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Brentano String Quartet



2023/24 SEASON



Dear Friends,

Welcome to the grand finale of a spectacular concert season. As we gather one last time, I am overflowing with gratitude for each and every one of you who has joined us throughout this remarkable year.

THANK YOU! Thank you for your unwavering support and enthusiasm. Thank you for infusing each performance with energy and joy. Thank you for being the community of friends we talk about when we invite people to experience the world's most celebrated musicians among friends. And a huge round of thanks to the Brentano String Quartet for generously agreeing to step in this evening to replace the Doric String Quartet, closing our 2023/24 season in spectacular fashion.

Looking ahead, I eagerly anticipate the upcoming 2024/25 season. Subscriptions are now on sale, alongside early-bird tickets available for Princeton University students. The subscription deadline for current subscribers to keep your seats is June 1.

If you need a "PUC fix" throughout the summer, don't forget our Collective Listening Project, which features dozens of streamable playlists curated by members across the Princeton University Concerts community. You can find them on our website at puc.princeton.edu.

I eagerly look forward to welcoming you back next September.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marna Seltzer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping initial "M" and a long, horizontal tail.

Marna Seltzer
Director of Princeton University Concerts

Thursday, May 2, 2024 at 7:30PM • Richardson Auditorium, Alexander Hall

BRENTANO STRING QUARTET

Mark Steinberg Violin

Serena Canin Violin

Misha Amory Viola

Nina Lee Cello

**JOSEPH
HAYDN**
(1732–1809)

String Quartet in C Major, Op. 33, No. 3 “The Bird”
Allegro moderato
Scherzo. Allegretto
Adagio ma non troppo
Finale. Rondo—Presto

**JAMES
MACMILLAN**
(b. 1959)

For Sonny for String Quartet
Memento for String Quartet

INTERMISSION

**LUDWIG
VAN
BEETHOVEN**
(1770–1827)

String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 130
Adagio, ma non troppo—Allegro
Presto
Andante con moto, ma non troppo
Alla danza tedesca (Allegro assai)
Cavatina (Adagio molto espressivo)
Finale: (Allegro)

About the Program

By Mark Steinberg ©2024

Mark Steinberg is the first violinist of the Brentano String Quartet.

Joseph Haydn String Quartet in C Major, Op. 33, No. 3 “The Bird” (1781)

When Haydn published his Op. 33 quartets and claimed he had written them in a “new and special style” it was neither an empty boast nor necessarily particularly newsworthy; every new work the master wrote seems to reveal further, unforeseen facets of his fertile imagination. Haydn, often lauded for his considerable wit, is a prestidigitator extraordinaire, fully conversant in misdirection, taking delight in, and exploiting fully, ambiguities of form and function. He lives in the Newtonian world of expected relationships, but as soon as one peers more closely quantum weirdnesses start to crop up.

He wastes no time in toying with his audience and players in the opening of the Quartet in C Major, Op. 33, No. 3 (“The Bird”). A primary task at the start of any tonal work is to establish the key of the piece, to provide context, and to set the stage upon which the action of the play will transpire. It takes at least three notes to make a chord, the lowest of which, in the normal positioning, is called the root, and lends the key its name: here, C Major. This quartet starts with only two notes, which could plausibly be part of two different simple harmonies, one major, and one minor. In fact, the root is there, but in the higher position, uprooted, as it were. Haydn buries the lead. It is only with the entrance of the third note, which appears above, drawn from the air, that resolution and recognition of the scene becomes possible. The entrance of the first violin is akin to the appearance of Ariel in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: Ariel is beholden to the laws insisted upon by Prospero, yet he is able to enchant and conjure, affecting the presentation of the world in which he is captive and in which these laws pertain. The sense of expectation is further heightened, theatrically, by the exquisitely delicate pulsations in the opening measure, the texture of time and anticipation itself, unadulterated possibility. The repetitions of a pitch here also propel the first violin melody, albeit more patiently, now adorned with grace notes that evoke the chirping of birds, one of several details in the piece that may be responsible for its nickname. By the time the cello also joins, and provides, at long last, the root in its proper position, the phrase is already hurtling toward its own vanishing: a wink, a flutter, a series of acrobatic leaps ending with a fancy dismount into the sea. No sooner does the music situate itself than it disappears, and immediately, with the second phrase, calls into question the plausibility of the first statement; perhaps we are in the presence of an unreliable narrator. The first moment in the piece where the quartet properly delivers a completely unambiguous C Major chord, which would logically suggest a solid foundation and an unchallenged sense of place, the chord heralds, paradoxically, a bridging, transitional idea. Haydn starts on his way toward

