

February 19, 2019 at 6PM & 9PM | **Richardson Auditorium, Alexander Hall**

PERFORMANCES UP CLOSE

**FRANZ SCHUBERT** (1797–1828)

**OCTET FOR WINDS & STRINGS IN F MAJOR, D. 803** (1824)

**BRENTANO STRING QUARTET**

**MARK STEINBERG**, *Violin I* | **SERENA CANIN**, *Violin*

**MISHA AMORY**, *Viola* | **NINA LEE**, *Cello*

**ANTHONY MCGILL**, *Clarinet* | **JENNIFER MONTONE**, *Horn*

**DANIEL MATSUKAWA**, *Bassoon* | **LEIGH MESH**, *Bass*

**Concert experience by**

Michael Dean Morgan and Wesley Cornwell

## Schubert Octet by Mark Steinberg

The ability to experience being someone else, to live inside someone else's skin or take on another's abilities, seems to be a universal fantasy. Rituals featuring masks and costumes appear in myriad cultures. Developing empathy, seeing through someone else's eyes, is a cornerstone of many views of ethics. It can be a way of widening our perspective, of trying things out that are otherwise too dangerous to pursue, of enjoying a vacation from ourselves. And, of course, the "other" is so often seen as a creature with fewer cares, greater ability, more smiled upon by Fortune. Thomas Mann in the novella *Tonio Kröger* creates a character who is every bit the artist. Surrounded by those he considers beautiful, self-assured, and at peace, Tonio is everything they are not. Mann's initial description of Hans, the first of the beautiful people Tonio encounters, reads: "He was uncommonly handsome and well built, broad in the shoulders and narrow in the hips, with keen, far-apart, steel-blue eyes." Tonio, on the other hand, has "a brunette face with the finely chiseled features of the south; the dark eyes, with delicate shadows and too heavy lids, [he] looked dreamily and a little timorously on the world."

No doubt Franz Schubert saw himself as a Tonio Kröger, unhappy, overly sensitive, out of place in the world, and composing very much in the shadow of that great giant, Beethoven. Schubert was a poet for the downtrodden, those who would not know peace in this world but who cultivated visions of the beyond. His music stood for those who live in the glow of memories of an unredeemable idyllic past or in recognition of a paradise beyond reach. Schubert never shied away from depicting the power and terror of fate, but he

was not, like Beethoven, a conqueror. If there exists reconciliation with fate in Schubert's music, it tends toward acceptance rather than subjugation.

So It may be surprising, at first, to encounter a large scale work such as the Octet, D. 803, which offers so much that is cheerful, optimistic, and bright. Schubert at first blush seems to have stepped out of the shadows, to have cast aside his doubt and fascination with ambiguity. In fact the composer we encounter here is in costume, playing a role.

The genesis of the great Octet is in a commission from the clarinetist Ferdinand Troyer, who requested a companion piece to the hugely popular Septet of Beethoven. Schubert accepted the commission, adding another violin to Beethoven's instrumentation. The Beethoven work is almost relentlessly sunny and untroubled and is relatively undemanding of the listener. Schubert modeled his work on Beethoven's in many particulars. He seems to have taken delight in the chance to try on the self-assured buoyancy of the earlier work and produced a divertimento-like piece replete with charm and light. The relatively amiable, engaging character of the Octet is not completely unlike that of its predecessor, but Schubert has created a far richer, subtler, and greater piece than the one on which it is modeled. The mimicry of a person in costume only delights up to a point; beyond that, what fascinates is the way the person's true character filters through, the small ways in which it betrays itself. A mask both presents a face to the outer world and turns the wearer's gaze back within.

On a personal note, as a very young man and a would-be composer, I wrote piece after piece in minor keys, most often g minor, with occasional forays into c minor or d minor. My (perhaps exasperated) composition teacher assigned me the task of writing a piece in major. Intending to do so, I wrote an orchestral introduction in G major, but, alas, the main part of the movement defaulted into the parallel minor. I couldn't stop it. Decades later a good friend and wonderful musician described me, without knowing any of this, as a "g minor sort." We can change, learn, grow, and explore, but none will be found who can resculpt or completely camouflage his essential nature.

One of the most important examples of self-revelation in Schubert's Octet is to be found in the framing of the outer movements. Beethoven's first movement begins with a slow introduction that has the feel of an operatic overture in generously setting forth the mood of what is to come. Schubert's slow introduction is far more uncertain. Where Beethoven gives us a richly scored E-flat major chord, Schubert chooses to begin with a single pitch, neither major nor minor: suspended, elusive, startlingly hollow. Beethoven's introduction is populated by pulsating repeated notes decorated by short ornamental dissonances. Schubert takes on this idea in his introduction but extends the dissonances so that they almost overtake their resolutions, questioning rather than affirming. Offering mystery rather than confidence, Schubert seems to begin his story with "long, long ago." By the time we find ourselves in the main part of the movement we understand it as a discovered fairy tale. Heroics and gallantry abound, but we feel them as an escape rather than a reality. And here, as throughout the piece, the lyricism and Viennese lilt that are so much a part of Schubert's language give him away over and over. He may be trying on Beethoven's swagger, but his accent betrays him.

