

## About the Program

by Jason S. Heilman, Ph.D., © 2021

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In 2002, the Brentano Quartet marked their tenth anniversary by commissioning ten new works inspired by a different fugue from *The Art of Fugue*, the incomplete masterpiece of counterpoint that Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) spent his final decade working on. The group received contributions from Bruce Adolphe, Chou Wen-chung, Sofia Gubaidulina, David Horne, Steven Mackey, Wynton Marsalis, Nicholas Maw, Shulamit Ran, Charles Wuorinen and Eric Zivian. Tonight's concert presents two of these pieces, paired with Bach's original fugues.

**Bruce Adolphe**  
Born May 31, 1955, in New York, U.S.A.

**ContraDictions**  
2002; 5 minutes

Instantly recognizable for his clever Piano Puzzlers, heard each week on American Public Media's *Performance Today*, Bruce Adolphe has enjoyed a wide-ranging career as a composer, pianist, educator, and humorist. Having earned degrees from the Juilliard School, Adolphe has written music for such artists as Yo-Yo Ma, Itzhak Perlman, Joshua Bell, Daniel Hope, Sylvia McNair, and the Beaux Arts Trio. The author of three books on music, he has taught at Yale, Juilliard, and New York University, and is currently the Resident Lecturer and Director of Family Concerts for New York's Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Adolphe has been composer-in-residence for numerous ensembles, festivals, and other organizations over his career, including most recently the Brain and Creativity Institute in Los Angeles.

His contribution to the Brentano Quartet's *Art of Fugue* project plays with an often-overlooked aspect of Bach's counterpoint: rhythm. As the Quartet's violist, Misha Amory, explains:

"Bruce Adolphe chose Contrapunctus II, in which Bach changes the basic rhythm of his main idea, giving it a kind of limp, at once slightly awkward yet dignified. Bach also plays around with "tied notes" in this fugue, meaning notes that are held over-long while other voices, moving on, shift around them creating brief, beautiful moments of tension. In the companion piece, *ContraDictions*, Bruce magnifies these moments, often making time stand still at the tense point, meditating on it. In other spots, the tied patterns are spun out into a more perpetual texture, so that they suggest a kind of spinning stasis. In a central section, graceful and airy, the main idea appears in one voice while the others dance around it in unison; over time, the tone intensifies, becoming rhythmically denser and finally reaching a crisis or breaking point. Bruce is a master at portraying how one might examine an object, becoming obsessed with it, looking at it from different angles, feeling now tender towards it, now frustrated by it, unable to put it out of mind: an apt description of what these fugues have been for later composers!"

**Steven Mackey**  
Born February 14, 1956, in Frankfurt, Germany

**'Lude**  
2002; 11 minutes

Although he is widely regarded as one of the most important composers of his generation, Steven Mackey once had hopes of becoming a rock star. Born to American parents stationed in Germany, his first passion was the electric guitar, which he pursued in several rock bands after relocating to northern California. He went on to study music at the University of California, Davis, the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and Brandeis University, but he never abandoned his rock roots, and his compositions for such ensembles as the Kronos Quartet, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the San Francisco and Chicago Symphonies, and Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra have intimate ties to popular and vernacular music. Currently, Mackey is Professor of Music and chair of the Department of Music at Princeton University and performs regularly with his band Big Farm.

Mackey's contribution was his first of several compositions for the Brentano Quartet. Misha Amory again:

"Steven Mackey chose Contrapunctus XI, a rather more complex fugue where Bach uses a halting, stuttering version of his main idea, and then adds two other melodic subjects to the mix. Not content to place his companion piece respectfully alongside the Bach, Steve chose to toss his composition and Bach's into a mixing bowl and make one piece out of them, where the music alternates between Mackey and Bach, one dissolving and melting into the other from time to time. Since his work serves as prelude, interlude, and postlude for the Bach, Steve entitled this blended result simply '*Lude*'. He opens with a spiky version of the four-note motif that Bach used to express his own last name, spelt 'B-A-C-H' in musical pitches — a motif that appears elsewhere in the *Art of Fugue* although not in this contrapunctus. From there, he riffs on Bach's main *Art of Fugue* idea, using tricky cross-rhythmic textures in an energetic, popping atmosphere. When the Bach does eventually appear and take over, it seems to emerge in its own tempo while Mackey's tempo and energy fade into the background. Later, in a particularly zany moment, he interrupts the Bach by taking a passage where the music is rising, having it gradually speed up, lose control and explode back into Mackey-world. And so the two musics alternate, one commenting on the other. When the Bach finally reaches its concluding, sustained chord, that too blurs, losing its focus and splintering back into the restless Mackey-world, which dances and fades its way to a hovering, unresolved final sonority. As with the Adolphe, one has the impression that here we are not neatly summing Bach up and finishing his work, but rather discovering ever more questions and uncertainties, hinting that the search is 'to be

continued at a future date.”

