Norbert Brainin, Primarius of the Amadeus Quartet

'We aimed solely at *truth*'

Fidelio: Professor Brainin, even though it seems at first paradoxical: You, in particular, a master of Classical *chamber music,* seem to have been fated to lay out your thoughts on Schubert's "Great" Symphony in C Major. Can you give us some details about this?

Prof. Brainin: We know, from a letter which Franz Schubert wrote to his friend Leopold Kupelwieser [SEE box, page 67], that by 1824, Schubert was already planning to write a "great symphony," what four years later became the Symphony in C Major. In that letter, dated March 31, 1824, he wrote, interestingly, that he intended to pave his way "to the great symphony," by composing string quartets—quartets on a grand style, of symphonic proportions. These quartets, from a stylistic standpoint, were still chamber music—I really don't like the term "chamber music"; I'd prefer to speak of the "small ensemble" style—but they are nevertheless equivalent to a great symphony, from the standpoint of their content and length.

Fidelio: You're speaking here about the "late quartets," beginning with the "Rosamunde" Quartet?

Prof. Brainin: Yes. From this period, 1824 to 1826, dates his composition of the "Rosamunde" Quartet in A minor, Op. 29, followed by the "Death and the Maiden" Quartet in D minor—so called because of the variation movement, which is based on his song of the same name—and, finally, Schubert's last quartet, the Quartet in G Major, Op. 161. The first movement of this last quartet had its debut at the only public concert of Schubert's compositions held during his lifetime; that was on March 26, 1828.

Shortly before that, Schubert had completed his C Major Symphony; actually, it was supposed to have been the centerpiece of this concert, but the orchestra members, who at that time were mostly amateurs, could not (or, would not) learn their parts in such a short time, and so the symphony was dropped. Instead, various songs and choruses, one of the two "new piano trios," and also the "first movement of a new string quartet" (Op. 161) were performed, with Schubert in the audience. The concert was a great success.

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Professor Norbert Brainin (right) talks with Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., Washington, D.C., 1994. Helga Zepp LaRouche looks on.

Professor Brainin was interviewed for Fidelio on Oct. 13, 1996, in Weimar, Germany by Ortrun and Hartmut Cramer.

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So, by composing string quartets, Schubert wanted to "pave the way to the great symphony." And in this respect, we notice something very interesting in Schubert's work: For him, the year 1819/20 was a kind of watershed; it was during that year, that he changed his entire *mode* of composition. From then on, he no longer wrote "entertainment music" for his friends, but, rather, he wrote music that was *deadly serious.* The last work in the old mode is the "Trout" Quintet, and the first one in the "new" mode is the so-called "Quartet Movement," the only quartet movement he ever wrote in C minor, toward the end of 1820. This latter work is written in a completely different style than the previous one.

Fidelio: The "Trout" Quintet and the "Quartet Movement" are quite close to each other, timewise . . .

Prof. Brainin: . . . [Y]es, they are separated by only a little more than a year. And they're very close, too, when you consider that during the four years before then, Schubert hadn't written any quartets at all—his previous one, the E Major Op. 125, No. 2, which dates from 1817, actually doesn't count; I've never been able to play it right with my quartet—and another four years were to pass before he composed his next one, the "Rosamunde" Quartet. But from the standpoint of genre, the "Trout" and the "Rosamunde" quartets are even closer still, since, outside of the opera *Die Zauberharfe* (*The Magic Harp*), Schubert only composed a very few songs during that time. So, in comparison to his usual output, Schubert wrote *very little* during those fifteen months, and *absolutely no* works in the "small ensemble style."

Schubert's early quartets date back to 1812, 1813, and 1814. His very first quartets were still quite simple, since Schubert was only fourteen or fifteen years old—practically still a child. But already only two years later, at the age of sixteen, seventeen years, he was writing *masterpieces.* The three most important quartets from this period, are the E-flat Major, B-flat Major, and G minor.

The B-flat Major Quartet, Op. 168—the Opus numbers are all very high, but they don't go chronologically—was a string *trio* in its first version. Schubert's working approach therefore matches the praxis of Mozart and Beethoven, who also composed string trios in order to practice for writing quartets.

Later on, he rewrote this original string trio as a quartet; some say he just "added a second violin to it." But, of course, it's not so simple.

