

INTERVIEW



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

# ‘The *Motivführung* principle is quite literally a gift from God...’

## An interview with Norbert Brainin

*Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, sponsored by the British Government through the organization known as “Die Brücke” (“The Bridge”), the public’s enthusiasm*

*was such that the “the walls nigh caved in.” So began the worldwide career of this extraordinary group, which ended only with the quite unexpected death of Peter Schidlof in the summer of 1987. Thereafter, the Quartet was*

*dissolved, but Norbert Brainin continued to share his deep knowledge of Classical art through sonata recitals, seminars, master classes for young artists, and more especially, through the Brainin Foundation, which he set up shortly before his death.*

### Strength of Character

*Brainin showed remarkable strength of character from his early youth, when, in 1938, owing to his Jewish background, he fled from Vienna following the Nazi Anschluss. In England, as a refugee, he became acquainted in an enemy-alien internment camp during the war with two of the men who were later to join the Quartet. In the 1980’s and 1990’s, on learning that Lyndon LaRouche was persecuted by the U.S. neo-conservatives, and sentenced to prison after a show-trial in 1988, Brainin spoke out unreservedly in his defense.*

*Thus, seconded by the pianist Günter Ludwig, Brainin gave solidarity recitals for*

*LaRouche, including several in the United States itself. He also visited LaRouche in prison, and there, under those otherwise unfortunate circumstances, he discussed with LaRouche his own work on Haydn’s fundamental discovery of the compositional principle known as “Motivführung” (“motivic thorough-composition”). LaRouche responded with enthusiasm, and then wrote, from his prison cell, “Mozart’s 1782-1786 Revolution in Music”\* in which he developed the concept further. This led to a fruitful dialogue, out of which came musical seminars by Brainin and philosophical writings by LaRouche on this precise issue, which is so critical to the future of Classical music.*

*Unforgotten also is Brainin’s involvement in the LaRouche campaign for so-called Verdi concert pitch of A=432 Hz. Brainin gave several lecture-demonstrations, where he demonstrated the superiority of the lower, Verdi pitch, over the higher, and quite arbitrary “Karajan pitch.” In December 1989, shortly after the Berlin Wall fell, Brainin gave a “Beethoven Matinee for German Unity” in the West Berlin Musikhochschule before 1,000 people, 800 of whom had come from East Germany, and entered free of charge.*

*Why Germany, and “German music,” forever remained so critical to the Amadeus Quartet, and how this Quartet, whose members remained constant for nearly 40 years, “tracked down” the secrets of interpreting Classical music, is the subject of the interview below, which Norbert Brainin gave Ortrun and Hartmut Cramer in London in July 2004.*

\* *Fidelio*, Winter 1992 (Vol. I, No. 4).

**What one has got to get across to the public is, first and foremost, the idea behind the composition, through form and development of the overall concept.**

**The late Norbert Brainin, first violinist of the legendary Amadeus Quartets, gave many interviews to *Ibykus* and *Fidelio* over the past 20 years, but none perhaps so dense as the one below, which may perhaps be seen as his artistic Testament.**

*The fact that in 1947, Brainin, then a young violinist who looked to make a great name for himself as a virtuoso soloist, deliberately decided to focus uniquely on the string quartet, clearly points to those qualities of musicianship and character that led him to place the musical idea, above all else, as the raison d’être of a true artist.*

*The countless concerts the Amadeus Quartet gave worldwide, their numerous recordings, many of which have won the highest critical acclaim, most especially for their interpretation of the late Beethoven quartets, are very impressive proof of how Brainin and his colleagues (violinist Siegmund Nissel, violist Peter Schidlof and ’cellist Martin Lovett) took up the challenge to “get under the listener’s skin” with Classical music, and uplift the soul.*

*In Hamburg in 1950, when the Quartet made its German debut with works by*

**Fidelio:** Mr. Brainin, relative to a half-century ago, there have unquestionably been major changes in cultural politics. Just after the war, it seemed quite obvious that the task was to ennoble man, as Schiller would put it, through Classical art, and create a climate of cultural optimism throughout society.

That so-called pop music, which is utterly shallow, might ever be taken seriously, as it now is, or that “Crossover” music would become acceptable—by Crossover, I mean “crossing” major Classical works with Rock-slop—would have struck one as simply out of the question in the 1950’s or 1960’s, when the public would have rejected out of hand, any such attempt to make a mockery of art.

