

# MOZART AND AUCOIN

**FRI**      **7:30 PM**  
**DEC 6**

**Zilkha Hall**  
**The Hobby Center for**  
**the Performing Arts**

## BRENTANO STRING QUARTET

**Mark Steinberg**, violin

**Serena Canin**, violin

**Misha Amory**, viola

**Nina Lee**, cello

**Hsin-Yun Huang**, viola

**Matthew Aucoin**, guest composer

**Maurice Ravel** (1875–1937)

**String Quartet in F Major** (1903)

Allegro moderato

Assez vif, très rythmé

Très lent

Vif et agité

**Matthew Aucoin** (b. 1990)

**String Quartet** (2019 | DACAMERA co-commission)

my mind is elsewhere

open the gates!

a part, apart

## *INTERMISSION*

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–1791)

**String Quintet No. 2 in C Minor, K. 406/516b** (1778)

Allegro

Andante

Menuetto in Canone

Allegro

Brentano String Quartet | Ms. Huang

The Downtown Chamber Music series is underwritten by  
**CLAUDIA AND DAVID HATCHER.**

### *Concert Sponsors*

**ROBIN ANGLY AND**  
**MILES SMITH**

**NATIONAL**  
**ENDOWMENT** **ARTS**  
for the  
arts.gov

## RAVEL: STRING QUARTET IN F MAJOR

Igor Stravinsky famously said, “Good composers borrow...but great ones steal.” He might have been speaking of his one-time friend and associate Maurice Ravel. Ravel’s youthful String Quartet, written in 1902, owes an immense and inarguable debt to Claude Debussy’s Quartet from nine years earlier, both in surface detail and at deeper levels. Up to this point, the young Ravel had written music that was beautiful and striking (*Pavane for a Dead Princess, Jeux d’Eau*), but had yet to write a substantial work that would show the full range of his vision. Debussy’s example may have seemed like a miraculous gift, a box into which he could drop his own ideas and inspirations. Had the Debussy never been written, Ravel’s quartet would no doubt have been something quite different.

But this is no slavish imitation. The delight that the listener feels when he sets these quartets side by side stems from their profound differences, not their similarities. Granted, both quartets may be organized, in the best late-Romantic tradition, around single “motto” themes (unifying ideas that resurface in each movement); they may rely on shared musical scales and harmonic worlds; they may both feature an Iberian-sounding scherzo that relies on guitar-like plucking and strumming, as well as a luminous, twilit, muted slow movement. But there is no confusing which piece came from which man. In Debussy’s quartet, we hear an artist still half in thrall to the German genius of the previous generation, mining its riches while trying furiously to disentangle himself and give utterance to a new voice: he purposely rejects the usual forms and proportions in each movement, his passionate and wayward energy makes itself felt everywhere, his

“motto” theme is like a hero on a restless quest as it journeys through the movements, alone and embattled. Ravel, biographically speaking, might have had a fairer claim to feeling alone and embattled: he was virtually unacknowledged by the musical establishment in Paris, many of whom personally disliked him, and he was rejected for the Prix de Rome five years in a row. But whatever rancor may have been in his heart, it appears nowhere in his music. Elegant, glowing, and balanced, the quartet is not a rejection of past forms and traditions, but a positive celebration of them, even as it is suffused with Ravel’s own harmonic language and texture. As with the Debussy there is much that is passionate, and moving, in this music; but ultimately it is its classicism—felt at times almost as an objective distance—that stamps the quartet most strongly.

The first movement is a case in point. It is a paean to Classical sonata form, and its beauty stems in no small part from how it cleaves to that form, laying out its arches and balances transparently for us to enjoy. Haydn often achieved great things by subverting our expectations—surprising us with asymmetrical phrase lengths, lopping off parts of the expected structure, stopping short just when the music ought to continue. Ravel, a lover of Haydn’s music, does not seek to surprise in that way, but rather to confirm the beauty of the archetype. His “motto” theme, stated simply and tenderly at the opening, ascends for four bars, and descends for four more; the answer to this theme, a kind of countersubject, similarly occupies eight bars, an exercise in the love of the regular. And so it proceeds: scurrying transitional material, a beautiful, recumbent second theme closing the first section of the movement, a middle developmental section that explores these melodic ideas,

a towering climax, and a returning section that lovingly recapitulates every moment of the first section, leading finally to a glowing coda where the sun radiantly sets on the scene, descending chord by chord. The magic here is the marriage between such structural clarity on the one hand, and Ravel’s sensuous harmonic language on the other; added to which, the composer’s unerring and almost savant-like instinct for orchestration, the voicings and textures that bring such a wealth of color and vividness out of the medium.