The result, was a true masterpiece. Also, the quartets in E-flat Major and G minor are thoroughly typical Schubert works. And it's amazing, virtually unbelievable, that a youth of sixteen or seventeen could write such music. It's like Felix Mendelssohn, who, at sixteen or seventeen, wrote the incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* as well as his Octet and at least two string quartets, all of them *masterful.* It's hard to imagine how such a thing is possible. Mozart also wrote masterpieces very early in life, but I think he was a "late bloomer" in comparison to Schubert and Mendelssohn.

But, back to his *mode* of composition: Schubert had models he could follow. In order to practice for his late string quartets, Mozart—and I'm not talking about his Six Quartets Dedicated to Haydn, in which he had already applied the new style of *Motivführung* [motivic thorough-composition], but rather, his three "Prussian" Quartets K. 575, 589, and 590—Mozart wrote his so-called "Divertimento." This string trio, K. 563, however, is a divertimento in name only. It was a preparatory exercise. But, as is always the case with Mozart, whenever he does something like that, he ends up with well-nigh the best that had ever been produced in the genre! It was the same with Beethoven: all of his string trios were preparatory work for his six quartets Op. 18. And, as I have already said, Schubert's late quartets are basically exercises in preparation for the great C Major Symphony.

The Amadeus Quartet.

Fidelio: Couldn't you generalize your point, and say that the symphony developed out of the string quartet—not

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More than other composers, Schubert often worked entire melodies or motivic kernels from his lieder into chamber music. Shown here: Autograph of "Die Forelle" ("The Trout"). Schubert gave the song elements instrumental treatment in the "Trout" Quintet (1819).

out of quartet as a form, but rather, from the fact that the four instruments . . .

Prof. Brainin: . . . four-voiced polyphony . . .

Fidelio: . . . form, as it were, the true nucleus—LaRouche speaks of the "torso"—of the orchestra?

Prof. Brainin: Absolutely. This really goes back to Haydn, since he not only invented the string quartet, he also invented the instrumentation of the symphony orchestra. Later on, of course, it was extended, but the instrumentation of the Classical symphony—a string quartet, supported by the contrabass, with the addition of a few wind instruments—this actually comes from Haydn.

During the year before the C Major Symphony, which was completed in early 1828, Schubert had written *Die Winterreise,* and after finishing the symphony, he wrote his genial C Major String Quartet. The posthumously published, fantastic B-flat Major Sonata was also composed during this period—quite late, in September 1828, only shortly before his death. The Octet (1824), and, really, both of the two piano trios from 1827, also belong to the preparatory phase leading to the C Major Symphony.

Fidelio: You said that, for Schubert, there was a kind of caesura, a "watershed," between 1819 and 1820. Can you put your finger on the reason for this?

Prof. Brainin: I think that with Schubert, it was a purely personal matter. It didn't have anything to do with his formal style. I don't know when he first consciously applied the compositional method of *Motivführung.* As far as I know, this method can be found in all of his works. The fact remains: Around that time, he had wanted to resume his study of counterpoint, because he wanted to learn even more. He never got around to doing that, because he died so early, in November 1828, at barely thirty-two years of age. Perhaps his mind's eye had been focussed on developing along the same lines as Beethoven did; but he never got that far, even though these grand "late" works of his already contain everything in them. In the works that Schubert wrote toward the end of his short life—in the marvelous piano sonata, in the quartets, and also in the C Major Symphony—we find four-voiced polyphonic composition on a level of development comparable to that of Beethoven's late works.

Four-voiced polyphony—this style, in which, on the

Norbert Brainin made chamber music history as first violinist of the unforgotten Amadeus Quartet. This quartet's activities revolved around the works of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and, especially, Schubert. Following the death of the violist Peter Schlof in 1987, the Amadeus Quartet stopped giving concerts; its surviving members currently teach, and promote young quartets from around the world.

one hand, each voice has its own independent existence, and yet, at the same time, is an integral part of the whole—that is Beethoven's great accomplishment. Of course, this has much to do with *Motivführung,* since each voice is composed strictly according to the method of motivic thorough-composition. Each is clearly recognizable, and is a unity in its own right, but nevertheless everything fits together. This method was composed, for the first time at this level of perfection, into his Quartet Op. 59, No. 2—at many points there, although not consistently throughout. Beethoven only first achieved true perfection throughout, in his late works, Op. 127, 130, the "Grosse Fuge" Op. 133, as well as in Op. 131 and 135. This "as rigorous, as it is free," is entirely typical for him. The *"Tantôt libre, tantôt recherchée,"* which he wrote above his "Grosse Fuge": now, that's a real contradiction!