The public had a more or less unfailing sense for how great art should be interpreted.

When, in 1950, you returned to the continent, Germany to be precise, with the newly found-  
ed, as yet unknown Amadeus Quartet, your Hamburg concert unleashed an

absolute sensation. In your first *Ibykus* interview—20 years ago now!—you said: “The public was so enthusiastic, the walls nigh caved in!” Why were people so excited then about Classical music?

**Brainin:** Naturally, it had to do above all with the times, and the political circumstances. Germany had practically been destroyed, and its people had lost all confidence. The horrors of war were all too fresh in people’s minds. Despite all the horror, people understandably had a great hunger for Classical music, beauty, and art, in general.

**Fidelio:** The Nazis had banned not only so-called degenerate art, but a number of Classical works that they considered dangerous, such as Schiller’s *Don Carlos* (“Give us freedom of thought!”), as well as his *Wilhelm Tell*, as Hitler and Goebbels rightly saw these works as a call to overthrow and mur-

der tyrants. Other great works, such as Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony or his *Eroica*, were misused by the Nazis for propaganda purposes . . .

**Brainin:** . . .The British used Beethoven for their *own* purposes, too . . . That is why so great a craving for an adequate presentation of Classical art, and—in Germany, especially—for great Classical music, was quite understandable at that time.

But, the enthusiasm unleashed by our Hamburg recital in 1950 naturally also had to do with our being Jews. That certainly played a big role. People thought, “Classical art will create the environment for peace. For peace among all men, and most especially, for peace between the Jews and Germans.” Apart from ourselves, there were other Jewish artists who, right after the war, committed themselves to reconciliation, notably Yehudi Menuhin. Today, among musicians, Daniel Barenboim has endeavored to do this. Such artists have made an absolutely incredible contribution to understanding among peoples and nations. Barenboim brings Muslims, Jews, and Christians together, especially of course Israelis and Palestinians; he organizes concerts with them, where he plays and conducts. That’s exactly the right way! One has got to show that Classical music and art belong to *all* men, irrespective of their cultural background. This understanding, for which Barenboim, particularly amongst the youth, has acted in so exemplary a fashion, is critical. The more so, as these efforts have tended to become rather more feeble these days, compared to what was done just after the war.

**Fidelio:** The Nazis, and after the war, their Anglo-American sympathizers, were very concerned at the incredible influence of what Schiller refers to as the “Sublime,” a moral power which Wilhelm Furtwängler, with “his” Berlin Philharmonic, was able to get across in a

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**Top:** *The Amadeus Quartet (left to right): Peter Schidlof, Siegmund Nissel, Martin Lovett, and Norbert Brainin.*  
**Top, right:** *Yehudi Menuhin. Left:* *Daniel Barenboim.*

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*This interview first appeared in Ibykus, the German-language sister-publication of Fidelio, in July 2004.*

very unique way. Furtwängler represented, beyond any doubt, the “true Germany,” including during the Nazi period, and of course after the war. The Anglo-American “re-educators” knew that only too well; they, then as now, wanted to promote totally different character traits among the Germans, than the Sublime.

**Brainin:** In respect to the Sublime, which Schiller consciously placed at the center of all Classical art, since only the Sublime is “truly free,” allow me to report an amusing, but quite accurate example, which indicates the high moral standards that still existed in the 1960’s, and the sort of intellectual and moral demands that artists then placed upon themselves.

We were rehearsing a recital for the Aldeborough Festival, with Benjamin Britten, where we were to play a Mozart quartet with piano, as well as Britten’s second string quartet. Britten was at the piano. After we’d practiced the Mozart quartet, Ben put aside the Mozart score, and said with a smile (we were expecting that the composer, being himself present, was about to explain to us how his work should be played): “And now, from the sublime, to the ridiculous!”

**Fidelio:** When you compare, in general, the moral standard in music in the 1950’s-1960’s, with the situation today, what differences do you see?

**Brainin:** Things are quite different now of course, as there are many more quartets and ensembles. In the 1950’s, the very well-known musicians were, in the main, pianists and violinists. Some of today’s quartets play extremely well—perhaps not always as I personally would like, but, technically, they know what they’re doing. But the real difference is on what I call the “receiving end”—the listener, and above all, the press.

