Professor Norbert Brainin, Primarius of the Amadeus Quartet

'As free, as it is rigorous'— Beethoven's Art of Four-Voice Composition

EIRNS

Norbert Brainin, former head of the legendary Amadeus Quartet, turned seventy-five in March 1998. Shortly after his birthday, he granted a wide-ranging interview, with Beethoven as the focus. The interview was conducted by Ortrun and Hartmut Cramer on March 19 at Elmau castle near Munich, Germany, where Brainin was holding one of his master classes for young string quartets, and first appeared in Ibykus, the German-language sister publication of Fidelio.

Beethoven really took the concept, 'As free, as it is rigorous,' earnestly. This is his first commandment. Bach also wrote in four voices; but, with him, the voices are not individual. With Beethoven, every voice is different, although distinctly stamped by the Motivführung. This is his great achievement.

Fidelio: Professor Brainin, in one of your earlier interviews [with *Ibykus*] you said, that Beethoven's great achievement was in four-voice composition; that in this domain he remains unequalled. Can you elucidate that more fully?

Brainin: Gladly. Beethoven writes a type of four-voice composition in his late quartets, in which the four voices are played or sung, but each voice is treated entirely individually. All voices sing something which is *important*—and, indeed, everything is *equally important.* The balance is perfect; the voices need not concern themselves over how loudly they sing or how softly, because everything is composed so *perfectly.* The most important element in this regard is the *Motivführung,* because the motifs Beethoven employs, all cohere and derive from the piece itself.

Especially in the late quartets, one finds that to be the case; but, naturally, already partially in his earlier works. The same is also the case here and there for Mozart. With Mozart the four voices also sing, and it is so perfectly composed, that one should actually just *sing* it; but, it must be sung *correctly,* with correct voices, correctly produced, and it must really come forth from the body. I am not a singer—but, I assume, a singer skilled in *bel canto* would be able to do so immediately.

Fidelio: And how is something like this done on the violin?

Brainin: The whole art consists in this, of course. In order to produce such singing on the violin, you need a certain technique, a definite bowing technique. First, you must "find" the tone on the violin; you must discover the correct point of contact between the bow and string, and then, in addition, the correct bow velocity. And then, as the final factor, you add the pressure. This is something that the artist must discover, and it is different every day. You must learn it, and practice it *every day,* practice it over again, until it works. I can only explain it thus: that when it really works, a tone comes forth which is a full *expression.* I can demonstrate this with singing, too. Whatever my voice might be, it nonetheless really comes from me. And this voice has true expression. You need such a tone, in order to play or to sing music such as Beethoven's four-voice composition.

Fidelio: One must practice this technique virtually every day?

Brainin: Every day. For years, this has in fact been the one thing that I really practice. It is something which a student of *bel canto* must learn, too. Right from the start, one must begin with the *correct* tone, the correct *sound*; it must ring right from the beginning. This is the most difficult thing for the *bel canto* singer, too. It is a technical concern, that his voice be right "there." Even with my meager voice I can do this. I am not a singer, and of course I can do it much better with the bow.

The violin responds differently every day. I do not play gymnastically, never—I always play solely with expression. When I play, I think only about the expression; especially in such works as Beethoven's

late quartets. For this is precisely typical of these works; Beethoven's four-voice composition is absolutely the appropriate music for this technique.

Fidelio: Returning once more to your remark, that Beethoven is unequalled in the domain of four-voice composition. Why is this? Many composers, both before and after Beethoven, availed themselves of this compositional technique. Why, in your opinion, is Beethoven unequalled in this art?
Brainin: Because he really took the concept, "As free, as rigorous," which he inscribed on his *Große Fuge,* earnestly. This is his first commandment, as it were. Bach also wrote in four voices; but, with him, the voices are not individual. Bach's polyphonic technique produces a certain sound, a certain music—a great music. But with Beethoven it is such, that his manner of voice-leading contains an individuality, which is not found in the same way in Bach's polyphonic compositional method. With Beethoven, every voice is different, although distinctly stamped by the *Motivführung.*

Fidelio: So that the greatest possible unity of the whole composition predominates, notwithstanding the greatest possible individuality of each of the voices?
Brainin: Exactly. This constitutes the greatness of Beethoven's music. This is the great achievement of Beethoven.

