

Norbert Brainin: Founder and Primarius of the Amadeus Quartet

by Hartmut Cramer

The death of violinist Norbert Brainin on April 10, 2005, came as a shock, and is still difficult to grasp. He died at the age of 82 in London. With him the world loses one of those truly great artists and human beings, who, because of their moral integrity and extraordinary charisma, are able to shape an entire epoch, since they are able to successfully mediate in all cultures precisely that which makes man unique: the joy in creative work. Anyone who has seen firsthand only once, how intensively, precisely, and rigorously—but never ever pedantically—always inspiring, loose, and with a lot of jokes, Norbert Brainin was capable of teaching especially young musicians, how great Classical works are to be performed, so that the listeners can be reached and ennobled in the best Schillerian sense, understands the deeper meaning of Beethoven's famous challenge *So streng wie frei* (As rigorously, as free). This high moral challenge, which is not only valid in Classical art, but also in all science, accompanied Norbert in

his long artistic life; with “his” Amadeus Quartet, he consciously chose to take it on—and fulfilled it.

“To bring out adequately in quartet playing the great art of the four-part setting,” of which Beethoven became an unsurpassed master with his late quartets—the very domain of the legendary Amadeus Quartet—“so that the audience starts to understand this concept, is, for an artist like me, the *raison d'être*, the sense of an accomplished artistic life.” How often in our many discussions and interviews with Norbert have we heard this sentence from him, which he said very deliberately at the end of his last interview to *Ibykus* in July 2004—an interview which now unfortunately has become the very last of his life.

“We simply listened into the music. Again and again,” was his typical answer to the question, how the Amadeus Quartet was able to reach this great mastery of interpretation. Similarly, his stating the fact, that he was one of the last living violinists who was educated in that very technique of violin playing, which had been “authorized” by Beethoven himself, and without which “you simply can't play Beethoven's late quartets adequately.” Brainin stood in this tradition with two of his teachers: Rosa Hochmann-Rosenfeld in Vienna, as well as Carl Flesch in London, were pupils of Jakob Grün, who in turn had been the pupil of Joseph Böhm in Vienna. Böhm, the “father of the Viennese violinists,” and founder of the so-called “German,” or “Viennese School,” had worked with Beethoven directly, especially concerning the interpretation of his late quartets. “Technically speaking, it is exactly the kind of violin playing which you need in order to play Beethoven's music,” said Brainin. It means, producing a certain *singing* tone. It's like the *bel canto* technique in singing. And, like a singer, you have to rehearse



Lyndon LaRouche (left) with Norbert Brainin, after a concert played by the renowned violinist in 1987.



The Amadeus Quartet, left to right: Norbert Brainin, Siegmund Nissel, Peter Schidlof, and Martin Lovett. The four played together for 40 years—a record in musical history.

this every day. Every day.” Yet, aside from all the talent and industriousness, as well as the enthusiasm and joy in doing creative work, the cultural and personal background of the members of the Amadeus Quartet was also a decisive reason for its success, and for that the career of Norbert Brainin is exemplary.

The Development of a Great Musician

Born 1923 in Vienna, his enthusiasm and talent for playing the violin became clear already at the age of 6, when he saw the 12-year old “prodigy” Yehudi Menuhin perform in concert. Initially, Norbert was taught by his uncle Max—an amateur musician and later architect in New York, but who nevertheless played so well, that he was allowed to play in quartets with professional string players, a passion, which he still indulged in at the age of 90. But when Norbert’s extraordinary talent became evident, he was taken under the wing of Riccardo Odnoposoff, the then (very young) concert master of the Vienna Philharmonic, and violinist Rosa Hochmann-Rosenfeld, who also introduced him—at the early age of 12—to playing string quartets. Later she arranged his contact to Carl Flesch in London, who at the time was by far the world’s most famous violin pedagogue.