There is less and less understanding of Classical music, and the fault lies rather less with the public, than with the press and the music critics, who have played a fairly significant role in altering, or perhaps one should say “perverting,” what culture actually is, and the importance of the mission represented

by culture in our society.

That is one aspect that the Norbert Brainin Foundation, which I’ve just established, intends to change. The Foundation aims at rooting out, as it were, the flaws in interpreting Classical works; in other words, flaws that have to do with “making music” and interpreting it, which I would like to shift over into a Classical direction. Plainly, I could not do that alone, so I’ve found several colleagues who will be collaborating on the project.

**Fidelio:** Could you give an example of what you mean by perverting the understanding of how one should interpret, over the last half-century?

**Brainin:** It’s hard to put into words. Above all, it has to do with the *singing* quality, with how one produces the tone. As a singer, the essential question is how one places the voice, failing which one will never be “in tune,” neither the intonation, nor pitch, nor the actual quality of the tone.

The same can be said of violin playing, or, indeed, playing any instrument at all, which one could in fact call “singing through the instrument.” What’s wrong with the way we teach violin technique today, is that the teachers do not have a clue why the student has produced the wrong tone. It has something to do with the current craze for the “big tone,” which a “big” violinist is supposed to be able to produce.

In so doing, a notion which should be critical to any true artist, is ruined—the notion, that what one has got to get across to the public is, first and foremost, the *idea* behind the composition, through form and development of the overall concept. This means producing a tone with a very precise degree of *intensity*, which is not the same thing as volume. Pop music, that ghastly stuff, has much to do with this form of perversion; pop music has had a devastating influence on our contemporaries’ “taste,” because pop-musicians, among other things, literally slither into the tone, thereby eliminating all true sense of dynamics.

The same could be said in a related sense, especially concerning the begin-

ning of a work. The best example of how an artist can, in the very first instant, “grab” the listener’s attention, and “tune him in” to the way the entire work will proceed before him, was Wilhelm Furtwängler. The tone was there, straight off, and his famous or, if you will, notorious, “attack,” was the textbook example of how a conductor can awaken that peculiar mixture of emotional tension and lively intelligence in his musicians and in his audience, which is so indispensable if one is to properly interpret a Classical work. (And forget trying to imitate him! One never knows what will come out.)

In general, here is how one could attempt to explain Furtwängler’s brilliant approach to the orchestra: He would seek to bring his musicians to play in the manner *he* intended them to play (i.e., from the standpoint of the composition as a whole). Never would he allow people to play the way *they* might have wished. During rehearsals, by the way, Furtwängler rarely spoke, because words are of little use under such circumstances. Apart from the fact that everyone was expected to know the piece, the musicians were expected to focus entirely on the music, and “listen into” the music; musicians must, in the finest meaning of the word, develop a “feeling” for the music. Through his gestures, and his laconic “Take it again,” Furtwängler succeeded. I knew exactly what he was getting at, and I did the same in my Quartet.

The other major problem in the interpretation of Classical works is a tendency towards romanticizing them, with quite arbitrary use of *rubato* [changes in tempi, and even erratic mood swings—HC] that have nothing whatsoever to do with the work’s actual flow, the way it unfolds from within. That’s something else that my Foundation will set about altering.

**Fidelio:** How will the Foundation work?

**Brainin:** I intend to take only truly gifted music students, because I want to foster people of genuine talent. There will be no cost to the student, neither for the lessons, nor for his lodging. We are now

working on financing, as we have not yet quite made the grade in this respect. It will be in Italy, at Asolo, a town that lies between Venice and Lake Garda. A real school will be set up there, and later, there will be festivals, master classes, and so forth. I have already found some colleagues who are willing to teach there; but, at least at the beginning, I've got to be there myself. I hope to live long enough to bring it all into being.

**Fidelio:** Your long life is a good catchword— But why, when you were a young violinist with so promising a future as a soloist, did you opt for the string quartet?

to play quartets with other string players, and, increasingly frequently, with some students of Max Rostal, who had been Carl Flesch's assistant. I myself had studied with Rostal during the war.