Fidelio: This is nothing but the solution to the old paradox in Greek philosophy, the opposition between the *One* and the *Many,* expressed musically. That one can combine as many individual voices or melodies as possible, into one overall conception.
Brainin: Yes, this is above all what one must learn, in order to be able to play Beethoven's quartets. One practices—it's a bit coarse to say it this way, but—basically, one practices other quartets, until one has advanced to the point, where you can play those of Beethoven.

Fidelio: Where did Beethoven derive this from? How did he learn it?
Brainin: Naturally, he learned this. First, as we know, he knew Bach very well; he could write fugues. But it's certain he was of the opinion that "to write fugues alone is not sufficient." Beethoven never wrote fugues for their own sake, but rather employed this technique in his compositions, in order to achieve a better overall result. He learned this afresh from Mozart. He combined Bach's polyphonic technique with Mozart's method of voice-leading. These are different elements, which, however, are *equivalent;* Beethoven made a *synthesis* of these different elements. And, from this, a sound results, which one cannot compare with any other. It is not a quartet in the harmony alone—that is not it, not at all.

In Beethoven's string quartets, the four voices are very individually distinct singing voices. The personal action of each single player is the most important thing in the performance. All attempts to render Beethoven's quartets with a string orchestra were unsatisfactory.

In 1987, after the death of violist Peter Schidlof, the Amadeus Quartet ceased performing concerts; the remaining members teach and promote young quartets from around the world.

A good example of what I mean, is the second movement of Op. 127; in fact, the *entire* movement. It consists of variations, of which one passes over into the other; one can actually scarcely notice when one ceases, and the next begins. In the first movement, Beethoven proceeds similarly. But, above all, this type of quartet is especially strongly pronounced in the second movement, the variation movement; I don't see this in the last, third movement, however. There, everything is arranged more according to Bach than to Beethoven, hence polyphonic. But, in Quartet Op. 132, throughout the whole piece, he employs this technique with this sound, the individual sound of the voices *and* the harmony, at the same time. For this reason, I use the expression "synthesis" to characterize it.

Fidelio: In all likelihood, you were playing the late quartets of Beethoven with the Amadeus Quartet from very early on . . .
Brainin: . . . yes, already in the late 1950's; and indeed all as an integral cycle (strangely enough, for the first time in Stockholm), and then more and more.
Fidelio: . . . when did you "come to know" Beethoven, as it were? When did the idea first arise in you, of what the "secret" of these quartets is, and how one must play them?

Brainin: That's difficult for me to say. Somehow, I have the feeling, as if I had always known this. Certainly, I haven't always understood it in the way that I can now explain it. Likewise, I have actually always understood *Motivführung,* although it wasn't until much later that I first spoke about it. Thus, a cognitive process starts, which is indeed similar to that which occurs in the composer; *Motivführung* with Haydn, for example, is such a case. It is true, that he wrote no string quartets in the nine years prior to writing the six quartets Op. 33, in which he consciously employed this "new method" for the first time. But, he had already written many quartets before that. And, in reality, they were not composed *much* differently—this is true especially of the Quartet Op. 20. At the very least, the direction was already established.

One can perhaps illustrate this with the following comparison: Water at 70 degrees is water; at 80 degrees also—it has only become hotter. At 99 degrees, the water is always still water, but, at 100 degrees, it is no longer the same. That means, that Haydn's musical creation attained a point, where it no longer was the same; but, beforehand, it had not been very much different. His music already contained the impulse for the later direction; even the first beginning in the exercise of this technique is found in the previously composed works.

Fidelio: So, this "synthetic" process of composing, of composing in order to achieve a greater synthesis of different elements, was already subliminally there, but then it became at some time entirely explicit?