Fidelio: From a formal-logical standpoint, an insoluble contradiction, a true paradox.

Prof. Brainin: But this dictum of his, is true for all music—for composition as well as for performance. It is a sort of *leitmotiv* of the art of Classical composition. And it is we artists who must bring such contradictions to bear in our interpretation. That goes without saying. And also for Bach, because he, too, is both "rigorous and free" at the very same time. And, as a musician, you must find a way to execute that; this places demands on our artistry; all of our creative powers go into it.

Fidelio: If we may return to Schubert: What was the nature of the crucial difference at the watershed you were speaking about earlier? Did Schubert more clearly grasp this "as rigorous, as it is free" contradiction, following 1819/20?

Prof. Brainin: Possibly. I don't know exactly; all I know, is that a change in Schubert's thinking occurred between these two works—the 1819 "Trout" Quintet, and the Quartet Movement, which was written a good year later. Beyond that, no one really knows exactly why he wrote this movement; and it's also unclear, what this movement belongs to. Did he conceive of it as a separate movement, or as part of an entire quartet? And, if it was the latter, or was intended to be so, did he do any further work on it, or, have the other parts been lost? All these things are simply not known. Therefore, I can't say.

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"An excursion of Schubertians," memorialized by Schubert's friend, the artist Leopold Kupelwieser. **Above:** *The journey to Atzenbrugg; Schubert and Kupelwieser are standing at the back of the carriage.* **Right:** *Schubert (bottom left) provides piano accompaniment for the amateur theatrical. (Oil painting and watercolor by Kupelwieser, 1820.)*

Fidelio: But it *is* known—you already mentioned it—that, just as with Haydn, whose quartet output, following his revolutionary "Russian" Quartets Op. 33, had a lapse of almost ten years, Schubert also had a long lapse between his early and his later quartets; and the only work that lies in between, is this "Quartet Movement."

Prof. Brainin: Yes, and therefore the last "early" quartet, written before this Quartet Movement, was the above-mentioned one in E Major, in 1817. It is written in a style that is completely different from the other ones—in what you might call a virtuoso style. Purely instrumental, very technically demanding, completely out of keeping with what was later taken up again, in the quartets written from 1824 onward, in a much-improved form.

Fidelio: When one studies Schubert's works, one is particularly struck by the fact that, more so than other composers, Schubert quite often worked entire melodies or motivic kernels from his *lieder* into his chamber music. When you say that the later quartets, such as the "Rosamunde" and the "Death and the Maiden"—all of which have such elements—are the antecedent form of his symphonies, how would you rank them?

Prof. Brainin: The motivic kernel of the "Rosamunde" Quartet comes out of the incidental music for the play

Rosamunde, Prinzessin von Zypern (*Rosamunde, Princess of Cyprus*). Much of this work contains things which he used elsewhere. For example, not only does the entire A minor Quartet consist of motivic elements from *Rosamunde, Prinzessin von Zypern*—we find one theme, for example, in the Scherzo, while the second movement comes from the "Entr'acte," the music that bridges from one act to the next—but he also made variations for the piano out of it.

Fidelio: But he wrote the orchestral version first?
Prof. Brainin: Yes, absolutely.

As for the "Death and the Maiden" Quartet: The song that bears the same name consists of two parts; in the quartet, he only uses the part that has to do with Death. This he made into the theme of the second movement, and of the variations.

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But the entire piece, the entire D minor Quartet, is permeated by a longing for death. It's very easy to recognize. The end, the final movement, is like a gallop into death; it has an air of hopelessness, and also it ends in D minor. Interestingly, there's something similar in the G Major Quartet: the counterposing of G Major to G minor. This dualism, this contradiction, is a dramatic element; it starts right at the beginning: The opening harmony is a G Major chord, and the next one is in G minor. The tension between major and minor permeates the entire work; it is only finally resolved in the coda. In the end, major emerges as the winner, and the march to death is a joyous one. As with the D minor Quartet, here, too, it is a ride into death; only here, in the G Major Quartet, it is a joyous ride; in the D minor Quartet, on the other hand, a deathly serious, despairing feeling prevails.