We future colleagues worked really intensively (as is well known, I'd met our violist Peter Schidlof in an internment camp; Peter knew Siegmund Nissel from another camp, and our 'cellist Martin Lovett was a friend of another of Max Rostal's students); but it was only in 1947 that we began to play as a quartet. My "leisure hours," so to speak—i.e., when I was not preparing the Beethoven concert—I spent playing quartets with my three friends. For whatever reason,

Haydn, that music, that had so colossal an impact on me, to a degree that I could *think* of nothing else. And so it was that my solo career slipped into the background.

**Fidelio:** For almost 40 years, the Quartet held together, without ever replacing one of the players—this must be a record in the history of music. You have often explained that the art of interpreting the quartets, especially the late Beethoven quartets, became your *raison d'être*, the purpose for your whole existence. How did that realization affect your decision?

**Brainin:** It was a *decision, pure and simple*, neither for, nor against. But as early as 1947, I already had a premonition that the string quartet would be the actual content of my life. What that meant, was something which I recognized in the great quartets that I had heard as a young violinist in Vienna, notably the Rosé Quartet, headed by Arnold Rosé, who also acted as concert master for the Vienna Philharmonic, and the Busch Quartet, which was already a legend in its own time, and which I'd often listened to on the radio. The greatest influence was, I would say, in fact the Busch Quartet, and the tremendous personality of its first violinist

Adolf Busch; it was the intensity that the Busch Quartet had in playing Beethoven. In the slow movements, no other group had ever achieved the singing quality, and the intensity, of the Busch Quartet.

But our own Quartet started out with Mozart and Haydn. We worked very seriously on Mozart's KV 499, the so-called "Hoffmeister Quartet," which Mozart wrote after the six "Haydn Quartets." That's how we began. Incidentally, we had to work the hardest on Mozart, as that is where the major interpretative difficulties lay. The stages

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*Professor Brainin conducts a master class with the Moyzes Quartet, Dolná Krupá Castle, Bratislava, Slovakia 1995.*

**Brainin:** That's right. I was, in point of fact, on the verge of a solo career, in the autumn of 1946, after winning the Carl Flesch Competition at London, which I had entered essentially as a tribute to my great professor Carl Flesch, who had just died. The prize was a concert with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and I played Beethoven's violin concerto in London. I'd won the Carl Flesch prize for interpreting the Brahms violin concerto, and as I did not want to play the same concerto twice, I chose Beethoven. While I practiced for the concert, which was to take place one year later, I began

after that Beethoven concert, I somehow lost interest in a solo career, because I was so strongly attracted by quartet playing. Plainly, that was my focus. And since that time, I became ever more engrossed in quartet compositions.

Early on, playing quartets was just an interesting hobby, my purpose being thereby to develop myself further as a musician and as an artist. But suddenly something decisive happened, in my mind, in my soul, and in my heart, and the reason for it all, was the music itself. Above all, it was Beethoven's quartets, as well as those of Schubert, Mozart, and

through which Mozart moves in his quartets—his intensive study of Bach while he composed the “Haydn Quartets,” along with the notion of *Motivführung* that Haydn himself had initiated—that was very, very hard for us to grasp. We simply had no inkling of it. Only in the course of time did we begin to understand the actual process of unfolding in each of Mozart’s quartets. Non-professionals will simply not get it; it will be a complete blank to them, because for the layman, Mozart is “just so beautiful.”

**Fidelio:** How did you begin to understand it?

**Brainin:** Paradoxically, at first I found that I understood less and less! But we refused to let ourselves be led down the primrose path, and we were intent on “listening into” the music, again and again. Through playing, very intensely, and listening to one another no less intensely, our essential aim was to grasp how his musical thought unfolded. We could not get enough of playing! Finally, we tried the following: I said: “I shall play, and you must follow. Naturally (at the relevant passages) you must play as you see fit, or better said, as it suits, and I’ll go along.” That was a huge step forward in our understanding of the work, and also, of ensemble playing.

Many would tend to think of Mozart’s music as light and agreeable, a view that one very frequently came across in those days—and one would play his works “softly.” I insisted that one should *not* play Mozart “softly,” but rather with *intensity*, as there is a terrific strength and dynamic in his music. It took *years* until we managed to really bring that to the fore. Of course, in the meantime we had often played Mozart at our recitals, and through performing, we had learned a great deal, partly because at our concerts we gave our fullest attention to the music alone. We played extremely well in recital, which did not prevent us from constantly experimenting in rehearsal, to better it. We wanted to really understand Mozart’s music, and at the end of the day, we did.