Brainin: Absolutely, this is exactly the case. And, from then on, according to this "boundary condition of water," nothing was any longer as it had been beforehand. Even though, of course, for example, Beethoven composed very well before he *consciously* availed himself of this method. His quartets Op. 18 are masterpieces of the very first order, as are also the previously composed string trios. But everything was different from the moment he consciously employed the method of *Motivführung* for the first time. That was, I believe, in the Quartets Op. 59. (I am not yet entirely certain; in Op. 59, No. 2, there are passages which are just as well composed as in the late quartets; but, in fact, he does not yet always employ this method here, only off and on. In Op. 95 it is similar, especially in the second movement.)

With all composers, Schubert, for example, everything was going in this direction, although Beethoven did not yet have any notion of it, at the time when Haydn used this technique. At least, not *consciously.* With Schubert, the work with motifs typical of him is found in almost all of his works.

EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

In rehearsal: Professors Norbert Brainin and Günter Ludwig, December 1988.

Fidelio: It was, if you will, virtually in the air at that time; it was the manner of composing.

Brainin: But, as I said, Haydn and Mozart played the greatest part in it, and Beethoven thereafter.

Fidelio: Can you indicate, approximately, *when* the significance of Beethoven's late quartets and the *Motivführung* for the overall creation of quartets, came to be consciously known by you? Probably, after you had worked through the entire classical literature with the Amadeus Quartet, had publicly performed, and also had instructed?

Brainin: Approximately. It was in the 1970's, when our quartet was already over twenty-five years "old." At that time, we had played Beethoven quite a lot, above all in Italy. For some reason, we received many inquiries from Italy, to play Beethoven cycles. Oddly enough, mainly in Sicily; in Catania, Palermo, Syracuse, and Messina. Again and again we went there on tour, travelling from one city to another, and each time playing a different program, in two, sometimes in three cities. I still remember it quite well, for my colleagues were not especially enthusiastic about it in the beginning, because these concerts were naturally very, very arduous. But I said to myself: "I will not miss *a single one* of these evenings."

Fidelio: These were always purely Beethoven evenings?

Brainin: Yes. At that time, we did this—in the middle of the 1970's, the beginning of the 1980's—not only in Sicily, but also in Florence, Milan, and Turin; it was here, as it were, that "the penny dropped" for me in respect to Beethoven—but, not only in respect to Beethoven, however.

Fidelio: Which is to say, that the proper performance of Haydn and later also of Mozart, first became fundamentally clear to you in the playing or working through of all of the Beethoven quartets?

Brainin: Actually, yes. For, then we played Mozart better, too. Our first efforts with Mozart were not especially good, although everyone believed—after all, we were, of course, called the "Amadeus" Quartet—that we specialized in Mozart. But, that was really not the case. We had always played Beethoven better than Mozart. But, from a certain time, it became the case that, through the mastery of the music of Beethoven, we in fact played that of Mozart better also. I learned from Beethoven, how to play and assess Mozart correctly.

I believe the piano is really the best singing instrument. Of course, Beethoven knew that. The violin sings better than the human voice, but the piano sings better than the violin. It's no accident, that he wrote five piano concertos, and only one for the violin.

Actually, that is not in general astonishing, if one takes seriously Beethoven's thesis, "*Tantôt libre, tantôt recherchée*" ["As free, as rigorous"]. I have always adhered to that, and indeed not only in respect to Beethoven.

Take Haydn's music, as an example: If, as often happens with the Haydn quartets, I had to play a cantilene with a rhythmically harmonic accompaniment, then, at the beginning, my colleagues literally always followed me; I had to, so to speak, "drag them along." Until I then said: "*You* must carry *me*; I do not want to lead here, that makes my voice too heavy; I would like to be led, to be conducted. It must flow. Do this for me, and I will follow. *I* will follow." And that has worked. That is the solution to the puzzle and the paradox, "As free, as rigorous." That is the solution, and it has worked fantastically.

My colleagues were of course all happy about this, for by this means, the voices which they played obtained their own proper values. The whole piece had "head and feet," so to speak, and the listeners thought and said: "Just listen to how well they follow the first violin." And yet, it was exactly the reverse; I was following *them*. To be sure, we had to play it in such a way as it suited me; in other words, the way I should play, and also told them to, too. Otherwise, I would not have been able to do it at all. As a result, we had also to do this in the places, where the 'cello had to play a solo, or the viola, or the second violin. We always employed the same recipe.

