, teasing with occasional silences and irregular phrase lengths—so that we seem to have returned entirely from the alien, compelling world of the slow movement. However, a forbidding *Trio* section in minor intervenes, announcing itself with a stern unison *arpeggio*; this is answered by groaning, strangely accentuated harmonies, obsessively repeated; although the music remains in the tempo and swing of a *Minuet*, the dance is tortured, oppressed. Then the skies clear, as the form requires, and the sunnier main section returns as if from a bad dream.

After an eventful three movements, the Haydn connoisseur will be ready for a brilliant and humorous *Finale*. Instead, Haydn offers a spacious and extraordinary slow movement as his conclusion to this unorthodox quartet. The composer's mind must have been still full of his *Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross*, composed only a year or two earlier, transcendental music of reflection which he adapted for string quartet and whose spirit seems to sing in these opening bars as well. The main body of the movement is a whispered, murmured confession in the first violin, which is lifted heavenwards by slow, ascending figures in the cello. The effect of this music, coming in the wake of the outward-directed activity and restlessness of the earlier movements, is transformative: we are shifted to a stiller plane, invited to breathe, reflect and contemplate in private. The horizon is distant, the pace of thought is patient, nearly trance-like. Just as we feel fully immersed in this state, it is interrupted utterly by a rambunctious *Presto* that scampers around mischievously. Kids at play outside the house of worship? A glimpse of the true *Finale*, a palimpsest that has mostly been covered over and hidden from us? Perhaps it is just a depiction of the human condition, where those nearby often have no inkling of one's innermost thoughts. The lines from W. H. Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts* come to mind: "How, when the aged

are reverently, passionately waiting/For the miraculous birth, there must always be/Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating/On a pond at the edge of a wood..." The *Presto* frolics, runs its course, dissolves; we are returned to the quiet reflection of the opening, and the music comes to a tender close.

—Program note © by Misha Amory

String Quartet in D Minor, Op. 103

The *D Minor Quartet*, *Opus 103*, is a fragment, the final chapter in Joseph Haydn's monumental string quartet oeuvre. It consists of two movements; it is unclear whether they were intended as the inner movements of a four-movement work, or as the first and second movements. Haydn composed this music around the same time as the two *Opus 77* quartets, which were meant to be part of a six-quartet set; presumably, then, this work would have been a third quartet in that set. In failing health, the composer subsequently allowed the fragment to be published by itself, as *Opus 103*. He added the following words to the score, a quote from his own chorale *Der Greis*: "Gone is all my strength, old and weak am I." How many geniuses would feel moved to apologize for an unfinished work, after bestowing such a splendid and prolific output on the world?

Haydn the man may have become enfeebled; but in this quartet, Haydn the composer is fully in control. The first movement, marked *Andante grazioso*, is gentle, pensive, simple rhythmically and formally. The face it presents to the world is guileless, seemingly devoid of artifice, the work of a man with nothing left to prove; and yet it bears a patina from sixty-seven earlier quartets, with all their innovations and profundity. The music moves lightly, but there is everywhere a feeling of gravity. Musical lines often head downward (especially in descending scales), and chromatic darkenings of the harmony constantly suggest a minor-key presence lurking behind the major key, a tender melancholy. In fact, the entire movement describes a larger, circular descent: at the end of the first section, the music swings down a major third to the startling key of G flat major, where the middle section begins; then the middle section itself ends in D major, another third lower, and then the circle is completed when the main section resumes down a final third, back in the home key

of B-flat. It is a simple but beautiful, and in Haydn's time rather unusual, harmonic device, enfolded in such a simple-sounding movement.

The second movement, a minuet, is in D Minor, once again a major third away from the work's main key. Defiant and robust, it seems to pay lip service to the minuet of Mozart's *D Minor Quartet*, one last chapter in the history of mutual inspiration between these two composers. The main section of this minuet alternates forthright, dotted-rhythm gestures with quieter, more uncertain interpolations, the most striking being an anxious four-note chromatic ascent that is passed back and forth between first violin and cello, uncertainty beneath the surface bravado. A more friendly trio intervenes in D Major; this is vintage Haydn, complete with teasing hesitations, strange irregular phrase lengths, jocular embellishments. Then the gruff main section returns, ending with the first violin's flamboyant upward scale. Despite its fragmentary nature, this quartet feels like an authoritative exit line for the man who elevated the quartet genre to greatness for the first time.