In fact the extended dissonances of the introduction continue and become the propulsive rhythmic figure of the main theme of the first movement; the personification of unease and doubt now dons the hero's mask. But later in the movement, in the moment of preparing to reassert this character, to reaffirm that this is what the movement is truly about, Schubert gives himself away. He does something Beethoven does not do in the Septet: he revisits the introduction, stepping away from the immediate narrative to reveal its roots. The music of the introduction is seamlessly integrated into the tempo of the main section so there is no temporal rupture (although the unsettling unison note from the opening does reappear, suspending the motion). All is one; the character behind the mask is revealed to be untransformed in his essence. Elements of doubt persist in the midst of role playing, as Schubert peeks out from behind his Beethovenian costume. This moment arrests our attention and foreshadows a similar and far more unsettling disruption in the final movement of the work.

Listen to the theme of Beethoven's slow movement. Graceful and touching, it is also comforting in its symmetry; it scans easily and simply. Not so, Schubert's. His starts with the promise of straightforward scansion: two bars, then two more. But at this point the phrase becomes extended and extended again, loosed from its moorings. It develops some measure of ambition in reaching upward, but this is ambition short-lived. The theme fades away with a remembrance of its first two bars, now shaded with a painful harmony absent at the start and, with the marking *morendo*, dying. In the Beethoven, when the violin enters to sing the tune after the clarinet, it repeats what was said with a simple change of the ending to close out harmonically what the clarinet left open. In the Schubert, the violin's response is entwined with the continuance of the clarinet. They hold hands and circle each other,

the clarinet acting as empathetic companion, albeit not one who can ferry the theme toward a destination. Instead we are ushered into a third-related key, so that instead of moving architecturally, rationally, there is a sort of slippage, an expansion of awareness into tangential realms. The piece uses this sort of modulation again and again, suggesting enchanted revelations, dreams within dreams, temporal obfuscation. These are some of the most touching moments in the piece, offering a glimpse into a beauty beyond even the beauty we had allowed ourselves to imagine. If Beethoven is a composer of focused, sharp sight, peering ahead and expertly steering his boat, Schubert is the composer of peripheral vision. His boat gives itself to the sea, floats on its currents, is taken by its inevitabilities.

The only large-scale structural change Schubert makes is to transpose Beethoven's placement of the scherzo and minuet movements. Beethoven's minuet is one of his most famous and beloved, cheeky and teasing. Perhaps Schubert, composer of the only truly tragic minuet I can think of (in the a minor, "Rosamunde," string quartet), couldn't risk placing a movement sure to be tinged with his vulnerabilities so early in a piece trying to own its mask of self-assurance. So after the slow movement he barrels ahead into a rollicking scherzo. At the start of the second short section of the movement, he uses a rather Beethovenian trick, a unison moving the music upward not elegantly but with brute force. As the sound fades we find ourselves not at a triumphant arrival, however, but in another third-related key, fallen into memory, or more likely a desire to own such a memory, a yearned-for Viennese *gemütlichkeit*. From there it is hard work to find the way back; the diversion feels more real than the re-arrival.

Schubert's theme and variations movement starts as innocently as Beethoven's. Replete with imaginative ornamentation and textural nuance, the variations delight and charm. And for the first five variations (perhaps not coincidentally the number of variations in the Beethoven) and not excepting the one in minor that partakes of the trope of the villain in the comedy, all sits easily within the expected expressive world of the divertimento. But then, adding variations to Beethoven's number, Schubert again dissolves into a third-related key, a vision of the Elysian Fields, released from striving, with a sense of peace far removed from the earthly ease of the rest. The variation has an extension that turns away, not without pain or regret, returning us to the main key and setting up one more lighthearted, virtuosic variation. Beethoven's coda threatens to vaporize in the wrong key, fading and weakening, a ploy engineered as a foil to set up a sudden and delightful eruption in the last two chords, revealing, with a wink, that we were never truly far from home. In the last moments of the Schubert movement's leave-taking a lingering A-flat creates a passing dissonance that refers back to the heavenly vision. What was a tranquil and temporary home there now clearly cannot coexist with the key from which we departed and to which we must return, and the pain of its irretrievability is as potent as the beauty of its revelation was.

Where Beethoven puts his belly-laugh of a scherzo, Schubert places his minuet, its main theme oscillating between two pitches as Beethoven does in his minuet, here with less tease and more tenderness. The movement lives in ambiguity, poised between dances present and dances past, and perhaps dances danced only in imagination as well. Schubert adds a coda to the movement, reluctant to let it go. It is an affecting farewell to the dance, with an inner smile as it evaporates. It is, as well, the calm before the storm.

