



Memorable Day at Tannery Pond (reprinted courtesy of the Boston Musical Intelligencer)

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The Brentano String Quartet. Photo Christian Steiner.
Inaugural concert of 2010 Concerts At Tannery Pond, Saturday, May 29, 2010,
on the grounds of Mount Lebanon Shaker Village and Darrow School, New
Lebanon, New York. (reprinted courtesy of [The Boston Musical Intelligencer](#))

The Brentano String Quartet performs Schumann, Britten and Beethoven:

Robert Schumann: String Quartet in F-Major, Opus 41, No. 2

Benjamin Britten: String Quartet III, Opus 94

Ludwig van Beethoven: String Quartet in C-Sharp Minor, Opus 131

Mark Steinberg, Serena Canin, violin
Mischa Amory, viola
Nina Lee, cello

On this desultory weekend, reserved for barbecues, gardening, yard sales, and the occasional superficial gesture to honor our war dead, the green splendor of the Shaker Village at New Lebanon, New York, seemed an unlikely setting for the serious and sometimes stark musical fare offered on Saturday evening. The Beethoven C-Sharp Minor alone can exhaust both listeners and performers in its athletic compass of emotional extremes. But the deeply tragic and valedictory Britten Quartet, the program's true centerpiece, was infused with such poignancy and despair that the tranquility of Tannery Pond's almost ethereal grounds, with their assuring Shaker buildings and yawning fields, offered little succor. The rarely heard Schumann quartet, while having its share of Biedermeier charm, also shared some spectral affinities with the Britten, and evoked, at times, the melancholy of Caspar David Friedrich's dark and mysterious landscapes. However, two hours later, one could not have been more satisfied and impressed with a performance that transformed the darkness into light with the sheer force of musical intelligence and immaculate technique.

The Brentano String Quartet has become one of the world's premier ensembles, placing themselves alongside the Takács, Shanghai, and Emerson as this decade's artistic successors to the Italiano, Amadeus, Juilliard, and Vegh Quartets. I mention the Italiano and Vegh for special comparison to the Brentano since their style reveals certain affinities to both of these progenitors. The Vegh Quartet was noted for the first violinist's light touch and discreet presence, which promoted the second violin and viola as more prominent upper voices; the cellist had a wonderfully thick, dark sound, avoided arching legatos and favored short, incisive phrasing. Such is the case with the Brentano. The Italiano quartet was known as having an aristocratic sound, somewhat epicene but extraordinarily elegant in ensemble. Such is also the case with the Brentano. In short, this group has combined qualities that separate themselves from the heavy-breathing approaches of groups that characterized quartet performance from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s. Their intonation is impeccable, their entrances sonically convincing, and their ensemble carefully crafted. Mark Steinberg's silvery tone, commanding, yet reticent, allowed second violinist Serena Canin to be, at times, the lead. Violist Misha Amory's tone was

extraordinarily well focused; his articulation consistently produced beautiful phrases shorn of the ambiguity sometimes associated with the viola. His instrument, as well, seemed to produce a lighter, more athletic, sound than most. Cellist Nina Lee was magical in her ability to be a perfect complement to the ensemble, while appearing to me (and others, I think) as the energy epicenter of the group itself.

The infrequently programmed Schumann Quartet in F-Major (his first attempt in the genre) puts to rest the weary notion that Schumann was a middling colorist for any instrument other than piano. The sunny opening movement, *Allegro Vivace*, was played with appropriate warmth and with a luscious sonority. The *Andante* in A-Flat begins with a lovely melody and is followed by several variations (at variance, as well, to the given theme). These variations, written in 12/8 time, make much use of syncopation and eerie chromatic sequences in the upper strings. Although the Brentano handled these deftly, I wished for more of the unsettling and mysterious, especially in the *Molto più Lento* variation which anticipates the lonely alienating landscape of Britten's *Passacaglia* heard later. However, the Brentano's intentionally tentative treatment of the ensuing *Un poco più Vivace* (through the movement's Coda) allowed Schumann's playful and macabre ambiguities their full measure to both charm and chill. The C-Minor *Scherzo* gives us arresting contrasts in a darkly etched *Scherzo* coupled with a nearly comically caricatured *Trio*. In this movement, as in the final *Rondo*, *Allegro molto vivace*, the demanding string writing replete with jagged syncopations, leaps, *spiccato*, and double stops was brilliantly carried off.