In the second movement, Ravel seems to borrow on family capital. His mother, who was of Basque extraction and grew up in Madrid, might well have contributed the Spanish flavoring of the movement, with its plucking and strumming and its vibrant, proud cross-rhythms. Meanwhile, his father, a brilliant mechanic and inventor, makes his presence felt too: the main section of the movement is striking in its precision and intricacy, full of polyrhythmic gears that move at different rates and yet intermesh, each cog lending itself to the grander design. The motto theme is concealed in plain sight here, with its pitches contained in the main melody but reassembled, Cubism a few years early. A wistful middle section intercedes with its own mournful melody, high in the cello part over a woozy chromatic accompaniment. The atmosphere descends into a kind of opium dream, where the motifs and rhythms of the earlier section reappear, sometimes menacing, sometimes evanescent, combining and revolving in the smoky air. Ultimately, however, we are recalled to the alert, lively world of the main section, Ravel once more affirming his allegiance to the received forms and dwelling brilliantly within them.

The third movement opens with the motto theme as moody recitative: it is declaimed, and mused upon, once in the viola, once in the cello and once in the first violin, each time with a kind of wrinkle or genetic mutation. The question is asked three times, in three different ways, but the answer, for now, is postponed; instead the scene dissolves into an aria for the viola, plaintive and lonely, accompanied by the sparsest and simplest of textures. From time to time, the motto theme utters a hushed response from somewhere in the distance—hovering, beautiful, but absent. After the last of these, the cello swells threateningly, introducing a spooky nocturnal middle section: things that go bump in the night, the fluttering of invisible winged creatures, a feeling of hastening down mysterious pathways. Melodies surface here and there that are half-recognized, but nothing is quite what it seems in this gloomy demimonde. Finally the viola's song is heard again, a familiar lantern guiding us home. Near the end, the recitative that asked the earlier question resurfaces, in modified form; and this time the motto theme provides its own answer, threefold, luminous, ascending up out of sight.

The finale brings the piece full circle in more senses than one. This movement, like the first, is an elegantly proportioned sonata form, yet it houses enormous energy and turbulence. Whirling and athletic, the movement's dynamism derives not only from its unstable 5/8 meter, but also from the clever trick of starting out in the wrong key—a technique also used by Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Schumann—which creates a feeling of being dropped right into the middle of the action. The motto theme serves here as a transitional character, a guide to help us travel from place to place; and we have another visitor from the first movement, the second theme which was sultry and languorous back then, but which is here transformed into a playful and lightfooted sprite. The movement follows its appointed rounds,

now jocular, now gruff, now elegant. The motto theme is everywhere to be heard, and by the time the euphoric coda arrives, the music has become so nimble that this theme is abbreviated to just its first two pitches, musical initials of a kind. The work concludes in an atmosphere of great joy, an invitation from this young composer to join him in celebrating his new discovery.

**Misha Amory**

#### **MATTHEW AUCOIN: STRING QUARTET**

Attention, we are told, is a valuable commodity. It's increasingly clear that my attention, and yours, is bought and sold every day in ways that are invisible to us. What is visible, however, is that most 21st-century "content" (a word that means everything and nothing) exists primarily in order to attract attention, to focus—just briefly—the restless eye. But is our attention really so easily manipulable? Whom are we paying when we "pay attention" in this way? Is there a kind of attention that can't be sold?

My new string quartet is organized according to the different forms of attention that it embodies or enacts. You could think of its three movements as three studies in distinct kinds of human attention.

The first movement, "my mind is elsewhere," embodies a state that's probably all too familiar for many of us: distraction. This is a specific, faintly disturbing kind of distraction that I associate with multiple tabs being open on a computer screen: the mind seems to be on autopilot, whirring away somewhere, quietly spinning its wheels, but the self—at least, the conscious, active self—is not in the building. (Where it goes is a mystery.)

The piece's second movement embodies the opposite of distraction: an intense, obsessive fixation. (This is much closer to my usual state when I'm composing.) This state brings with it very different dangers from the state of distraction;

it's possible to fixate so hard on a harmonic progression or a rhythmic cell that the musical material overheats. In this movement, for once, I can at least claim that this effect is intentional!

The third movement attempts to enact a state that is neither distraction nor obsession, but rather a meditative focus, a willingness to listen and to let the musical material lead the way.

Writing this piece has been a singular experience: it's both unnerving and illuminating to focus very hard on the state of distraction! I've noticed also that each movement's essential state has tended to bloom into its opposite by the movement's end. The first movement's distracted whirring eventually leads to a moment of awakening: the conscious self returns, realizes it had been asleep on the job, and humbly takes stock of its surroundings. The intensity of the second movement melts into a serene postlude—and the third movement's meditative focus leads somewhere pretty intense, after all.

