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BRENTANO QUARTET

MARCH 25, 2026 | 7:30 PM



Brentano Quartet

Mark Steinberg, *violin*

Serena Canin, *violin*

Misha Amory, *viola*

Nina Lee, *cello*

The Brentano String Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists

BRENTANO QUARTET

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.

EVENING SERIES

This evening’s concert
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PROGRAM

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 74 (“The Harp”)

Poco Adagio—Allegro
Adagio ma non troppo
Presto-Allegretto con variazioni

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

String Quartet in F Major, Op. 18, No. 1

Allegro con brio
Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato
Scherzo: Allegro molto
Allegro

INTERMISSION

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

String Quartet in C Major, Op. 59, No. 3
(“Rasumovsky”)

Introduzione: Andante con moto—Allegro vivace
Andante con moto quasi Allegretto
Menuetto: Grazioso
Allegro molto

PROGRAM NOTES

Beethoven: *String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 74* (“The Harp”)

The Opus 74 String Quartet was written in 1809, a year of significant events for Beethoven. Three noblemen—Prince Lobkowitz, Count Kinsky, and the Archduke Rudolph—had banded together to provide the composer with a steady annual income of four thousand florins, and Beethoven was elated. His immediate response was to plan marriage, but he proved to be unskilled at courtship. Compounding his frustrations, Vienna soon suffered its second invasion by the French (the first had ruined the premiere of his opera *Fidelio*). According to Beethoven’s biographer Schindler, the furious bouts of shelling “destroyed the inner peace necessary for the execution of large compositions.” Possibly because of these distractions, Beethoven does not forge new techniques in his splendid Opus 74 but rather refines his earlier innovations.

After a brief, harmonically enigmatic introduction, a clear E flat tonality is established at the sonata form Allegro. After a statement of the lyrical first theme by the violin, the other instruments introduce an arpeggiated pizzicato figure. Near the end of the development section, this arpeggio motive is extended in range and executed in increasingly faster rhythms to suggest the plucking of a harp—leading to the quartet’s nickname “Harp.” This theme returns at the coda, a section remarkable for its diabolically difficult violin cadenza.

The sublime Adagio develops a serene theme that returns three times with increasingly complex variations. Harmonically rich episodes intervene between these statements. The movement concludes with a warmly ethereal coda.

The forceful Presto recalls the driving scherzo movement of the Fifth Symphony. A C minor movement with recurring trio sections in C major, the movement presses forward at maximum dynamic levels until its final statement, at which point Beethoven demands the softest possible level of sound. A brief pause leads into the finale, six variations of a gracefully flowing melody.

Beethoven: *String Quartet in F Major, Op. 18, No. 1*

Beethoven held the string quartet genre in his highest esteem. The sixteen that he composed over the course of his career are considered to be the most profound expressions of his inner thoughts; they are also judged to be the finest achievements in the genre. The traditions of Classicism passed to Beethoven through Mozart and Haydn and remained his ideals—he retained not only Classicism’s concept of balance and proportion but also its high standard of craftsmanship. While Beethoven did acknowledge the virtue of inspiration, with the utmost rationality he continuously polished and improved his works, which he once described as “products of the human brain.”

Although Beethoven’s sketchbooks indicate that Opus 18 No. 1 was the second of the set to be written (1798-1800), he placed it first for publication because he favored its subtle inventiveness. He was annoyed that Nos. 2 and 4 received greater favor and was moved to profanity by a critical review of No. 1 in Vienna’s leading music journal: “It is difficult to perform and not at all popular.”

The Allegro con brio opens with a concise idea played in unison by all the strings. A second theme is introduced by the first violin; as in the quartets of Haydn, these two generative ideas expand to create a large and coherent design. The concluding coda introduces a scalar motive that combines with earlier ideas.

Beethoven’s affinity with the growing Romantic movement is heard in the profound and intense Adagio (D minor), which develops three expressive themes. According to Beethoven’s friend Karl Amenda, this movement was inspired by the tomb scene from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Beethoven penned the words *Les derniers soupirs* (“The final sighs”) over the original end of the movement in his sketchbook.