That has its origin with Bach—I then comprehended this. This was also the reason why I could play Bach very well. I comprehended the interpretation of this music correctly first in the 1970's; *how* important the intensive study of Beethoven's quartets was, was at that time not yet clear to me, naturally; but, *that* it was very important, was already clear. Somehow, all this—the understanding of Bach, Haydn, and Mozart—derived for me from Beethoven.

Fidelio: On the basis of this personal experience, would you say that the study of Beethoven's quartets is in general the best approach to understanding all other Classical composers, even the later ones, such as Schumann, Mendelssohn, Brahms, and so forth?—In the 1970's you also began instructing young quartets in Cologne . . . — that one therefore should take Beethoven's art as the metric for understanding all other composers?

Brainin: Yes, above all Beethoven's use of the *Motivführung*. Also, Brahms is quite typical of this. Dvořák also, and Mendelssohn naturally; Schumann, absolutely. Absolutely! Since, for me, Beethoven was the key to the understanding of all other Classical composers, it became clear to me, that Beethoven was actually the greatest composer, indeed the greatest *artist* of all time. Until approximately ten years before his death, there had been many other artists, who were of equally high rank with Beethoven in their achievements. But, from then on he was utterly all alone on the wide field. An *artist*.

I believe he must have known that. He felt it; he was indeed very humble about it, but he did not conceal it.

Fidelio: The point in time identified by you is certainly important in this connection, for after the 1815 Congress of Vienna, and especially after the Carlsbad Decrees of 1818, there was something like a restoration of feudalism—and that only a few years after the European "Liberation Wars." Prince Metternich did not have only his political opponents spied upon and arrested—like, for example, the young Friedrich List, who had to go into exile in America—but he also extended this surveillance to artists. We know Beethoven suffered greatly under this. Yet, Beethoven possessed such a strong character—not least his *Heiligenstädter Testament* demonstrates this—, that precisely in such extremely oppressive circumstances, he created his greatest works: master works like the Ninth Symphony, the *Missa Solemnis,* or the late quartets, which were written quite *consciously* for their effect upon posterity.

Brainin: What concerns Beethoven's mastery, occurs to me—not absolutely *apropos*—to be precisely something, which has to do with his treatment of solo instruments; I mean, above all, the relationship in Beethoven between the violin concerto and the piano concerto. The Beethoven violin concerto is, in fact, a modification of a piano concerto, in which Beethoven above all changed the key from C-major to D-major. In the violin concerto, he attempted to treat the violin just as he treated the piano in the piano concertos. Naturally, that did not quite work. But he attempted it, and in the second movement, the violin certainly "fit" excellently, as it was really in the correct place. Beethoven was much more successful on the piano than on the violin.

What I want to say with this is: The particular "tone," which I spoke of previously, I had heard in his violin concerto. But it struck me later, that this is yet more manifest in his piano concertos. For, on the piano, you can do practically everything that each of the other instruments can do; moreover, the piano *sings* better. The violin sings better than the human voice, but the piano sings better than the violin.

I believe the piano is really the best singing instrument. Of course, Beethoven knew that. It's no accident, that he wrote five piano concertos, and only one violin concerto; and that after the violin concerto, he no longer engaged himself with this kind of music.

Fidelio: If, in comparison to the violin, the piano is the better singing instrument; then, is that nevertheless probably not true, for Beethoven's treatment of the string quartet?
Brainin: That's correct. Absolutely. For Beethoven writes his string quartets, such that the four voices are very individually distinct singing voices, whose development depends very much upon the personal initiative of the performer. This personal . . .
Fidelio: . . . action?
Brainin: . . . yes, action! The *personal action* of each single player is the most important thing in the performance of Beethoven's quartets. It is for this reason, that all attempts to render Beethoven's quartets with a string orchestra were so unsatisfactory. Even with Furtwängler, it did not work. Certainly he even admitted that often, and accordingly said: "Yes, I know that that can't be done; but I very much wanted to perform the work, and since the orchestra is my instrument, I wanted to try it with it; and, above all, because I have never heard an adequate rendition of Beethoven's string quartets."
Fidelio: He did not hear the Amadeus Quartet in its prime.
Brainin: Unfortunately, Furtwängler did not hear us at all.