**Matthew Aucoin**

#### **MOZART: STRING QUINTET NO. 2 IN C MINOR, K. 406/516B**

My first encounter with Mozart's C Minor quintet, K406, was at a party. I was a student at a summer chamber music program in Taos, New Mexico, and was part of a group called upon to sight-read music as background entertainment at an outdoor gathering. We arrived armed with the music for the Mozart quintets and decided, at random, to start with the C Minor, a piece none of us knew at the time. As we played, my friends and I were struck by an odd double sensation: we were overwhelmed by the austere power of the work, and we were overwhelmed as well (almost to the point of laughing) by the complete inappropriateness of this music to the occasion at hand.

I could not have known then what I later learned, that this experience oddly mimics the historical questions that surround this particular work. For

the C Minor String Quintet is a later arrangement of the C Minor Serenade for wind octet, K388.

Wind serenades were, in Mozart's time, commonly commissioned for specific outdoor events, typically festive music, light and diverting in character. The precise genesis of this particular serenade is unknown, and the piece is a puzzle in that it so completely plays against type. This is a dark work, serious and compositionally complex. Perhaps this helps to explain why Mozart saw fit to make the present arrangement, as wind serenades were often forgotten once the occasion for which they were written had passed, and in bringing the music into a more "serious" form the composer might ensure that it would be heard again and again. Although there are orchestrational beauties and timbral contrasts in the original that Mozart had to give up in arranging the piece for only five parts (and for more homogenous instruments than the original combination), the music survives the transcription admirably well.

Whereas G Minor in Mozart's oeuvre is a key suggesting pathos and tragedy, C Minor seems a key at once less vulnerable and more stern. Of course it would become a key very important to Beethoven for such pieces as the Third Piano Concerto and the Fifth Symphony, where the potent force of Fate is felt so strongly. And in fact the opening of Mozart's C Minor quintet is not entirely dissimilar to that of Beethoven's piano concerto in the same key, both starting out with nearly brutally raw unison statements answered by a more poignant, fully harmonized quiet response. For Mozart, the end of the unison theme features a falling diminished seventh, an interval with painful connotations to be explored later in the movement. The quiet response in the first phrase has the first violin reaching ever

higher in a series of melancholic sighs. This dialogue between austere, almost heartless music and music that pleads and questions gives the movement its shape and meaning. The dichotomy is perhaps most moving when it is exposed as two facets of the same material, for example in the falling seventh of the opening transformed into a plaintive sigh or the declamatory closing theme when it is repeated in piano, now unsure and trembling. The exposition gives us a moment of relief in the elegant and buoyant second theme in major, but, as is so often the most painful and beautiful moment in Mozart's minor key first movements, when it returns in the second part of the movement it is enshrouded in a veil of tears, now in minor and with the addition of suspensions in the melodic line and a portentously murmuring accompaniment.

The Andante moves into the relative major and seems precisely to embody the feeling which inspires us to create words like "bittersweet." A gentle lilt is felt throughout despite off-balance stresses and heart-rending harmonic clashes. If this is perhaps a garden love scene in which none of the difficulties or vicissitudes of love are ignored, still there are moments when the innocent charm of the garden itself infects the proceedings and all is momentarily cleansed.

The Menuetto once again plays against type, as, ironically, is not uncommon for Mozart. It is useful for a composer to have a received form carrying so many expectations of character and dance-like pulse, for he can then thwart these expectations to great expressive gain. In the present case, Mozart gives a simple dance a rigorous contrapuntal treatment, severe and heavy. The theme starts with some rhythmic ambiguity, having a pulse in three which is twice as

slow as the meter of the dance, a device more commonly used in the baroque (to which this movement pays homage) at the ends of phrases. The contrasting trio section is for string quartet, with the second viola silent, and is a canon in inversion, a musical depiction of the still beauty in the double image of nature and its reflection in the water.

A series of variations closes out the work, in which neighboring variations often serve as foils to each other through startling juxtapositions. At two points in the movement the original idea of a wind serenade makes itself felt. The first of these is a variation in E-flat major in which we hear "horn fifths"—the call of hunting horns in the woods. Of course in the original we hear actual horns, and here we have a reference to the idea of horns in the violas. (Those who know Borges' *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* may enjoy musing over the differences in meaning created through the shift in reference point.) Then in the final variation, having found our way to C Major, we hear the type of music we might have expected all along in a serenade, and we escape the interior, complex world we have inhabited for the whole piece so far to gallivant briefly in the open air.

**Mark Steinberg**