After Hitler’s *Anschluss*, the occupation of Austria, in March 1938—right on Norbert’s 16th birthday—the family decided to send their children to England for their safety. Flesch accepted Norbert as a pupil and everything seemed to develop “normally,” until World War II ended his studies with Flesch. When the Nazis started to bomb England, Flesch fled from London to the Dutch harbor of Rotterdam, which was later largely destroyed in a terrible bombardment.

In London, Norbert initially continued his studies with

Flesch’s assistant Max Rostal, but as an “enemy alien,” he soon was put into an internment camp, where he met Peter Schidlof, who was also a young Jewish refugee from Vienna who played the violin. Through joint performances of Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto in the camp (Schidlof playing the solo part, Brainin “the orchestra”), the two boys became inseparable friends—for life. When Brainin was able to resume his studies with Rostal, his teacher announced that he was ready to teach two Jewish violin students without any means—Peter Schidlof and Siegmund Nissel, who had also emigrated from Vienna—for free. Three of the future

members of the Amadeus Quartet became close friends because of their joint fate as refugees and their life in the internment camp; artistically, they became close later in Max Rostal’s chamber orchestra, and while playing string quartets together. In addition, there was another challenge to be mastered: the duty to undertake “war-relevant activity.” Up to eight hours’ work in an armament factory, and about four hours studying the violin—that was the typical “day of study” for these future outstanding musicians during the war.

After this tough education, Norbert accepted another challenge, a true baptism by fire for the musicians: In 1946 he took part in the Carl Flesch Competition, founded in memory of his recently deceased teacher—with the firm intention to win it. His interpretation of Brahms’ Violin Concerto fully convinced the jury. The first prize being a concert with the BBC Symphony in London, Brainin chose (typically for him) Beethoven’s Violin Concerto, and with that, the door to a great international career as a soloist was wide open. While preparing for this concert, he often played string quartets with his friends Peter and “Siggie,” who were joined by the cellist Martin Lovett—“because through this I wanted to develop myself further musically and artistically. But then something decisive happened, in my head, my soul, and my heart; and this was entirely caused by the music we played. Above all, by Beethoven’s quartets, but also by those of Schubert, Mozart, and Haydn. . . . I couldn’t *think* about anything else. . . . Already in 1947 I sensed, that playing string quartets would become the purpose of my life.”

This is exactly what happened. The (unofficial) debut of the “Brainin Quartet” in 1947 was already a huge success; the proper debut of the Amadeus Quartet on April 10, 1948 in London was even a sensation. So, too, its 1950 debut on Ger-

man soil, in Hamburg, where “the audience in its enthusiasm almost smashed the entire hall.”

Since that time, Norbert Brainin and “his” quartet developed more and more into a powerful musical institution, which set international standards in terms of adequate interpretation of the great Classical works for string quartets—above all Beethoven’s late quartets, the *raison d’être* of these four musicians. Until the premature death of its violist Peter Schidlof in 1987, the Amadeus Quartet played together with no changes in its personnel, which is a unique record in the history of music.

This part of Brainin’s extraordinarily successful artistic and equally influential cultural-political life, which secures him an acknowledged place in the history of music, is generally known. The *London Times*, in its obituary on April 12, honored Brainin’s extraordinary artistic and moral qualities, and did not forget to mention his appropriate use of jokes. (Once, in order to loosen up his colleagues, Brainin suddenly interrupted the Amadeus rehearsal of Schubert’s Quintet, and told a joke about the conversation of two street violinists in New York: “What’s your violin?” “Strad, 1699.” “Boy, that’s cheap.”)

But also another part of Norbert’s life deserves to be told, because it demonstrates in an exemplary way, that for him the question of morality and absolutely strict artistic rigor and integrity—his constant *truth seeking*—was not only a matter of “pure art,” but also of practical everyday life—i.e., politics. We are talking about his relationship with the American politician Lyndon LaRouche, with whom he developed a close friendship over the last 20 years.