—Program Note © by Misha Amory

Quartet in D Major, Op. 20, No. 4

Joseph Haydn's *Opus 20* works are often described as the first true masterpieces for the string quartet. There are many reasons for this, mostly having to do with how the composer was becoming ever more daring in his ways of imagining: expressive, formal, coloristic. In the case of *Opus 20, No. 4*, it is the composer's orchestrational imagination that grabs our attention, especially in the first movement: with this music, he expanded the world's sense of what a string quartet could represent in its textures, blocks of sound and range of color. At the opening, the quartet is a hushed choir in its lowest register, expressing its sure truths in measured, elegant six-bar sentences. Three times he begins on a D-natural unison, then a fourth utterance starting one step higher on an E-natural, then a concluding fifth statement one step down on a shadowy C-natural. Wise and calm as these seem, they are harboring a suppressed energy, because suddenly brilliant triplets erupt out of the opening rhythms, the quartet's energy is redefined utterly, and its unity splinters into a glittering,

polyphonic back-and-forth. Haydn, never boring in his use of color and texture, has heightened contrasting possibilities to the point where one set of instruments seems to be replaced by another. The unpredictable, exciting alternation of these two energies is central to the movement's drama. When the time comes for the formal return of the opening music, Haydn instead has us alight on the "wrong" key, G major, and then slips in a side door to find his way back home, the music seeming to scratch its head as it works things out.

The slow movement, a somber and sorrowful theme and variations, returns the string quartet to the more contained and tightly related texture that a listener in the 1770s might have expected: intimate, conversational, warm. The theme itself is simple and balanced, in two repeated sections; but just as one is expecting a four-square symmetry to its design, the ending phrase twists into an ascending extension, lifting the theme's mood into a plane of more painful eloquence. Three central variations follow: one for the middle two voices, a delicate conversation full of lilting off-beats; one for the cello, showcasing both the instrument's *bel canto* register and its lower ranges with groups of traveling arpeggios; and a more nimble triplet vari-

ation for the first violin. Finally, and most touchingly, the theme returns in more hushed tones. But the expressive weight of this music is in need of something more than a simple restatement, and the theme extends itself even further than it did at the opening, reaching a climactic chord, then going into an ever-darkening tailspin as it seeks closure. There is a sense in this coda of confronting a source of pain or grief which the main part of the movement only alluded to, resulting here in abrupt clashes and moments of near-operatic drama. Finally, the movement concludes with three terse chords: the problem has been addressed but hardly laid to rest.

The *Minuet* movement, entitled "alla Zingarese" or "in Gypsy style", celebrates the jagged, uneven meters that flavor the styles of some Eastern European music. Haydn has his fun with this, completely obscuring the "oom-pah-pah" of the 3/4 meter which would support a normal minuet—instead the feisty cross-rhythms jerk us first one way and then the other, still somehow fetching up in one piece at the final downbeat. By contrast, the middle Trio section is entirely regular and well behaved, with the cello acting as the elegant but pedantic grandfather schooling us on what a correct minuet should sound like. Unperturbed, the unruly

main section returns and the grandfather's precepts go flying out of the window!

Plenty of Gypsy energy follows us into the *Finale*, a sunny, frolicsome romp. Predominant here is the sheer energy of nimble fiddling and forward kinetic drive, often supported by motoric rhythms in the lower voices. But of course, Haydn being Haydn, the music progress is studded with sudden stops, changes of texture, fake-outs, as in a game of tag when your target dodges out of reach at the last second. One notable moment is a few seconds into the movement, when the quartet makes a mock-ferocious statement in minor unison, only to have the first violin part stick out its tongue with a stuttering chatter in response, and then it's back to major-key fun. Much later, after lots of excursions and high jinks, the music suddenly is suspended, and a glassy, eerily calm sequence unfolds, a daydream of five seconds in the midst of all this goofing around. Then the music recollects itself and returns to its starting point. Finally, when it has run its course, the story winds down, descending in register and timbre to the hushed tones that opened the first movement, completing the circle.

—Program note © by Misha Amory