**Fidelio:** Could one say that the Amadeus Quartet learned how to play from Mozart? Was the study of Mozart the keystone?

**Brainin:** Actually, yes, but not Mozart alone, it was Beethoven as well. We worked very hard on Beethoven’s first quartet, Op. 18, No. 1. One of the reasons being that the public wanted it from us, as well as Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden” and his *Quartettsatz* in C-Minor.

**Fidelio:** In terms of their contents, Beethoven’s quartets Op. 18 are closely related to Mozart’s “Haydn Quartets.” Beethoven had studied the latter very carefully, notably the A-Major quartet, KV 464. Dedicated to Haydn by Mozart (“to his dear friend”), Haydn studied these with great attention, as one sees from his quartets composed after 1785. The two composers were thus in a fruitful dialogue, and learned much from one another.

**Brainin:** Without a doubt. We knew it, in a way, but at the beginning, we didn’t have quite the right approach. We had to work extremely hard until we truly *knew* what it was, and how it was employed, so as to get it across to the public. In January 1948, when we made our debut at the Wigmore Hall as an ensemble, our entire repertoire consisted of five pieces, of which three were on the program.

**Fidelio:** And what were they?

**Brainin:** Mozart’s D-Minor quartet, KV 421, which is the trickiest of all the Haydn Quartets, and the hardest to interpret. Then the Verdi string quartet, which was less of a problem for us, and the third piece was Beethoven’s Op. 59, No. 3, the last of the three Rasumovsky Quartets. The latter was incredibly well-received, as I imagine that in London, no one had heard it played with such life in it. Needless to say, at our *début* we hadn’t really understood the piece; nevertheless, we had “listened into” the music so deeply, and we had allowed ourselves to be so uplifted and inspired by Beethoven (and by our audience too), that it became a terrific performance, and the audience was inspired.

**Fidelio:** And what were the other two pieces?

**Brainin:** A Haydn quartet, and Mozart’s quartet in C-Major, the “Dissonant Quartet,” KV 465.

**Fidelio:** And then what happened?

**Brainin:** Our success at Wigmore Hall caused a very big stir, and at our next recital, people queued for tickets. At the time, our fee was £40, so each one of us got £10, less than the cost of lunch in London today. But for those days, it was a right good fee. By comparison, lunch in a simple restaurant used to cost only two shillings, a tenth of a pound.

We worked very hard indeed, as for every recital, we had to rehearse a new repertoire.

**Fidelio:** How were those pieces chosen?

**Brainin:** The choice was in the hands of our agents, and at the end of the day, of the public. Both the perceived need, as well as the “taste of the times,” inclined almost without exception to Classical music. We played many Haydn quartets, Schubert, and of course Mozart and Beethoven.

**Fidelio:** So an intellectual dialogue with the audience was essential to you?

**Brainin:** Absolutely, that was most important for us. Almost to a man, our audiences were music lovers, members of musical clubs and societies, who were extremely keen on good music. Such societies existed in other countries as well, not only in England, of course. Which explains—in addition to our own ability!—the great success we enjoyed within a few short years throughout Europe. After England, we toured Spain, and then as I’ve said, we made our first recital tour to Germany in 1950.

It was that recital at Hamburg that opened doors for us in Germany, where we were then to give so many recitals. The Hamburg recital was organized by the organization called “Die Brücke” (“The Bridge”), which in the postwar period had been assigned by the British government to promote cultural relations between England and Germany.

**Fidelio:** When did you begin to work on the later Beethoven quartets in depth?

**Brainin:** Very early on, in the 'fifties; by the late 'fifties, we had already performed a complete Beethoven cycle for the Stockholm radio. It was an enormous effort, playing the entire cycle within a couple of days. Later, we had the opportunity to do the same in Italy. Initially, my colleagues were not so keen on the idea, as they found it too much, and very heavy going. But I insisted upon it, as each and every time, I learned something new, both in rehearsing, and in performing it. We rehearsed very thoroughly—although of course not overdoing it—and when it came time to perform, then we really went for it. Whatever the public might have thought about this being “strong meat,” was irrelevant to me: I wanted to test out the idea we had in mind, and focussed intently on what it was we were actually doing. As a result, the atmosphere became one of great concentration, and the public was held in thrall. The listeners were an inspiration to us.