Fidelio: But this also means, that there exists an underlying connection between what you said at the beginning about four-voice composition—concerning the greatest possible freedom and individuality of the individual voices, with the greatest possible strength of the composition as a whole—, and the fact that Beethoven brought string-quartet composition to a height never attained.
Brainin: Yes, and this is also a striking demonstration of his solution to the paradox of the One and the Many: his string quartet is really a unity, even though it simultaneously involves a composition of four entirely different voices. It has been realized perfectly in this manner, it is almost incredible.

Fidelio: In conclusion, once again to Furtwängler. He became famous for his expression, to play that which is "between" or "behind the notes."
Brainin: Yes—that is the true task of the artist. Of course, this is connected again to the previously mentioned correct sound, which you need for the adequate representation of a musical idea. If you do not concentrate on this, and do not practice this constantly, then no true interpretation can result.

As is well known, Furtwängler always had difficulties, when beginning a piece that demanded a particular sound. Of course, something like this can be conveyed to an orchestra only with great difficulty—formally, not at all. I believe the only one which was able to follow him in such situations was the Berlin Philharmonic, because they were acquainted with it, they already knew it. One of its concert-masters, Szymon Goldberg, when once asked a similar question, expressed this laconically as follows: "So, then look at each other for a little while, and then we simply start up!" But, then, they would begin *correctly!* So, that was what Furtwängler was all about.

Fidelio: In other words, to drive the tension to the maximum . . .
Brainin: . . . yes, he did that intentionally. Naturally—entirely irrespective of all his other abilities—he made use of a quite "normal" technique for beating time, which he was able to use, when he wished; but that did not suffice him, he wanted something special.

Fidelio: Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau has expressed Furtwängler's art in an essay, as "music that breathes"—as a process of *becoming,* which communicated itself by way of the orchestra to the audience. There were indeed already in Furtwängler's lifetime countless anecdotes about how he allegedly "could not decide, how to make the entry," and therefore "so comically put himself out of joint." In this way, with Furtwängler, the first tone was already the expression of a *creative process!* But he could only evoke the capacity in his performers, to render this process *with vitality*—as his concert masters above all have emphasized—only insofar as he put the musicians under extreme tension, so that they literally "broke out in a sweat"; they sat, as it were, "on tiptoe," and thought, felt, and acted as a single large instrument under his direction.
Brainin: That was exactly what he wanted to achieve! Furtwängler's "trembling" and "quaking" at the beginning of Beethoven's Fifth is indeed a legend, but there is yet also the famous example of his *Eroica.* It begins with two *forte*-strokes. A normal conductor makes these two strokes in *forte,* and then proceeds. But what did Furtwängler do? He quickly, but intensely, looked at his musicians, and even if the musicians were not yet quite ready,— *boom!*— he would strike it. Furtwängler was someone who trusted himself to do something like that.

Fidelio: Unfortunately, the situation today is indeed different. At present, for example, the most prized recordings are made by some remarkably sterile sounding orchestras. It seems as if with these recordings, they consciously want to counteract the tradition of Furtwängler. It is, in fact, more than merely a fad, to try each time to make something once again completely different; rather, on the contrary, it is an attempt to attack the essence of music.
Brainin: I know—such musicians play only the notes. Certainly, they play them more or less correctly—in a certain, technically adequate way—, but that is all. Technically, their playing is surely correct in this way, but it contains no expression, and hence no radiance. What's more, it is actually deficient rhythmically. You hear that especially clearly, if the musicians play beforehand, to warm up: they are entirely occupied with merely not making mistakes. Only, in order that *nothing* take place!
Fidelio: And then nothing happens.
Brainin: To be sure!
Fidelio: Professor Brainin, our thanks for this interesting discussion.