the so-called second theme, usually providing contrast and, thus, dramatic tension, in a sonata form movement such as this one. The dismount motive, used at first to end a thought, is punningly remolded into a propulsive idea, eventually intermingling with the chirping, birdlike initial first violin idea just before the arrival of the second theme, a shuffling of the deck. But, lo and behold, after the shuffling we find the card drawn at the beginning of the movement materializes again, resurfacing at the top of the deck. The second theme starts almost identically to the first theme, albeit twice as fast and with a small alteration in the interval of the grace notes. Birds of a feather, I suppose. Further transmutations await. In the development section, where the composer reexamines and refashions earlier ideas, using them as vessels on which to sail and explore, the “chirping” figure turns dark and moody, haunted, self-entangled, with a melancholic cast: the shadows, now, of ravens and crows. Clouds dissipate, and we find our way back to the opening idea, but as we arrive at the anticipatory pulsations we know from the opening we may be startled to realize they are not where we should expect harmonically. On the return home, the plane descends through layers of clouds and suddenly the landscape we expect to recognize seems terra incognita. Of course, it is a feint, a fleeting mirage, and a quicksilver bit of harmonic manipulation situates us correctly, at home. Don’t get comfy, though. The second phrase again starts in disguise before revealing its true, original identity. Doubleness abounds. The movement ends in high spirits, at long last providing closure to the phrase that started it all.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Op. 33 quartets is Haydn’s decision to replace the expected minuet movement with movements entitled “scherzo,” literally “joke” in Italian. The minuet was already a potent template within which Haydn could jest, as it was a rather quotidian dance with clear presuppositions that could be cleverly thwarted to comic effect. In the case of Op. 33, No. 3, the title, itself, seems a form of misdirection, as the dusky, undulatory murmurings and susurrations of all the instruments under the breath and in their lowest registers seems more akin to prayer and introversion than pleasantries and wisecracks. In fact, the scherzo proper serves as a foil for the bright and strutting, if perhaps vainglorious, trio section, in which the violins perform a pompous dance, a feathery frolic, all twitter and hop. The lower instruments silently observe, binoculars at the ready!

The silken slow movement is a tender aria, charming and charmed, replete with sighs and florid arabesques. Gentle singing, suffused with warmth and comfort, cedes way now and then to music rather more playful and enchanted, dancing around the singer. The song spins itself out more or less placidly, despite occasional nods toward exotic harmonies that haunt the periphery. The movement circles itself, reexamining the same landscape with fresh eyes each time.

The finale of the quartet might have been titled by composer Béla Bartók, a century and a half later, a “teasing song.” Here is the trademark call of the cuckoo, named after the sound of its cheap. Of course, the cuckoo is also beloved of clockmakers, and just as the quivering opening of the piece seems to make audible the texture of time, giggling repeated notes here return to the idea of measuring the progression of moments. The four “g’s” that the first violin intones at the start of the work are here doubled, hitting that pitch eight times in the tune. All is good-natured ribbing and tickling. Twice the childlike provocations are cut off by Turkish-inflected Janissary music, begging for drums and cymbals. But the more naive and lighthearted music wins out, and the piece in its final moments evaporates with an insouciant wink, the first violin floating away while accompanying with the same repeated note on which it first appeared. We could easily loop back around to the opening of the piece, but instead, the balloon is let go into the sky, lighter than air, to be amongst the birds.