**Fidelio:** That was in southern Italy, Sicily?

**Brainin:** The public—and this is something we found in recitals everywhere in the world—first, was swept up in the very greatness of Classical music, and second, they were moved by how seriously we performed it. My method, aided and abetted by the fact that I have made a point of truly listening to, and “listening into” so much music, is to play precisely as the composer wrote it.

That means following the indications to the letter; whether *piano*, *forte*, *crescendo*, *legato*, and so forth, I did precisely what was written. And I “listened into” the music, which gave me a “feel” for the correct manner of *expression*. Needless to say it was not always right, but we became ever better.

A further hitch was that editions were not satisfactory in the 'fifties, and the *Peters* editions were notoriously rife with mistakes. There was only one way to deal with this, which was to say, “I’m not entirely sure *how* it should go, but it

most definitely *cannot* be this way.” As we always attempted to understand the composition as a whole, what *we* played often proved to be correct. Later, thank God, the *Urtext* editions came out, against which we could check what we had been playing. And we found that we had often been right, in the way we had “listened into” the music, and that we had interpreted it adequately. This is one area in which things really have looked up, thanks to the *Urtext* editions.

**Fidelio:** At one time, the Amadeus Quartet took private lessons with the great violinist Georges Enescu, on the Beethoven quartets?

**Brainin:** That was sensational. It happened during a festival at the Bryanston School in the mid-'fifties. It all started with the fact that we had interpreted “over-literally” indications for tempi that were thought to have come from Mozart himself. At one recital there, we had played Mozart’s first “Haydn Quartet,” KV 387, in G-Major, for the very first time in public, and it just had to happen, that Enescu himself turned up to listen. We did not play badly, but when we heard that he was in the room, we did become a little anxious.

The next day, Enescu came up to me at lunchtime in the cafeteria, and said to me—in German: “Thank you for yesterday evening’s recital, it was very fine; but to be frank, you took the *Minuet* far too slowly. To which I retorted: “But it’s clearly marked *allegretto*.” And Enescu said, “I know, but it’s wrong. Later, Mozart changed, and in fact, improved upon it, and wrote *allegro*; and the effect is quite, quite different.” To which I replied, “Terribly kind of you to have pointed that out, thank you so much, now I know.” And Enescu said, “Have you got plans for the afternoon?” We’d planned to rehearse, but of course I said, “No, nothing, nor have my colleagues.” Thereupon, Enescu replied that “I’d very much like to show you how to play Beethoven’s quartets, but unfortunately, it will have to be on the piano.”

After lunch, the five of us appeared in the recital hall, and Enescu sat at the grand piano with his back to the “audience,” and began to play. He played by

heart; each tone was absolutely precise, and his expressiveness was a sheer phenomenon.

**Fidelio:** He began with Op. 18, No. 1?

**Brainin:** Yes, with Op. 18, No. 1, and then he played straight through all the quartets, including the late quartets. He did of course leave out the repeats, and sometimes, when the development process was clear, he left out a few passages, saying, “You know how this bit goes.” He did change the order a little, though. He ended by playing the C-Sharp Minor Quartet, Op. 131. The thing took the entire afternoon, straight through to evening.

Meanwhile, word had got about in the Conservatory that “Enescu is playing the Beethoven quartets on the piano for the Amadeus Quartet, one after the other.” The students tiptoed into the hall, sat down quietly, and listened, without of course Enescu ever noting their presence. As he concluded the C-Sharp Minor Quartet and turned around “to us,” he saw everyone sitting there, and the entire room broke out into wild applause. It was incredible. Enescu knew the four voices of each quartet, and played and articulated them very precisely. As a pianist, he was so unbelievably good, I do believe he was a finer pianist than a violinist!

Enescu played all the voices on the keyboard, and not just correctly, but with the ideal equilibrium, dynamically, and in a word, perfectly. Yehudi Menuhin told me of something similar concerning Enescu; he had been a student of Enescu’s in Paris in the 1920’s. On the occasion of Menuhin’s seventieth birthday, he was often interviewed on the BBC, and when a journalist referred to his “fantastic” memory, Menuhin retorted: “Oh, mine is so-so. Let me rather report on a real feat of memory. When I was a very young lad in the 1920’s, studying with Enescu in Paris, the housemaid came in, and whispered something in Enescu’s ear. He told me to stop, and explained: ‘Excuse me, Monsieur Ravel is at the door; he wants to show me his new violin sonata. Could we break off the lesson for a moment, and carry on a bit later?’ Menuhin said,

‘Of course, Maestro.’