The C Major Quintet is related to the symphony, in that Schubert wrote it in the same state of mind of that year; the same goes for *Die Winterreise,* which was composed the year before. Schubert sang and played it for his friends; they didn't like it at all!

Fidelio: You have reported that you performed the D minor Quartet with your Amadeus Quartet quite often in concert. Why this quartet in particular?
Prof. Brainin: On the one hand, this was in accord with the public's wishes; our audiences wanted to hear us play it. This is certainly related to the fact that it was one of the first works that we had recorded back then.

On the other hand, we played the work in a very special manner—but one which, for me, was really quite normal. Looking back at it today, I know that it was unique. None of the other quartets have played it that way, because they didn't know how they should do it; because they didn't have the right concept. To this very day, no one else has played it that way. Either they haven't cared to do it, or they have been unable to do so. They have sentimentalized everything.

Fidelio: Is a special technique required to play this work the way the Amadeus Quartet played it?
Prof. Brainin: Technique—naturally. If one interprets the way the Amadeus Quartet does, one must acquire a certain technique that enables one to do it. It wasn't anything new; rather, it was rediscovered.

But, most importantly: in this way, you can achieve freedom. And, actual freedom exists within the bounds of a certain legality, a certain rhythm. To put it quite crudely: You play in time with each other; and, within the framework of this "playing in time," your playing becomes free. Every now and then, you may lengthen something a bit, but, that must be balanced out somehow, by taking away from somewhere else. That's just an abstract concept; it's called *rubato.* But, a *rubato* must be

done *thoughtfully.* It must be "both free and rigorous." Nobody wrote like that, before Beethoven.

Fidelio: Getting back again to the Schubert-Beethoven connection: If you associate Schubert's later works, especially the quartets, with Beethoven's late works, did the two men know each other intimately on this level of compositional artistry?

Prof. Brainin: No, not intimately. Schubert tried to write the same kind of music; it was just in the air of Vienna those days, you might say. Because music had not been "invented," it was just there. But Schubert was not as far advanced as Beethoven. And what did Schubert *know* about Beethoven? He would have knelt down before him. Many have remarked, "Beethoven is something monumental," but they really didn't understand him. Schubert, on the other hand, *knew* it, but he himself had not progressed as far.

Fidelio: One more question on the C Major Symphony. You said that in his quartets, he was practicing for the symphony—that is, he was studying the art of applying four-part polyphony on a symphonic scale—an art which Beethoven had brought to a pinnacle . . .

Prof. Brainin: . . . [T]hat is what's so special about this symphony; and that is why it is Schubert's greatest work. In his selection of themes and motivic kernels, there is, of course, a big difference between the symphony and the quartets; the former is "orchestral," and the others are "instrumental"—though always based on the singing voice. What unites them, however, is especially their extended treatment: this "Schubertian expansiveness," or "divine length," as Schumann later called it, which all composers after him, strove to emulate.

Fidelio: Schubert's works are particularly interesting, of course, from the standpoint of the relation between the human singing voice and the poetic idea—an idea which is expressed in a particular speech form, a prosody, from which motivic seed-elements emerge, which can be further worked up in a particular form.

Prof. Brainin: That's precisely the way Schubert composed songs. He always let himself be inspired by the poetry, that's clear. Sometimes he even wrote the poetry himself, sometimes not. It was always something that spoke to his heart; it wasn't always the very best poetry, but, deep within him, it touched something, which then brought forth the idea for a song.

Fidelio: From the standpoint of a string quartet player,

Robert Schumann on the C Major Symphony: 'A unique way of treating instruments . . . as if they were human voices'

While on a trip to Vienna in 1838, Robert Schumann paid a visit to Franz Schubert's brother Ferdinand, who allowed him to look through the unpublished Schubert compositions in his possession; among these was the C Major Symphony. They agreed to send it off to Leipzig, where, on March 23, 1839, it was performed for the first time, under the direction of Felix Mendelssohn. Schumann writes:

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Robert Schumann

I'll say it outright: Whoever doesn't know this symphony, doesn't know anything about Schubert yet, even though, after all that Schubert has already bestowed upon Art, many might see this as a degree of praise scarcely to be believed. . . .

