

**Interview with Mark Steinberg, first violin, Brentano Quartet**

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**By Alice Hardesty**

Alice Hardesty: Hello Mark, and thanks for agreeing to the interview today. I'm going to start with something that has intrigued me: That you named yourselves the Brentano Quartet, which I gather is named after Antonie Brentano, who is thought to be Beethoven's "Immortal Beloved." Of course, you've seen the movie.

Mark Steinberg: Actually I haven't seen the movie, but now I'll have to boycott it because I know she doesn't even appear in it!

AH: It's a very romantic name and I was wondering if it characterizes your quartet. Or have you been influenced by the name? Does it have some kind of resonance with you?

MS: I don't think we've been influenced by the name. It was (second violinist) Serena's husband who came up with it, and it's a nice name because it has this association with Beethoven, who of course is an important composer for the string quartet. Besides, it's very easy to spell and pronounce! We had a very nice meeting with Maynard Solomon, who wrote an important psycho-biography of Beethoven and whose theory it is that Antonie Brentano was Beethoven's Immortal Beloved. I had never met him until the manuscript of the Grosse Fuge in the four-hands version had been discovered in Pennsylvania, and Sotheby's had a function where the four-hands version was played and we played the string quartet version. Maynard Solomon was there. He came right up to me wearing a big smile and said, "I believe I had something to do with your name." So I said, "Yes, you did and thank you very much."

AH: I didn't know about the four-hands version.

MS: Yes, after Beethoven separated the Grosse Fuge from the Op. 130, he made a piano version and the manuscript was discovered in a library in Pennsylvania about five years ago. It was auctioned off by Sotheby's and we got a look at it. The handwriting was amazing — as the music gets more and more excited the notes get enormous! You see the energy of it because when he made a mistake he scratched it out with a pen and there are all these holes in the paper. You really get a feeling of the frenzy of the writing.

AH: I've noticed that many chamber musicians, ones that I've interviewed and others too, are very interested in contemporary music and getting it out to mainstream audiences. Of course you are as well, but you're also interested in old music, which I find unusual for chamber musicians. What is the draw of older music and do you play on period instruments?

MS: No, we don't. I've done a lot of work on period instruments. We all know quite a bit about it and I think that esthetic informs what we do. The changes in equipment are important, but in many respects string instruments are essentially unchanged, which is quite different from keyboard instruments. Bows have changed, but the basic qualities are still there, so I think we're able to capture the essence of the period instruments on modern instruments through our ears and our way of approaching our instruments. The draw, the reason why we do old music is that it's pure, really pure, and I have "pure-envy." We love this music and I can't conceive of not being able to play it. I have so much envy for the vocalists and the viol players, and this music is so beautiful.

In a lot of ways I think this music is well suited to the esthetic of quartet. A consort of viols is very close to the string quartet. For example, Purcell fantasias, which were written for viols, translate easily to a quartet once you find the playing style. And then a madrigal choir, where the voices stand out individually, is the whole idea of the string quartet. You lose the words, of course, but we study the words carefully in terms of articulation and phrasing and grouping of notes. The great madrigals have taken the quality of the words and translated them directly into the music. During Gesualdo's time, some of his madrigals were played on instruments as well, so there's historical precedent.

There's some arranging to be done, especially since a lot of the pieces of that time were five-voice pieces.

AH: I was going to ask you about arranging.

MS: We've had a few composers arrange for us. We had Charles Wuorinen arrange a group of Josquin pieces for us that were in differing numbers of voices. Bruce Adolphe arranged some madrigals for five voices, and I actually arranged a group of five-voice Monteverdi madrigals that we've played quite a bit. There are tricks, which we've learned through playing. I've benefited a lot from playing arrangements of these composers in how to get the best sound and the greatest clarity and where we put the extra notes into the quartet. We play Bach too, pieces which are already in four voices.

AH: Have you recorded some of the early music?

MS: Not yet, but we would like to at some point. It's mostly a question of the record companies, which have gone single composer, and that's not something we're prepared to do.