Britten's *String Quartet III*, Op. 94 (1975), written a year before his death, draws thematically from his last opera, *Death in Venice*, and the cantata, *Phædre*. It's a striking and unforgettable work, even if achingly dispirited. While not intended to be a programmatic work, the references in the last movement to the Thomas Mann-inspired opera make it difficult not to find affective correlatives. Idiomatically, the quartet assimilates string techniques and rhythmic modalities from Stravinsky, Bartók, and possibly even Charles Ives. Snapping pizzicatos, piercing string harmonics (even on double stops) and *col legno* bowing, while commonplace techniques, still challenge performers to make them musically convincing and contextually relevant. The players never allowed the formidable coloristic effect to disrupt the architectural and expressive underpinnings of the score.

In the remarkable opening Duets, the performers work in pairs, combining textural, melodic, or rhythmic cells, as if choreographed, in overlapping pas de deux. Each player had to listen carefully to and augment his or her partner, and the results were fascinating. In the centerpiece, Solo, which actually demonstrates another kind of partnering, Mr. Steinberg's discursive "solo" is accompanied by successive entries of the other three in slow-moving augmented rhythms. The Brentano handled the rough and tumble pesante moments of the Ostinato with appropriate force, and the special effects of Burleske with ease and humor. The remarkable final Recitative and Passacaglia, with a beautiful solo by Mr. Amory, leads to a near dirge on a ground bass, with Ms. Lee playing alternating, throbbing pairs of major seconds. The transformational movement first evokes the course of human desire: pain, abnegation, and then Will's sublimation which "melts, thaws, and resolves itself into a dew." The performance was breathtaking throughout.

After the intermission, the Brentano, with energy to spare, dove into one of the greatest of chamber works, the Opus 131 of Beethoven. One assumes that with the lesser-known works of the concert's first half, most attended tonight to hear just this work. Indeed, I heard musical snippets hummed or whistled by several while on line before the concert. The Brentano's conception here was consistent with their goal of clarity and restraint that I've already alluded to. Ms. Canin and Mr. Amory lead with the inner voices, while Mr. Steinberg and Ms. Lee, at the outer poles, provided the frame. The opening Adagio, performed a bit more apace than usual, conveyed the requisite intensity and emotion while never indulging in high drama or gesture. Transparency and lightness were everywhere apparent. The central movement, a set of variations, is a definitive test of an ensemble's flexibility and emotive range, and the Brentano's playing here was superb. The great Presto, the most popular movement of the quartet, was taken at a surprisingly slower, gentler tempo than usual. The wonderful Ritmo di Quattro battute section was perfect in contrasting the choppy inner voices against the legato outer ones. However, restraint is not what is essential in the final Allegro. Here, the group mustered preternatural force with machete-like phrasing and rhythmic incisiveness.

The Tannery is a beautiful hall and acoustically resonant. On the lower level, one sits comfortably on original Shaker benches outfitted with cushions. The stage is barely raised, and with the lack of raking, visibility is a problem for most on the main floor. If you want to see the performers, you must sit upstairs

- the price to pay being the less comfortable metal seats and the mushroom of summer heat clinging to the rafters. I didn't mind not being able to see around a balloon-headed attendee: after all, it was the music, and one could hear everything anywhere at Tannery. The crowd, a fusion, it seemed, of upscale Berkshire sophisticates and academics, seemed a far cry from the more casual Tanglewood Lawn diners. However, in the middle of the Beethoven finale, my large-headed obstruction stood up with his wife and friends in tow, and disruptively, en masse, left the hall. I can only imagine that the long concert interfered with dinner reservations, and, believing themselves invisible and entitled, they could offend the audience around them with a French exit. While the Brentano didn't miss a beat, one wondered how insulting such an antic was to the musicians caught in the passion of Beethoven's great work.