The framing of the last movement may be the most extraordinary moment of the piece. Taking the place of the march Beethoven uses to introduce his fun-loving finale, Schubert's introduction emerges from a chthonic rumble that provokes a *cri de coeur* that dissolves in echo. Live in the diverting world of the carefree if you wish, it seems to say, but ignore the surrounding darkness at your own peril. As so often in Schubert, this is turned away from rather than resolved. Again, this gives the main part of the movement a feeling of being an alternate reality, one in which the gypsy spirit of dancing in the face of adversity is suggested by great virtuosity and the abundance of spondaic rhythms. This spirit, however, gets shattered by the reappearance of the rumbling introduction. Beethoven, too, inserts an interruption in the proceedings shortly before the Septet's peroration, but while his is a gleeful cadenza, virtuosic and all ornament, Schubert seems instead to collide with and confront head on the void he has too long avoided. In the final analysis this disturbance is too close to the end of the movement to be forgotten or shaken off. All the sprites in the piece cast shadows. In her book *Nine Gates* poet Jane Hirshfield ('73) discusses Czeslaw Milosz's poem, "Gift:"

A day so happy.  
Fog lifted early, I worked in the garden.  
Hummingbirds were stopping over honeysuckle flowers.  
There was no thing on earth I wanted to possess.  
I knew no one worth my envying him.  
Whatever evil I had suffered, I forgot.  
To think that once I was the same man did not embarrass me.  
In my body I felt no pain.  
When straightening up, I saw the blue sea and sails.

She notes that despite the purity of the joy captured here, it is held in suspension by forces that give it a context of greater awareness and wisdom. The images celebrated are particularly ephemeral: fog, hummingbirds. And the happiness described is cast as the negation of unhappy things, a reprieve. And just so does Schubert get a reprieve by donning Beethoven's mantle. Schubert is not blind to the terror just beyond the borders of his created space. Yet his tenderness and vulnerability show through and lend a gentle humanity to the joy in the piece, a joy even more touching for having been borrowed.

— By Mark Steinberg, ©2018. Mark Steinberg is the first violinist of the Brentano String Quartet.

## About the Musicians

### **Brentano String Quartet**

Princeton University Concerts is thrilled to welcome the Brentano Quartet back to Princeton. Since its inception in 1992, the Brentano String Quartet has appeared throughout the world to popular and critical acclaim. In 1999, the Quartet became the first Ensemble-In-Residence at Princeton University, where they taught and performed for fifteen years. In the fall of 2014, the Quartet became the Resident String Quartet at the Yale School of Music, succeeding the Tokyo Quartet in that position. 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. More information can be found at [brentanoquartet.com](http://brentanoquartet.com).

### **Daniel Matsukawa, Bassoon**

Daniel Matsukawa has been principal bassoon of The Philadelphia Orchestra since 2000. He has been a recipient of numerous awards and prizes, including a solo concerto debut in Carnegie Hall at age eighteen. Prior to his post in Philadelphia, Mr. Matsukawa served as principal bassoon with the National Symphony in Washington D.C., the St. Louis Symphony, the Virginia Symphony, and the Memphis Symphony. Mr. Matsukawa joined the faculty of The Curtis Institute of Music in 2002. This concert represents Mr. Matsukawa's Princeton University Concerts debut.

## **Anthony McGill, Clarinet**

Anthony McGill serves as the principal clarinet of the New York Philharmonic — that orchestra’s first African-American principal player. He also maintains a dynamic international solo and chamber music career. A graduate of The Curtis Institute of Music, McGill previously served as the principal clarinet of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and associate principal clarinet of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. He is on the faculty of The Juilliard School, The Curtis Institute of Music, Bard College’s Conservatory of Music, and The Manhattan School of Music. This concert represents Mr. McGill’s Princeton University Concerts debut. More information about him can be found at [anthonymcgill.com](http://anthonymcgill.com).

## **Leigh Mesh, Bass**

Leigh Mesh is associate principal bass of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in 1993. A graduate of The Curtis Institute of Music, he has taught master classes at the New World Symphony in Miami, the Cincinnati Conservatory, The Juilliard School, and the Manhattan School of Music. Mr. Mesh has performed regularly at the Verbier Music Festival, and with the MET Chamber Ensemble, the Caramoor Virtuosi, and the Brentano and Tokyo String Quartets. This concert represents Mr. Mesh’s Princeton University Concerts debut.

## **Jennifer Montone, Horn**

Jennifer Montone joined the Philadelphia Orchestra as principal horn in 2006. She was the principal horn of the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra from 2003 to 2006 and also associate principal of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. Ms. Montone's numerous honors and awards include a prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant (2006), Ms. Montone joined the faculty of The Curtis Institute of Music in 2007. This concert is Ms. Montone's Princeton University Concerts debut. More information about her can be found at [jennifermontone.com](http://jennifermontone.com)

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**Princeton University Concerts thanks the Brentano String Quartet for bringing together these exceptional musicians to play Schubert's masterpiece, the Octet for Winds and Strings, on the Up Close Series.**