The Scherzo movement (F major) unfolds with Mozartean grace. Robust octave exchanges introduce the flowing trio section; a repeat of the opening material follows. The Allegro finale, written in sonata rondo form, recalls the spirited

finales of Haydn's quartets. It opens with a witty, rapid figure played in turn by each instrument. Contrasting episodes enter between the virtuoso thematic statements.

Beethoven: *String Quartet in C Major, Op. 59, No. 3* ("Rasumovsky")

Perhaps the most musically conversant of Beethoven's aristocratic patrons was Count Andrey Rasumovsky, the Russian son of the Empress Catherine's "favorite" and recipient of a lifetime ambassadorship to the Hapsburg Court at Vienna. An accomplished amateur violinist and cellist who maintained a superb string quartet as part of his household staff, Rasumovsky commissioned Beethoven to write three quartets for concerts intended to serve a dual purpose—both to celebrate his palatial new embassy, grandly adorned with statuary by Canova, and also to commemorate the grievous 1805 Austro-Russian military defeat by Napoleon at Austerlitz, which left thousands of his countrymen dead. Rasumovsky stipulated that each of the quartets include Russian themes as a patriotic gesture, and Beethoven searched for appropriate melodies to honor this request. Although engaged with other large-scale projects of his productive "middle period," Beethoven devoted his full attention to the commission, and he soon completed his Opus 59 (1806). These "Rasumovsky" Quartets mark a new era for the string quartet. Formerly a genre written for intimate chambers, the string quartet is here an expanded, quasiorchestral form intended for a concert hall with a large audience.

Beethoven at this time was obsessed by his desire to master sonata form—an established, yet flexible, eighteenth-century scheme that provided large works with a coherent structure: the exposition of ideas, their full development, their return in mostly original form, and an extensive coda. This clear framework allowed Beethoven to create dramatically nuanced, spacious designs with maximum thematic and harmonic contrast. Each of the Rasumovsky Quartets features at least the opening movement in sonata form. Remarkably, in the first quartet of the set each of its four movements is so constructed.

Opus 59 No. 3, like each of Beethoven's five middle period quartets, opens with a sonata form movement that grounds his adventurous thematic explorations and exploits contrasts of theme and harmony to achieve varying nuances of mood. After a slow and harmonically enigmatic introduction, a solid C major key center is established at the Allegro vivace, which develops two exuberant themes. Near the conclusion the dynamics increase from very soft to very loud as the tempo accelerates, creating an impressive coda.

Unlike the first two Rasumovsky Quartets, Opus 59 No. 3 does not feature identifiable Russian themes. However, the elegiac slow movement (A minor) conjures the essence of a Ukrainian folk melody with its characteristic melodic interval structure. Underpinned by steady pizzicati in the cello, the movement develops with subtle harmonic modulations. The graceful Menuetto (C major) is varied by a rhythmically incisive trio section (F major). An echo of the quartet's introduction, a harmonically ambiguous bridge connects this movement to the finale. Clarity returns at the substantial Allegro molto, one of the most exciting movements in the quartet literature. A dynamic fugue that develops in sonata form, the movement surges forward with ever-increasing force and energy until its triumphant conclusion.

Notes by Nancy Monsman

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Amerinet String Quartet with Rachel Calloway, mezzo-soprano Wednesday, December 10, 2025 7:30 p.m.		
Miró Quartet with Karen Slack, soprano Wednesday, January 28, 2026 7:30 p.m.		
Juilliard String Quartet Wednesday, February 18, 2026 7:30 p.m.		
Brentano Quartet Wednesday, March 25, 2026 7:30 p.m.		
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Pictured: Dover Quartet, Will Liverman, Aiyun Huang
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John Milbauer, piano

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A decorative graphic at the bottom of the page consisting of many thin, overlapping, wavy lines in black and grey, creating a sense of movement and depth.