James MacMillan *For Sonny* (2011) and *Memento* (1994)

For Sonny is a little miniature string quartet written in memory of a little boy, the grandson of a friend, who died a few days after his birth. Throughout, the first violin plays a simple fragment, like a nursery rhyme, repeating over and over again, pizzicato. The other instruments provide an ever-changing context for this little tune, sometimes accompanying it with easy harmonies, sometimes straying into stranger territory.

A brief movement for string quartet, *Memento*, was written in memory of a friend, David Huntley, the representative of Boosey & Hawkes in the USA, who died in 1994. It was premiered at his memorial concert in New York City by the Kronos Quartet. The music is slow, delicate, and tentative and is based on the modality of Gaelic lament music and the Gaelic heterophony of psalm-singing in the Hebrides. —By James MacMillan

Ludwig van Beethoven String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 130 (1827)

Most of us have felt at some point caught in the gap between feeling and expression, inchoate thought and language. Anyone feeling profound love or pain has likely searched in vain for words to convey the truest essence of those states. Even describing to another just why you find something amusing can be a challenge. It is by no means clear to what extent we need language to think, or whether there can be meaning in thoughts that transcends what can be translated into a formal language. When I write about music (including right now) I often feel I know just what I want to say until the moment comes when words must be found. The moment of writing sees the certainty of the thought evaporate. Was that certainty real or illusory? Does this suggest that there are thoughts

that have a shape no word can fit? The relationship between form or language and meaning seems an obsession in Beethoven's Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 130. Pushing at the boundaries of what music can or perhaps can't do, Beethoven wrestles with these questions in ways that at times have the nature of curious puzzles, and at other times profoundly grapple with the association between intimate experience and art. As Wittgenstein investigates the link between language and thought, as Gödel asks what truths may escape any given formal system, so Beethoven uses music to refer to and ask questions of itself, writing in Op. 130 a precarious piece that investigates and attempts to define the limit of what can be expressed.

The piece begins and certainties based on usually reliable assumptions quickly dissolve. A slow introduction leads, as expected, into a quicker main section, yet this is in turn interrupted by the introduction's return, and by the time the main section reasserts itself the doubling of the normal juxtaposition has thrown the claim to primacy of both types of music into doubt. Their playing off each other remains a central issue in the movement, and the development section manages to create an undulating continuity out of the two-note figure in the introduction which connotes only punctuation and closing. The repeated note motive that first appears in the second violin at the start of the Allegro completely subverts normal musical grammar: the two pitches are in the relationship of dominant to tonic, the strongest cadential formula in Western music, and yet instead of having the dominant fall to its tonic with a sense of finality (in accordance with gravity, as it should) Beethoven chooses to lift it upwards, deprive it of its expected harmony and introduce a sudden hush. Somehow this is music about the language of music, the composer playing with form and material, performing a balancing trick in coaxing the movement toward coherence, inventing as he goes principles of some non-Euclidean geometry governing a world that might or might not be able to exist.

Beethoven plays at testing the limits of musical language by refusing traditional rules and relationships. In many of the late works, we come across music where we feel the logical working out of the proceedings in real-time, a sense of living within the composerly mindset. This piece seems to be special in using that process to challenge or question the potency of music itself as an explanatory art form.