AH: I should think they'd rather mix it up than have a whole CD of the same composer.

MS: I don't claim to understand it all, but it becomes a classification issue.

AH: That brings me to your Art of the Fugue Project, which I find fascinating. Has that been recorded?

MS: That has not been recorded, not officially anyway. It was for our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It was really exciting to have ten composers respond to Bach and have this dialogue going on, with different kinds of light shed on Bach's work.

AH: Why did you decide to do that for your 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary?

MS: Well, we wanted to play the Bach, and then I began to think about how not only is Bach important to listen to, but also for composers to hear. So we started to think, wouldn't it be cool to know how this sounds to composers! The only way I could think of to do that would be to have the composers write something that would talk back to the Bach. Originally it was on the model of Bach himself, who often wrote preludes to his fugues, so my first thought was to ask everyone to write a prelude to each fugue. But why restrict it to that? So we decided to let everyone do whatever they wanted, so long as they were pieces in dialogue with the fugues. Some were before, some were after, and some were all around the fugue.

AH: Like the one composer whose work was called "Lude."

MS: Right, that had prelude, interlude, and postlude. We're actually doing a similar project for our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which is based on fragmentary works: the Fragments Project, which is coming up in 2011-2012.

AH: I loved what you said on your website about mythical beasts and this persuasion — that by living in two worlds at once they are believed to have had magical powers. So it's a wonderful idea of combining the old and the new and the interaction between them.

MS: Yes, it's like going into a sculptor's studio and seeing things that are left incomplete or in process. So in this case you feel like you are peering into the mind of the composer and you see something which they haven't polished yet, or maybe they've even abandoned because it was not fruitful for them in some way. We don't always know. I thought, How great to let a contemporary composer get back into the head of an earlier composer. Or as I've been saying, hold hands with the earlier composer and start to work with those ideas and see what they might become, to look at their esthetic and bring them into another world and see if they flourish in a different atmosphere.

AH: And then will you perform that program for the whole year, not just for whoever requests it?

MS: Not for whoever requests it. What we've done is assembled a group of presenters who are helping to co-commission it, and we will only play it for people who have contributed to the commission.

AH: How am I supposed to find out who has contributed so I can come and hear it?

MS: There are about 12 or 13 places in the U.S. where we'll play it, all places who have helped to make the commission possible. I can tell you that the world premiere will be in Portland, presented by Chamber Music Northwest on July 9<sup>th</sup> of 2011.

AH: OK, I'll put that on my calendar! I guess I mentioned to you before that I first heard you in Houston at the Mark Rothko Chapel around Good Friday, with then-Poet Laureate Mark Strand. I was struck by the combination of beautiful poetry and Haydn's beautiful music, all adagios. And similarly I was fascinated reading about your program with Mozart, Webern, and poetry.

MS: That program was also with Mark Strand reading his poetry. We did that in several places and I would call it an experiment in listening. It started out with thinking about Webern. We love the Second Viennese School — we play a lot of Webern and Berg. But it's tough music for people to listen to and understand, so I would often talk to the audience before we would play it, and we found that it helped to draw parallels between that music and painting and literature. We actually hooked a fair number of people, who got very excited about Berg and Schoenberg and somewhat about Webern, but much less so. It's not that Webern's music is any less great, but I had to start thinking about why this was particularly difficult. What I found is that it's really about the brevity of the music, the density, and the concentration involved, and it can be a little frustrating if this is a new language for you. Just as you feel that you might have gotten something, it's over. It's gone. It demands a very special kind of focus, so I was thinking about what we

could do to promote that. One of the things that demands that kind of focus is poetry. You could say that the relationship between Webern's music and other kinds of music is like the relationship between poetry and prose. You use the same words, but suddenly each word takes on so much meaning and is charged in a different way. It's shorter, more pithy, and the images that each word brings to it are important to what happens. So I thought about the poetry that could put people in that mindset to be ready to receive the Webern. Since we liked working with Mark Strand, I asked him to listen to the Webern and he fell in love with it. He wrote poetry so that one poem, or even one stanza, could be listened to before each movement of the Webern.