Here we find, in addition to masterly compositional technique, life in every fiber, coloration down to the finest nuance, meaning everywhere, the clearest expression of detail, and over everything, there is poured a romanticism such as we have already experienced elsewhere in Schubert. And this divine length of his symphony . . . .

We always have to call it an extraordinary talent, when a person who has heard so few of his own instrumental works performed during his lifetime, is able to arrive at such a unique way of treating instruments, as well as the orchestral ensemble, which often talk across to each other, as if they were human voices and chorus. Outside of many Beethoven works, I have never been so taken off guard and surprised by this similarity to the singing organ . . . .

‘I want to pave my way to the great symphony’

From a letter written by Schubert to his childhood friend, the painter Leopold Kupelwieser, in Rome, March 23, 1824.

Dear Kupelwieser,

I have been feeling the urge to write you for some time now, but I never knew which way to turn. But now the opportunity has come up via Smirsch, and so, finally, I can completely pour out my soul to someone. . . .

In a word, I feel like the most unfortunate, most miserable human being on the face of the earth. Imagine a person whose health just doesn’t want to ever again get back to normal, and who, out of despair over this, keeps getting worse at what he does; imagine a person, I say, whose brightest hopes have come to naught, for whom love and friendship offer nothing but pain at most, whose (incipient, at least) enthusiasm for Beauty, is in danger of being snuffed out; and ask yourself whether that isn’t a miserable, unfortunate man? . . .

On songs, I haven’t done much new; instead, I’m testing myself out on a number of instrumental things, since I composed two quartets for violins, viola, and violoncello, and an octet, and want to write yet another quartet; generally, in this way, I want to pave my way to the great symphony.

Leopold Kupelwieser

might you address the following question: You said earlier, that the Amadeus Quartet had a very special sense and feeling for “Death and the Maiden,” and also played it accordingly—quite differently from the way it is played nowadays.

Prof. Brainin: If I might be permitted to put it this way: Most quartets’ interpretations of it have been wrong: they have sentimentalized it. Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden” is *dramatic,* but they have completely excluded this dramatic element. And the audiences have responded to the sentimentality. We, on the other hand, played it *without* sentimentality; we aimed solely at *truth,* which was much more at work here, than mere sentimentality. We turned everything that people had imagined Schubert to be, upside-down, and did it differently.

Fidelio: Earlier as well, audiences have always wanted this sentimentality. And whoever yields to that, can, of course, get through life relatively easily . . .

Prof. Brainin: . . . absolutely; easy *business!*

Fidelio: Today’s cultural world is confronted with a certain dilemma: On the one hand, people attend concerts because they must satisfy their craving for real culture, for *truth*; but, on the other hand, standing there on the stage you have the young artists, who practice like mad and accomplish enormous technical feats, and yet the overall result is often unsatisfying.

Prof. Brainin: “Enormous technical feats. . .”—yes, on a certain level. But I fear that this level is pretty superficial—generally speaking, that is, only generally.

For instance, a conservatory teacher once sent a very gifted Korean girl to me. She played me Schubert’s “Duo”—also called a sonata—Op. 162, very nicely, to be sure; but I immediately noticed that certain nuances had been inserted, that had absolutely nothing to do with Schubert. Completely made up! Just in order to do *something.* But the whole had been perverted, *tonally.* And I showed her that there was not the slightest reason to insert these nuances, that they just weren’t valid. Because the very first thing one must do, is capture the “right tone” for playing a piece or an individual phrase; only after that, can you go on to talk about other things. And once you have managed to do that, other, entirely different nuances come out—the very nuances that are actually in the music. That’s a typical example.

Many teachers grope around for something to tell their students; they start out by telling them nonsense, and by saying they should play with “imagination” and “fantasy.” But what’s fantasy? You have to have the *right* fantasy. And what’s the right fantasy? You must discover something that is already there; don’t just make things up. The inventor doesn’t make things up, he is a *discoverer,* basically. And if you don’t know anything, and haven’t discovered anything, that’s when you start to get sentimental.

Fidelio: Thank you, Professor Brainin, for speaking with us.

—translated from the German by John Sigerson