From the second movement through the fifth Beethoven writes a set of character pieces, in some sense in two pairs. This subverts the expected four-movement setup of the string quartet and sets forth the challenge of creating a convincing large structure out of miniatures, balancing unlike parts in preference to creating interlocking pieces. The

music leans away from the sophisticated reasoning of most of his quartet writing toward the world of caricature and masks, each movement affording a differing exaggeration of character and mode of expression. And in the sense that tribal masks sometimes protect the wearer who intones sacred words and names from divine retribution, Beethoven's masks allow him to play games of rhetoric otherwise far from the composer's usual relationship with larger forms. In writing music that is in many ways tongue-in-cheek he enters a sort of meta-musical world, being at once composer and commentator. The quicksilver Presto investigates the extremes of contrast between its scurrying, furtive outer sections, and the wild bombast of the intervening trio. In between is an odd passage in which the first violin line hovers three times above a moat of snapping crocodiles, the crocodiles taking the form of a minor second, motivically important throughout the work. The music teases with the idea of escape from motivic, rational writing, farther and farther away until it is pulled irrevocably downward back into the obsession of the opening section, decorated to become almost comically hyperbolized. The small movement teeters on the edge of rupture due to the highly stylized, almost farcical contrast of its sections. Its companion movement, provocatively marked "Poco scherzoso" ("slightly joking"), explores the possibility of mating two character pieces to produce a hybrid. Instead of separating the elements as he does in the Presto, Beethoven blends a tender, somewhat amorous Andante with a witty mechanical evocation of a clock (a popular musical trope of the period). For good measure, he throws in, as well, a somewhat portentous figure, heard at the very opening, which shares the figuration of the amoroso theme, a sort of musical pun. Throughout it becomes difficult to know whether the music is heartfelt or silly; it is as if the movement is a precarious emulsion of oil and vinegar, able to stay together only for as long as it takes to hear it, a sleight-of-hand.

The succeeding pair of movements balance caricature against deep introspection. The "Alla danza tedesca" ("in the style of a German dance") is a kind of manic waltz, a parody of rustic, unsophisticated style. Performance directions push the simple tune to the brink of the grotesque, and there are games played with awkward, almost absurd figuration, fitting the wrong rhythmic accompaniment to the first violin filigree, and bars in which the tune starts to go backwards before correcting itself. Just before the ending of the movement, there is the briefest flirtation with something more loving and inward which is cast aside almost immediately as the movement ends rather abruptly, naive, and pompous. The parody tests how much it is possible for music to make fun of itself, to contain both the underlying form and the commentary on this form at once. It is as if we meet an older person for the first time and detect at once his earlier self and the magnification of his personality traits that time has wrought, at once the prototype

and the distortion. The *Alla danza tedesca* also serves as a powerful foil for the ensuing movement. Its key is a rude shock after the preceding moment, challenging the gods of cohesion with such a harmonic rift, but somehow its keynote then becomes harmonically a link into the inner sanctum of the work, the fifth movement. (And then into the finales, as if the piece needs to step outside of itself to find a way forward.)

In the “Cavatina” (originally a term for a type of operatic aria) the crisis of the piece is reached, and the desolation of the inexpressible is fully revealed. Our quartet had the privilege of playing this movement at the memorial service for the great astronomer Carl Sagan at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. All the music for the service was taken from the selections Carl Sagan chose for the “golden record,” included on the Voyager spacecraft, which was meant to represent life on earth and some of the greatest achievements of mankind, sent as a communication and an offering to any intelligent civilization that might intercept it. The prelude to the “Cavatina,” on the occasion of the service, was a recording of Sagan reading from his book *Pale Blue Dot*, speaking of Voyager taking a photograph of the Earth from the edge of the solar system, of the great importance the contemplation of this vantage point holds for all of us. In *Pale Blue Dot*, Sagan writes: “It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world.” Beethoven’s “Cavatina” indeed deals with the folly of human conceits, the frailty and vulnerability of our love, and our tenuous ability to communicate it, indeed our deep lack of any true model of our inner states. And it touches on the richness of the human capacity for love as well as the loneliness of isolation in the chasm between feeling and expression. The singing line is shared mostly between the two violins, and although the very first part of the first theme ends with a too-quick, almost stammered half-cadence, as if the right word has escaped the singer’s lips even as the song has just started, the line manages to continue and blossoms into an infinitely tender, empathetic exchange. A particularly touching moment comes in the exchange between the violins of the second theme of the movement. Typically, a melodic idea first appears in a piece in its most simple version; if it is to be ornamented this happens in later repetitions. Here an idea traded between the violins twice comes in a slightly ornamented version and is only later sung in a more elemental form, as if the second violin reaches backward in time, searching for something more true, more pure, turning eyes inward and refusing any artifice. Painfully, the first violin fails to respond in kind, offering instead the most ornamented version of all, somehow lacking the trust or courage to grasp the essence of what must be said. The gap in expression is palpable. The incongruity of the utterances opens a space for one of the most unsettling