“So Maurice Ravel walked in, and showed Enescu the score for his sonata. It was in manuscript; Enescu glanced at it, played a little, and with the words ‘*Ja, ja—ach so—ja,*’ read through the entire sonata. Then he said to Ravel, ‘Okay, let’s start.’ The two artists played the full sonata, Enescu from memory, and the composer, his own work, with his nose glued to the score! Although Enescu had never once seen the sonata before—phenomenal! And what about that, for a feat!” When I heard Yehudi say that, I nonetheless insisted that Enescu playing the Beethoven quartets at the Bryanston School was yet another notch higher.

**Fidelio:** And you learned a lot that afternoon?

**Brainin:** What we learned was colossal. Enescu may have played the quartets “only” on the piano, but there is a great deal to be shown, and learned from that instrument.

It is hard to believe, but no less true. On the piano, one can produce every nuance, whether hard, soft, *legato*—and one can *sing*, especially sing! I think it was Schnabel who said that the piano is the most expressive of all instruments. Not the violin, but the piano, truly *sings*. Beethoven knew that. It so happens that his violin concerto Op. 61 was initially a piano concerto, out of which he made a violin concerto. One can hear that quite clearly, as many passages are not of the type that one would expect to hear in a violin concerto.

In fact, Beethoven never wrote another violin concerto. Either he wasn’t pleased with it, or he found it unsatisfactory. In any event, he never repeated that “experiment.” But he wrote five piano concerti, with passages that rather sound like a violin concerto. Manifestly, Beethoven thought, “I cannot make the violin sing, the way I can do with the piano.”

**Fidelio:** In the violin concerto,

Beethoven actually makes the kettle-drum into a *singing instrument*. Beethoven wanted to show that the most unexpected instruments can sing.

**Brainin:** That is so, and above all in the string quartet, where the voices sing with still greater freedom. And how grandiose the manner in which Beethoven has distributed the voices! It is a single, over-reaching composition, where four independent voices nonetheless sing. This becomes particularly notable from Op. 127 on, where Beethoven had come to a complete mastery of the compositional method of *Motivführung*—the technique of composing, where, from a single motif, a core motif as it were, all themes, the entire movement, and then the entire work unfold. In the later Beethoven quartets, the motifs of the various quartets are even related to one another. This

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

careful perusal of the Haydn and Mozart quartets, discovered the *Motivführung* principle, and then studied how Beethoven took it further, I could see the connections ever more clearly. One has simply got to give



**Many would tend to think of Mozart’s music as light and agreeable. I insisted that one should not play Mozart ‘softly,’ but rather with intensity, as there is a terrific strength and dynamic in his music. We wanted to really understand Mozart’s music, and at the end of the day, we did.**

revolutionary technique of composing, which, as I have already explained, began with Haydn’s “Russian Quartets,” Op. 33, developed further, and decisively, by Mozart in his “Haydn Quartets,” and then fully perfected by Beethoven in his later quartets, is less pronounced in his earlier quartets.

The exception is the Second Rasumovsky, Op. 59, No. 2; there, Beethoven has written passages where, in the space of but a bar or two, all the motifs appear. In the two opening chords of Op. 59, No. 2, the quintessence appears: All the motifs are, essentially, in those two chords, in seed-form, so to speak. The rest is “merely” variation or modulation. When I pick up the score now, and compare how we first played it, then I must acknowledge that we had not yet understood that when we began. Later, especially once I had, thanks to

**Fidelio:** Johannes Kepler, in the introduction to his fundamental *New Astronomy*, gives thanks to the “the Creator of the cosmos” for having “allowed man to understand the mysteries of the heavens.”

**Brainin:** It is a gift from heaven, and I believe that had I not already discovered the notion of *Motivführung*, I would not have understood that either. As I’ve said, not all of Beethoven’s works are written like that; the quartet Op. 59, No. 1 is written quite differently, literally quite differently. His quartet Op. 59, No. 3 resembles Op. 59, No. 2, but not in all respects. And even in Op. 59, No. 2, Beethoven uses the *Motivführung* technique only here and there, as he does in the quartet Op. 74. The first time Beethoven uses the revolutionary method of composition straight through—and masterfully—is in fact in Op. 127.

thanks to God, that one can understand such an idea. It is quite literally a gift from God, that we mortals can come to grasp such an all-embracing notion.