Friendship With LaRouche

The basis for this was laid, as usual in such matters, with the intensive exchange of great ideas. Before their first meeting in the Spring of 1986, Brainin had read some of LaRouche’s writings on music, philosophy, and—naturally—also politics. When they met in the vicinity of Wiesbaden, Germany, Schubert’s String Quintet—at the time one of LaRouche’s “music projects”—was at the center of discussion. For more than two hours Norbert demonstrated (without a score), with gestures, singing, and at the piano, the connection of all five voices of this great work of art, which he knew by heart. After that, the discussion—over a good dinner—continued with philosophical and political questions, but also with a lot of jokes and anecdotes. Out of that first discussion grew an extraordinarily fruitful intellectual cooperation, which went far beyond “musical projects” as such.

In December 1987, Brainin together with Cologne pianist Günter Ludwig gave a (first) “solidarity concert for LaRouche” in Boston’s famous Jordan Hall, with sonatas from Mozart, Brahms, and Beethoven, when LaRouche was put on trial for purely political reasons. The concert was reviewed very favorably in the leading Boston newspaper—a testimony to Norbert’s courageous engagement. The U.S.



Brainin and Günter Ludwig rehearse for a concert in Washington in 1990.

government some months later was forced to declare a mistrial, since the political fallout for then-U.S. Vice President Bush senior threatened to become too damaging. Brainin also stood by his friend LaRouche, when the latter was put on trial again—in practically the same case—at the end of 1988 in Alexandria, Virginia, and was sentenced to 15 years in prison, after a “rocket docket trial,” which had nothing to do with a fair trial according to normal legal standards.

Several times in the U.S. capital, but also in many European cities—among them Paris, Milan, Munich, Hamburg, and Wiesbaden—Brainin played solidarity concerts for LaRouche in the following years; he also visited his friend twice in prison in Rochester, Minnesota, where the two discussed, in a very noisy environment, questions of Classical composition—above all the principle of *motivic thorough composition*, which was very close to Norbert’s heart.

Fight for the ‘Low Tuning’

Norbert was especially interested in cooperating with LaRouche in the field of the *science of music*. At the end of the 1980s, this meant above all the fight for the “low tuning” of C=256 Hertz, the so-called “Verdi A” of 432 Hz, a proposal which the famous Italian soprano Renata Tebaldi had made in a discussion with LaRouche. After long conversations con-



Brainin inspects a Stradivarius in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, 1990.

cerning the *scientific* relevance—and not only the obvious practical one—of a unified (lower) tuning as opposed to today’s absurdly high “Karajan tuning” of A well above 440 Hz, Brainin, who of course had grasped the meaning of this question for singers immediately, studied this problem intensely. Using the *Adagio* from Bach’s Sonata for Violin solo in G-minor, Brainin demonstrated for the first time in a private setting with LaRouche, his wife Helga, and some friends, in August 1988 in his beautiful Summer house in northern Tuscany, Italy, the fact that a Classical composition (and also his Strad) sounded much better—i.e., “fuller” and more transparent at the same time—in the “low tuning.” Spontaneously (over lunch) the decision was made, to repeat this experiment on stage, which occurred in December of that same year with extraordinary success in Munich, Germany.

Before that, though, Brainin “paid his tribute to science.” In order to demonstrate the superiority of the “low tuning” in a parliamentary hearing in Rome, which became the basis for a parliamentary initiative to pass a law on the “Verdi A,” Prof. Bruno Barosi, the director of the world-famous International Institute of Violinmaking, in Cremona, Italy, invited Brainin to his lab, recorded certain tones (and their octaves) both in the low and high tuning, did a spectral analysis, and finally evaluated the findings. At first, Barosi and his assistant were

totally baffled at the absolute precision of Brainin’s intonation: “I have had almost all of the world’s top violinists in my lab, but something like this, I have never seen. Brainin is precise to the very Hertz, and that always. Again, and again. That is truly unique.” The other findings were not so surprising, but equally clear: The lower tuning created a larger sum of overtones, which explains the fuller sound; it was also proven, that Brainin’s Strad had its best resonance by far at exactly C=256 Hz, which is about A=432 Hz. This is clear proof, that Antonio Stradivari understood the superiority of the “low tuning,” and had built his instruments accordingly. Said Barosi laconically: “That I expected; in this lab we have tested all the Strads we could get hold of, and the result is always the same.” Not only these tests, but also Brainin’s ensuing demonstration (including Bach’s *Adagio* as an “en-core”) were videotaped, and broadcast on Italian regional TV the same evening; the video was shown to parliamentarians in Rome some time later.