(continued on page 14)



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passages in all of music, with the first violin left in desperate isolation. Beethoven marks the passage *beklemmt*: oppressed, anguished, stifled. Along with a viscerally disorienting shift to a distant tonality the lower voices pulsate in a sort of primal vibration. The first violin is somehow overcome, no longer singing, no longer even able to connect one note to another, voiceless yet desperate to give voice. The line cannot find tears with which to cry, it gropes for language where there is none. Within the world of Op. 130 and its investigation of the limits of musical language and form this is the moment of revelation. The movement which is to sing loses its capacity to do so or cannot find the inspiration to support it. Exquisite paradox: Music is inadequate to express what pleads to be expressed; this failure is flawlessly expressed by music. The “Cavatina” has an ending, one in which the idea of a fundamental vibration-pulsation meets the initial stammer of the movement and offers uneasy consolation, but there is little stable comfort to be had here. The fissure between depth of feeling and language too feeble to hold it in its entirety is too great for that.

Where to go from here? Perhaps the most obvious symbol of this work’s engagement with problems of expression and narrative is the fact that the piece has two possible endings. At the premiere of the work, it was performed with the *Grosse Fuge* (“Great Fugue”) as its final movement, music of at times terrifying force, teetering at the boundary between chaos and order. In this most rigorous of musical forms, Beethoven creates music that threatens at any moment to collapse, even flirting with the edges of madness or incomprehensibility. Having confronted the terror of music’s failure in the *beklemmt* section of the Cavatina, Beethoven responds by locking himself in mortal combat with musical form and, although it only happens in the final moments, somehow achieving a sense of having been victorious.

Or is he? Bewildered by the Fugue, Beethoven’s publisher convinced him to remove it from the piece, publish it separately, and write an alternate finale (the last thing he ever wrote). From what we know of Beethoven’s personality consenting to such a change seems highly uncharacteristic. Could it be that he welcomed the chance to respond differently to the crisis of the *beklemmt*? The alternate finale is much closer in feeling to Op. 135 (the last of the quartets) than to any of the other late quartets (including Op. 130), representing, perhaps, Beethoven wearing a Buddha’s smile. The crisis is acknowledged, accepted, and held as it is. Struggle is abandoned, equanimity allowed to blossom without denial of having stared into the abyss. Perhaps at the last moment, Beethoven envisaged a different way forward.



BRENTANO STRING QUARTET

Since its inception in 1992, the Brentano String Quartet has appeared throughout the world to popular and critical acclaim. 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 had its premiere in spring 2022 with soprano Dawn Upshaw. Other recent commissions include the composers Matthew Aucoin, Lei Liang, Vijay Iyer, and James Macmillan, and a cello quintet by Steven Mackey (performed with Wilhelmina Smith, cello.)

The Brentano 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. The Quartet has 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 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. The Brentano Quartet has appeared on the Princeton University Concerts series many times. We are tremendously grateful to them for stepping in at the last minute for tonight's concert.



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In addition to the donors above, we gratefully acknowledge Reba Orszag, Pamela Patton, and Eric White for their generous support of Admit All, our new ticket access program.

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Presenting the world's leading classical musicians at Princeton University since 1894, Princeton University Concerts aims to enrich the lives of the widest possible audience. We are grateful to **Dan Trueman**, Chair and Professor of Music, and the **Department of Music** for its partnership in and support of this vision. For more information about the Department and its vibrant student- and faculty-led programming, please visit music.princeton.edu.