AH: And the Mozart?

MS: Well, I think sometimes people appreciate Mozart for the wrong reasons. It's so pleasant on the surface that they sit back and let it wash over them, and they think, Oh how nice. But for those of us who really live with the music on a daily basis, it's the details, the incredible mercurial aspect of the music, how one note can suddenly cast a cloud over the music, and then it trips away, and that's it. It's quicker than any other music, I think.

AH: Really?

MS: I think Mozart is the fastest music there is. Not in terms of the tempo, but in terms of how colors shift and how the relative density of each note affects what's going on. I think that's what's really wonderful about Mozart. So we used the model of how concerts used to be presented in the old days. In Beethoven's time there would be one movement of a symphony, then something else, then the second movement, and so forth. In that way, we had the Mozart quartet framing the Webern, which was framing the poetry, so it was a double-tiered idea to see if we could bring people to this music in a special way.

AH: Did you explain things to the audience beforehand?

MS: There were program notes, but I didn't talk to them, because I think the whole thing is a very private experience. Maybe someone would come to the experience in a way I hadn't imagined and it would be wonderful for them. Everyone would respond to it in their own way.

AH: Are you going to revive this program any time?

MS: No, we don't have a plan to, but it could happen.

AH: I was struck by what you said about both the Webern and Mark Strand's poetry: that they reveal truths about our inner lives. Do you think people could approach Mozart that way too, and that educating them beforehand might help?

MS: That's a deep and difficult question. I think it's a matter of sensitivity, and I don't think our culture is set up to promote that right now. It's a big issue, because these things are very subtle. The way in which we graft music onto our own lives is a bit like Jungian archetypes. The way something leaps up, the way the color of a chord changes suddenly strikes a chord within us and resonates with some feeling we've had, and makes us feel connected, less alone. This is a question of real sensitivity to artwork, and I don't think that ten minutes of talking is going to explain it.

AH: No, I'm sure. Just as I believe that more and more westerners are practicing meditation and exploring their inner lives, so maybe the time is right for something like this.

MS: Yes, and when I make a generalization that the culture isn't set up for this, it's only a generalization. I'm sure that there are many people around who do respond to this and that's why the art form is still going on. Without people who have that kind of sensitivity, openness, and willingness to participate on that level, there would be no reason for the art to exist any more.

AH: One of our concerts about six years ago featured several Webern pieces, and a lot of our audience responded negatively. Interestingly, when I first came onto CMC's board, Shostakovich seemed pretty edgy and far out. Now, however, Shostakovich is considered mainstream.

MS: Also familiar because a lot of his style has become movie music.

AH: Right, like the *Gadfly*. But just to go back for a moment to the relationship of poetry to music, I read your program notes on the Beethoven Op. 131 and they're the most poetic program notes I've ever seen. The metaphor of William Blake's woman in flowing robes stretching heavenward and yet tethered to the earth was such a powerful image. My question is, can we get our audiences to be more aware of the relationship of music to the other arts?

MS: I sure hope so or else I'm wasting a lot of time writing these notes. It takes me hours and I just pull my hair out! No, but I do think it's possible. I often try to make analogies to visual images or literature because I think it's easy for most people to grasp these relationships. I think that we're more oriented toward the visual and we're more easily captured by words than by music. But of course, even though each art form has its own territory, they're all connecting to some very deep truths. So if I can get someone to latch onto a deep feeling that's evoked by an image, they can see the correlation, and maybe that will draw them into the music in a new and powerful way, and can help them continue making those associations. The point is not that I want the audience to share my view of the piece or my images or my imagination, but to open up the channels so that the sounds that are coming toward them evoke some kind of imaginative response, whether it's visual or not. I think that the visual is a purgatory state, in a way. What you want is to have something very direct — that the notes themselves evoke some kind of emotional resonance, but I think people sometimes connect more easily in other ways.

