

OPENING NIGHT CONCERT CLASSICS SERIES

Brentano String Quartet



26/27 SEASON



Dear Friends,

Welcome to opening night of our 133rd season—and welcome back! It's been a long summer, and I've missed seeing all of you in these seats.

I can think of no better way to open our season than with the Brentano String Quartet. I first met the quartet in 1996, and I knew from that very first time I heard them that they were something special. In 1999, they became Princeton's first ensemble in residence, and Princeton audiences have been fortunate to call them family ever since. What has always defined them is their individuality: the fearless, singular way they build a program. Tonight is exactly that. Josef Suk and Pēteris Vasks alongside Beethoven and a rarely heard Haydn—no one else would think to put that program together, and no one else could pull it off. How lucky are we to have had the Brentano here in Richardson Auditorium for more than twenty-five years now?

I'm deeply grateful to Bob and Marion Pollack for sponsoring tonight's concert. Bob was one of the first people I met when I arrived in Princeton, and our friendship has been built on the same two things ever since—a shared love of music and a shared devotion to this quartet. In a tight budget year, their generosity isn't just appreciated, it's essential. Thank you, Bob and Marion!

It's going to be another great season, and I look forward to experiencing it with all of you.

To great music and great musicians who play it!

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

Marna Seltzer
Director of Princeton University Concerts

Thursday, October 1, 2026 at 7:30PM • Richardson Auditorium, Alexander Hall

BRENTANO STRING QUARTET

Mark Steinberg, Violin

Serena Canin, Violin

Misha Amory, Viola

Nina Lee, Cello

This concert is sponsored by Bob and Marion Pollack.

**FRANZ
JOSEPH
HAYDN**
(1732–1809)

String Quartet in F Major, Op. 50, No. 5 “The Dream”
Allegro moderato
Poco adagio
Minuet - Trio
Finale. Vivace

JOSEF SUK
(1874–1935)

Meditation on an Old Czech Hymn “St. Wenceslas”
for String Quartet, Op. 35a

INTERMISSION

**PĚTERIS
VASKS**
(b. 1946)

Meditation from String Quartet No. 4

**LUDWIG
VAN
BEETHOVEN**
(1770–1827)

String Quartet No. 8 in E Minor, Op. 59, No. 2
Allegro
Molto Adagio
Allegretto
Presto

*Out of respect for the artists and enjoyment of your fellow concertgoers,
please turn off cell phones and other electronic devices before the concert.
Photographs and audio/video recording are prohibited during the performance.*



About the Program

By Lucy Caplan © 2026 • Program Annotator

Lucy Caplan is Assistant Professor of Music at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. and the author of Dreaming in Ensemble: How Black Artists Transformed American Opera.

In the 1960s, the experimental composer Pauline Oliveros embarked on a series of text-based scores called “Sonic Meditations.” They were arresting in their simplicity: one read, in part, “Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.” In a 1976 article, Oliveros elaborated on what the term “meditation” meant to her, namely, “steady attention and steady awareness, for continuous or cyclic periods of time.” She elaborated, “Attention is narrow, pointed, and selective. Awareness is broad, diffuse, and inclusive. Both have a tunable range. Attention can be honed to a finer and finer point. Awareness can be expanded until it seems all inclusive. Attention can intensify awareness. Awareness can support attention. There is attention to awareness; there is awareness of attention.”

“ ... these works ask us to embrace awareness and attention, making a deliberate choice to welcome music’s mind-altering powers.”

Oliveros was part of a group of midcentury American composers fascinated by meditation, both as an idea and as a cultural practice. But generations of earlier composers also embraced the term, using it to name contemplative works that were structurally freeform, yet not as virtuosic and improvisatory as a fantasia. (An intermezzo from Jules Massenet’s 1894 opera *Thaïs*, adapted as a popular solo work for violin, may be the best-known example.) On this evening’s program, two Meditations are bookended by quartets which share their introspective mood, from Haydn’s “dream” to Beethoven’s quartet, whose transcendent slow movement is said to be inspired by the music of the spheres. If these works have little sonic kinship with Oliveros’s “Sonic Meditations,” they share a conceptual foundation in how they ask us to embrace awareness and attention, making a deliberate choice to welcome music’s mind-altering powers.