## Felix Mendelssohn

Born February 3, 1809, in Hamburg, Germany  
Died November 4, 1847, in Leipzig

### String Quartet No. 6 in F Minor, Op. 80

Composed in 1847; duration: 25 minutes

One of music’s most gifted child prodigies, Felix Mendelssohn was already writing nuanced music by the time he was 12 years old. By 16, he had composed his celebrated String Octet in E-flat, and by 20, he had written his first two string quartets. Yet Felix was not the only budding young musician in the Mendelssohn family; his older sister, Fanny, received the same musical training, and her compositions showed great promise. Unfortunately, the rigid gender roles of 19th-century Berlin prohibited Fanny from pursuing a career as a composer, but Felix valued her advice, and she became an important mentor and confidante to her younger brother. The two would remain close for the rest of their lives.

Moving forward to 1847 finds Felix Mendelssohn, now based in Leipzig, at the height of his fame. His E-major Violin Concerto was captivating European audiences and he had just conducted the English premiere of his oratorio *Elijah*. Yet his strenuous travel schedule and his prolific working schedule was taking its toll on his already frail health. The cruelest blow came that May, when Fanny died after a sudden stroke at the age of 41. When Felix received that news, it seemed to his friends as though the wind had

left his sails. From then on, he would only complete one more significant work before his own death, also from a stroke, six months later at age 38. This final work would be a string quartet dedicated to Fanny’s memory as a kind of instrumental requiem.

The F-minor String Quartet, Op. 80, was Felix Mendelssohn’s first attempt at the genre in eight years, after his three Opus 44 quartets of 1839. He finished it just a few weeks before his death while on a convalescent holiday in Switzerland. Like his earliest quartets, the piece hearkens back to Beethoven’s “heroic” quartets, particularly the bleak “Serioso” Opus 95 quartet, also in F minor. Right from the outset, it becomes clear that Felix has found no peace since his sister’s death: the shuddering tremolos that open the *allegro vivace assai* first movement give the first theme a feeling of quivering rage, which is only partially dissipated by the contrasting second theme’s gently falling quarter notes. These two themes are then developed dramatically before returning, and after one last tremolo passage, the music accelerates into an emphatic *presto* coda. The *allegro assai* second movement is far from the buoyant, scintillating scherzos of Mendelssohn’s youth, instead bristling with an almost Beethovenian intensity. The *adagio* third movement offers some respite, with tender, intertwining melodies that build toward a brief, impassioned outburst and then subside. The finale, marked *allegro molto*, returns to the quivering energy of the opening movement; it gradually builds in intensity, with a virtuosic violin passage leading to an almost operatic climax and an abrupt end.

## Brentano Quartet

Since its inception in 1992, the Brentano String Quartet has appeared throughout the world to popular and critical acclaim. “Passionate, uninhibited and spellbinding,” raves the London *Independent*; the *New York Times* extols its “luxuriously warm sound [and] yearning lyricism.”

Within a few years of its formation, the Quartet garnered the first Cleveland Quartet Award and the Naumburg Chamber Music Award and was also honored in the U.K. with the Royal Philharmonic Award for Most Outstanding Debut. Since then, the Quartet has concertized widely, performing in the world’s most prestigious venues, including Carnegie Hall in New York; the Library of Congress in Washington; the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam; the Konzerthaus in Vienna; Suntory Hall in Tokyo; and the Sydney Opera House.

In addition to performing the entire two-century range of the standard quartet repertoire, the Brentano Quartet maintains a strong interest in contemporary music, and has commissioned many new works. Their latest project, a monodrama for quartet and voice called “Dido Reimagined,” was composed by Pulitzer-winning composer Melinda Wagner and librettist Stephanie Fleischmann, and will premiere in spring 2022 with soprano Dawn Upshaw. Other recent commissions include the composers Matthew Aucoin, Lei Liang, Vijay Iyer, James Macmillan,

and a cello quintet by Steven Mackey.

The Quartet has worked closely with other important composers of our time, among them Elliot Carter, Charles Wuorinen, Chou Wen-chung, Bruce Adolphe, and György Kurtág. They have also been privileged to collaborate with such artists as soprano Jessye Norman, mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, and pianists Richard Goode, Jonathan Biss, and Mitsuko Uchida. They have recorded works by Mozart and Schubert for Azica Records, and all of Beethoven’s late quartets for the Aeon label. In 2012, they provided the central music (Beethoven’s Opus 131) for the critically acclaimed independent film *A Late Quartet*.

Since 2014, the Brentano Quartet has served as Artists-in-Residence at the Yale School of Music. They were formerly the Ensemble-in-Residence at Princeton University, and were twice invited to be the collaborative ensemble for the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition.

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. For more information on the Quartet and their activities, please visit their website, [www.brentanoquartet.com](http://www.brentanoquartet.com).

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