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The first concert in what is known today as Princeton University Concerts was presented on October 29, 1894, thus establishing one of the oldest continuous series of musical events in the country. From 1894 to 1914, the “Ladies Musical Committee” presented concerts by the Kneisel Quartet. After 1914, the programs diversified. In 1929, the Ladies Committee became the Princeton University Concerts Committee—a town and gown group of interested and knowledgeable music lovers—which has guided the University Concerts to date.

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Ashley George '26

Kelly Kim '26

Andrew Park '26

Sara Shiff '25

Sarah Yuan '27

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PRINCETON
UNIVERSITY
CONCERTS

23/24

SEASON



◀
GOLDA SCHULTZ
Soprano

CONCERT CLASSICS

Thursday, October 12, 2023 | 7:30PM
CHANTICLEER VOCAL ENSEMBLE*

Thursday, November 2, 2023 | 7:30PM
DANISH STRING QUARTET

Wednesday, January 24, 2024 | 7:30PM
HÉLÈNE GRIMAUD* Piano

Thursday, February 15, 2024 | 7:30PM
ISABELLE FAUST Violin
JEAN-GUIHEN QUEYRAS Cello
ALEXANDER MELNIKOV Piano

Thursday, March 7, 2024 | 7:30PM
HAGEN STRING QUARTET

Wednesday, April 3, 2024 | 7:30PM
JONATHAN BISS Piano
MITSUKO UCHIDA Piano

Monday, April 8, 2024 | 7:30PM
GOLDA SCHULTZ* Soprano
JONATHAN WARE* Piano

Thursday, May 2, 2024 | 7:30PM
DORIC STRING QUARTET*

PERFORMANCES UP CLOSE

Sunday, October 8, 2023 | 3PM & 6PM
DREAMERS' CIRCUS* Violin, Cittern, Accordion

Thursday, October 26, 2023 | 6PM & 9PM
THÉOTIME LANGLOIS DE SWARTE* Baroque Violin
JUSTIN TAYLOR* Harpsichord

Wednesday, November 8, 2023 | 6PM & 9PM
JEAN RONDEAU* Harpsichord

Thursday–Sunday, January 18–21, 2024
MAHLER CHAMBER ORCHESTRA in virtual reality

RICHARDSON CHAMBER PLAYERS

Sunday, February 22, 2024 | 7:30PM: *Les Six*
Sunday, March 24, 2024 | 3PM: *A French Afternoon*

*Princeton University Concerts debut

SPECIAL EVENTS

Thursday, February 1, 2024 | 7:30PM
BRAD MEHLDAU Piano

Thursday, February 8, 2024 | 7:30PM
VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON Piano

HEALING WITH MUSIC

Wednesday, November 15, 2023 | 7:30PM
SULEIKA JAOUAD* Writer
JON BATISTE* Musician
Healing from Cancer through Music

Sunday, March 3, 2024 | 3PM
DANCE FOR PD® A Mark Morris Dance Group Program
Exploring the intersection of music, dance, and Parkinson's Disease.

Wednesday, April 24, 2024 | 7:30PM
JONATHAN BISS Piano
ADAM HASLETT* Writer
Anxiety, Depression, and Music

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Featuring **The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center**

Saturday, October 14, 2023 | 1PM & 3PM
CMS KIDS sensory-friendly program for ages 3–6

Saturday, March 16, 2024 | 1PM
ADVENTURES IN CHAMBER MUSIC for ages 6–12

AND THERE'S MORE...

Join us for concert-related events, many of them free: **Live Music Meditation, Do-Re-Meet Social Events, Movies at the Garden Theatre, Book Groups at the Princeton Public Library, Embroidery Circles, Dance for Parkinson's Disease Classes**, and more.

**Your
Community
is here.**



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