AH: It also seems like a way to draw people into chamber music. I find that a lot of people who like symphonic music just don't "get" chamber music. They like all the color, drama, and diversity of the symphony.

MS: They like the music to come to them. Symphonic music is a little more active, in a way, and what I sometimes tell people is that the best version of a wonderful performance of chamber music puts the audience in the role of eavesdroppers. Although I know that the audience is there, I don't feel generally that I'm playing *to* the audience particularly, but that I'm playing more to my colleagues. So that the people who are there are in the privileged position of listening in to a very intimate conversation, and getting themselves drawn into it. I think that's a very different feeling than when you're sitting there and it all comes to you. It can make audience members feel vulnerable, even uncomfortable for some people, but for others it's much more involving.

AH: Yes, I feel a different kind of involvement with chamber music. Which leads to another question. I saw in your press reviews from the Times of London: *Such was their ferocity on Saturday night that the instruments almost burst into flame!*

MS: God forbid, because they're very fancy instruments! (*Laughter*)

AH: So my question is, do you sometimes feel that the audience actually fans the fire? Do they kind of get in there with you?

MS: Absolutely, no matter what, there's a different energy in a performance than when you're alone in a room.

AH: And isn't that tough when you're trying to make a recording?

MS: That is. I hate recording, for many reasons, but that's one of the big reasons. It's very difficult when you feel only the scrutiny of the microphone rather than the reaction of a human being.

AH: So what is it about some audiences that actually fan the flames and other audiences are like dead weight?

MS: Ah, if I only knew the answer to that! I don't know. Is it biorhythms or the position of the stars? Sometimes it's the hall.

AH: Acoustics?

MS: Yes, acoustics, and also the size and feeling of the hall — people feeling included, not feeling remote from what's going on. I don't think that's the whole story, but that can be a contributor. Actually, something as pedestrian as lighting can make a difference to people — small things like that. And then as you know, when people come in, it's what kind of day they have had, what kind of mindset they're in. I think it's as mysterious as it is with any meeting between people. Do they have a resonance with each other? Is something happening at that moment? Then there's the quartet. Are we tired? Are we doing the best we can? What condition are we in? How comfortable are we with the pieces? We always try to do our best, but nobody does their absolute best every night. There are so many factors that come into play, and it is mysterious. But it definitely is different from place to place and on different days.

AH: Do you notice any differences between younger and older audiences? For example, at Princeton I'd imagine that the audiences are pretty young.

MS: Audiences are most often mixed. Actually, I think the differences among individuals are greater than the differences between age groups. We find curiosity and openness in all ages.

AH: Okay, just one more question. This is a question that I ask everybody and I love the differences among answers. I notice that you've been a soloist with orchestras, and that

you have performed as a duo with wonderful people like Mitsuko Uchida. Why chamber music? What is it that just turned you on about chamber music?

MS: It's the best! For me it absolutely is. I feel really lucky that I get to do other kinds of music, but I've known for a long time what I've wanted — that is to be first violinist in a string quartet. I remember very clearly the first time I played a string quartet. I was ten years old and they sat me down and we started playing a Haydn string quartet and it was a revelation! I had always loved playing music, but suddenly it was like the proverbial conversation. I played something and someone played something back, and then mixed with someone else's sound, I sounded better than when I was playing by myself. It meant something in a different way when it was pulling out a response, and things were bouncing back and forth and I felt this incredible intimate energy going on. And it is a really intimate thing. I remember when we started this quartet. Serena and Misha were already two of my closest friends, but Michael, our first cellist, I had only just met. One of the first things we played was Beethoven's Op. 135, and the slow movement of that is one of the most profound things there is. We came out of the rehearsal of that and I thought, I'm having this conversation about the deepest things — about love and vulnerability and what it is to be human with this person whom I barely know, and there's something so wonderful and trusting about that. It strikes me over and over again when we play. I feel really, really lucky.

AH: Thank you. That's a great place to end.