**Fidelio:** The later Beethoven quartets pose quite a problem to the relativists, who enjoy getting things mixed up; they claim Beethoven was a forerunner of Schönberg, Webern, and Stravinsky, etc., which is simply not the case. But that is what we are teaching people at the conservatories. How do you see this?

**Brainin:** Very early on, I had some *inkling* of how development proceeds in Classical music, and perhaps that is why I discovered the principle of *Motivführung*. As for Beethoven being a forerunner of Stravinsky? Stravinsky's music is utterly unlike that of Beethoven, it has nothing to do with it.

Here another anecdote, that relates, yet again, to Benjamin Britten, is relevant. Ben told me that when the war ended, he met with Stravinsky in America, and he told me about it, to make it clear that Stravinsky knew virtually nothing of Classical music, and indeed, was acquainted with practically nothing but his own works. During a conversation with Britten, Stravinsky suddenly said, "Incidentally, a few days ago I heard a Mozart Symphony, in G-Minor, what a lovely piece." What can one do, but shake one's head in disbelief: Stravinsky became acquainted with Mozart's great G-Minor Symphony (KV 550) well after the age of 60! What is this? A supposedly great composer hasn't a clue about Mozart! He discovers one of Mozart's major works, as an old-age pensioner! Thank God, at least Stravinsky did not claim that he had written the thing himself. I mean, Stravinsky's rattling and clattering music ["*Klappermusik*"] is so far afield from Beethoven's, that they are out of each other's sight-lines.

Were Mozart ever to hear how his works are often performed on the radio these days—not to speak of this business with "Contemporary Music"—he would laugh his head off; it has nothing to do with new or old music, but simply with good, or bad.

**Fidelio:** We had a question about the influence of Johann Sebastian Bach: There is a relation to the string quartet, although perhaps not so obvious.

**Brainin:** It is his method of voice-lead-

ing, which was later worked up into *Motivführung*.

**Fidelio:** Generally speaking, what role does Bach's ability—what Haydn called the "science of composition"—have for the art of the string quartet?

**Brainin:** Naturally, an outstanding role. Bach's polyphony, his science of

**Fidelio:** Very freely composed; but, as Beethoven wrote later in his "Grosse Fuge": "*So streng, wie frei*" ("As rigorously, as free")—double-fugal counterpoint.

**Brainin:** And what other musician had attempted anything like that before him? While, as a composition, that Mozart quartet is complex and compli-

**In Beethoven's string quartets, the voices sing with the greatest freedom. And how grandiose the manner in which he has distributed the voices! It is a single, over-reaching composition, where four independent voices nonetheless sing. From Op. 127 on, Beethoven had come to a complete mastery of the compositional method of *Motivführung*—where, from a single motif, all themes, the entire movement, and then the entire work unfold.**



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voice-leading, is something absolutely unique, and reveals itself essentially in four-voice settings. In every symphony, but especially in the Classical string quartet, one perceives Bach's polyphonic counterpoint. A good example is Mozart's G-Major quartet, KV 387, of which we have just spoken. Although very free in design, the final movement is in counterpoint, an "applied counterpoint" so to speak. I was deeply impressed by this quartet, and especially by the final movement, a double

cated, it is very "pretty" nonetheless.

**Fidelio:** That was Mozart's sphere, as he himself wrote in a letter, often to compose in such a way that "only those who know, will find true delight, while the layman too will be pleased, without, however, knowing why."

**Brainin:** That is Mozart's genius, and that is the genius of Classical music as such. I must admit that when I played that movement for the first time, I literally broke down crying, so moved was I by what Mozart had achieved here. How can one have written that? And then Beethoven presses ahead, with still greater freedom, in his late quartets. It is of colossal importance, it is the sign of genius.

As a string quartet, to bring that out adequately, so that the listeners begin to grasp the actual concept, is for an artist like myself, my *raison d'être*, the meaning of a fulfilled artistic life.

**Fidelio:** You have given us much to think about, Mr Brainin, for which we thank you.

—translated from the German by  
Katharine Kanter