Franz Joseph Haydn, String Quartet in F Major, Op. 50, No. 5 “The Dream” (1787)

Haydn scholars were delighted when, in 1982, the autograph manuscripts of some of the composer’s Op. 50 quartets turned up in Melbourne, Australia, having migrated there

by way of a colonel and his family, who moved from England to New Zealand to Australia over one-hundred-plus years. There are small, interesting differences between the published quartets and these manuscripts; the real excitement, though, lay in the idea that there were still new things to discover about Haydn, a figure so entrenched in music history that he can seem almost mythical.

Haydn's music, though, never feels out of reach. It strikes a balance between warmth and sophistication that is on full display in this quartet. The first movement begins with a genial figure that is rapidly bumped off by the presence of a non-diatonic C-sharp in the lower voices. That slight swerve anticipates the storminess that briefly overtakes the movement during the development section but soon resolves. The second movement gives the quartet its "Dream" nickname. Like the first, it begins simply enough, with a rolling accompaniment in the middle voices and a singing first violin line. Near-constant triplets in the violin give the movement a fantastical, improvisatory feel. The minuet makes abundant use of grace notes and trills, adding intricacy to a movement that is otherwise rhythmically and structurally straightforward. (The autograph manuscript revealed especially meaningful differences in this movement, with a change in notes at the beginning of the trio.) The last movement, in a jovial 6/8 meter, asks for a special flourish from the first violin, with certain passages played on *sopra una corda*, moving steadily up a single string of the instrument. All energy and light, it scampers to an engaging close.

Josef Suk, Meditation on an Old Czech Hymn "St Wenceslas" for String Quartet, Op. 35a (1914)

Over the course of his forty-two-year career as a violinist in an internationally acclaimed string quartet, Josef Suk gave more than four thousand chamber music concerts across Europe. As a composer, though, he was surprisingly lukewarm toward smaller-scale genres,

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preferring to write grand orchestral music, from symphonies to tone poems. These works reflected Suk's deep connection to his Czech homeland and tutelage under Antonín Dvořák. Later on, they also came to contend with the personal tragedies that shaped his life, including Dvořák's death in 1904 and the untimely death of his wife—Dvořák's daughter, Ottilie—in 1905.

Much like his orchestral music, Suk's "Meditation on an Old Czech Hymn" is rooted in place and solemn in tone. It was written on the cusp of World War I, after Suk learned of a rumor that the quartet in which he performed would be compelled to perform the Austrian anthem during wartime. The sense of urgency around the performance was so strong that the premiere was given from handwritten parts, just days after the composition was complete. The piece quotes and transforms a twelfth-century Czech hymn into an impassioned outpouring of feeling. The instruments enter separately, with reverential slowness, and then melt into a single, strong voice, mirroring the process of national solidarity that the piece aimed to inspire.

Pēteris Vasks, Meditation from String Quartet No. 4 (2000)

Vasks wrote of the quartet from which this Meditation is taken, "While working on the score, I often reflected upon the passing century. My reflections were somber ones. There has

FREE FOOD!

**PRINCETON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS:
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Tonight, at intermission, meet your fellow student attendees in the Richardson Lounge (basement level) and share your thoughts about the concert over free snacks.

Hosted by the Student Ambassadors of Princeton University Concerts.


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been so much bloodshed and destruction, and yet love's power and idealism have helped to keep the world in balance. I wanted to speak of these things, not from the sidelines but with direct emotion and sensitivity." It is sobering to consider how this work and Suk's, written nearly a century apart, both contend with conditions of war and violence—echoing Leonard Bernstein's ominous characterization of the twentieth century as the "century of death." Vasks' music shines a light on the forces that have countered this dismal reality, or what he calls "love's power and idealism." While the quartet's previous movements veer between tumult and tranquility, this one—the work's final movement—is wholly reflective. Its sober, contemplative mood is set by steady tremolo in the inner voices and muted, conjunct lines in the first violin and cello. There are brief detours to a warmer, folkish melody and a more cohesive, chorale-like texture, but the initial atmosphere pervades. At its end, the piece tiptoes away, concluding with ghostly harmonics and a fade to nothing at all.

Ludwig van Beethoven, String Quartet No. 8 in E Minor, Op. 59, No. 2 (1808)

An oft-quoted story about Beethoven's set of three string quartets, Op. 59, relays how contemporaneous reviewers and performers found the works opaque, even unintelligible. Beethoven's retort, the story goes, was that the works were "not for you, but for a later age." Today's listeners might find it humorous to imagine these now-canonical works causing so much consternation; they might also feel vindicated in their perception of Beethoven as a visionary, ahead-of-his-time genius. But another way to think about this anecdote is to consider how it helps us understand these quartets' fundamental, still audible weirdness. Take the beginning of the first movement. Two austere chords create a sense of anticipation, but what follows is silence, interspersed with brief, hushed snippets of melody. Even once it gets going, the movement remains unsettled. Frequent pianissimos, coupled with off-beat sforzandos and syncopated rhythms, create a sense of skittishness; the moments of repose that do occur feel fleeting.

After such uncertainty, the second movement—said to evoke the "music of the spheres"—comes as a deep relief. In exuberantly bright E major, it is grounded by a recurrent, heartbeat-like dotted rhythm, yet simultaneously sent heavenward by melodies of seemingly endless length. The third movement echoes the first in its unstable rhythmic orientation. Its trio section borrows a Russian tune (a request from Count Razumovsky, the diplomat who commissioned the work), but it is thoroughly melded into the quartet's existing sonic world by way of a complex contrapuntal treatment and dramatic dynamic shifts. The final movement has a false start. We begin in what seems like a new key, C major, but soon revert to the quartet's home key of E minor. The movement gallops forward, one three-note figure at a time, seesawing between major and minor, gaining energy from each sforzando, racing forward but never escaping the minor key that governs the work as a whole.



With a career spanning more than three decades, the **Brentano Quartet** has performed across five continents in the world's most prestigious venues. The Quartet has served as Artists-in-Residence at the Yale School of Music since 2014. They also lead the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival. Previously, the Quartet served for fifteen years as Ensemble-in-Residence in the Princeton University Department of Music. Between 2026 and 2028, the quartet will be performing their first complete Beethoven quartet cycle at Wigmore Hall in London and at the 92nd Street Y in New York.

Formed in 1992, The Brentano Quartet has received numerous accolades, including, in 1995, the prestigious Naumburg and Cleveland Quartet Awards. The Quartet has commissioned works from some of the most important composers of our time, including Bruce Adolphe, Matthew Aucoin, Gabriela Frank, Stephen Hartke, Vijay Iyer, Steven Mackey, Charles Wuorinen, and Melinda Wagner.

Notable recordings include Beethoven's Quartet, Op. 131 which was featured in the 2012 film *A Late Quartet*, starring actors Philip Seymour Hoffman and Christopher Walken, and a 2017 live album with mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, *Into the Fire—Live from Wigmore Hall*. 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.

This is the Brentano String Quartet's fifth visit to Princeton University Concerts, and they have also played many more times as the first Ensemble-in-Residence in the Princeton University Department Music, from 1999–2014. For an official biography of the group, please visit www.brentanoquartet.com.

SUPPORT US

Supporting Princeton University Concerts is critical to our future. Ticket sales cover less than half of the cost of presenting the very best in world-class music. Remaining funds come, in part, from our generous endowment, left to PUC by the Ladies' Musical Committee in 1929. We remain eternally grateful for the support of the Philena Fobes Fine Memorial Fund and the Jesse Peabody Frothingham Fund.

Other support comes from donors like you. We are grateful to the individuals whose support at all levels ensures that musical performance remains a vital part of Princeton, the community, and the region.

If you wish to make a donation to Princeton University Concerts, please call us at 609-258-2800, visit puc.princeton.edu, or send a check payable to Princeton University Concerts to: Princeton University Concerts, Woolworth Center, Princeton, NJ 08544.

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Tuesday, October 27 | 6PM & 8:30PM

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