After that, Brainin demonstrated the superiority of the “low tuning,” in many concerts, in which he also had the courage to explicitly tell the name of the instigator of this international campaign, Lyndon LaRouche. In the meantime, the superiority of the low tuning had been acknowledged by many of his famous “instrumentalist colleagues,” like his friend, the pianist András Schiff, for instance. The singers were definitely in favor of the “low tuning,” with only a very few exceptions. After the “debut” in Munich with pianist Günter Ludwig, which is available on audio and video, Brainin demonstrated the advantages of the “low tuning” with other ensembles: with a piano trio, for example, and with a string quartet. In a truly memorable concert with the Orlando Quartet, which was also educated by members of the Amadeus, in Wiesbaden in 1992, Brainin even played viola in the performance of Mozart’s C-minor String Quintet KV 406. He shut the mouths of many intransigent journalists by telling them with a smile, “My Strad simply sounds much better this way.”

Motivic Thorough Composition

At this time, Brainin was also engaged in studying an important principle of composition which he had been thinking about “already for many years,” which for an artist who had studied, rehearsed, and performed all great Classical string quartets again and again for over 40 years is not surprising at all: The principle of *Motivführung* (motivic thorough composition), as Brainin called it, was developed by Joseph Haydn. In 1995, while giving a master class at Dolná Krupá, a castle near the Slovakian capital of Bratislava, where Beethoven is supposed to have stayed and composed, Brainin said that so far nobody had understood fully the extraordinary significance of this principle of composition—which Mozart had developed further in a decisive way, and which Beethoven then masterfully exploited to the fullest—whenever he had brought it up for discussion, “except LaRouche.” His

talks with LaRouche in the prison at Rochester also dealt with this question, which in 1992 led to the essay “Mozart’s Revolution in Music 1782-86,” one of several philosophical writings by LaRouche, written during his 1989-94 imprisonment under extremely difficult conditions.

A result of this close cooperation were several demonstrations of this principle of composition, which Brainin explained at master classes with young string quartets. With the Munich-based Henschel Quartet, he produced a film for the Schiller Institute, in which he demonstrated this principle using works from Haydn and Mozart. At the master class at Dolná Krupá he worked for almost a week with the Slovakian Moyzes Quartet, and the Hungarian Auer Quartet, and demonstrated with Beethoven quartets the significance of *Motivführung*. The intensity—but also ease—of Brainin’s teaching is best shown by a caricature drawn by the young primarius of the Auer Quartet. This sketch was inspired especially by the very first lesson these young students got from Brainin, when he interrupted their playing with a “loud ‘Nooooo,’ ” telling them that playing string quartets is not entertainment, but “a bloody serious affair, science”; and he added: “At least a whole dimension is missing here.” To grasp and adequately perform this scientific dimension of Classical music—i.e., to bring out the real *content* of the music “behind the notes” (Furtwängler), was Brainin’s primary concern. In this respect, he made no compromises, and could not joke about it, no matter with how much Viennese charm he uttered his inspiring, or critical words.

This uncompromising seriousness in deeply rooted human affairs was, to a very large degree, the basis of the enormous artistic charisma of Norbert Brainin. He gave one of the most moving examples for this in early December 1989, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when he played a “Beethoven Matinee for German Unity” in Berlin, especially for the people in Eastern Germany, the then still existing German Democratic Republic. The many letters which the Schiller Institute—the organizer of this concert—received before the event, already made clear that this concert would become a milestone: “Will come under any circumstances. But need a definite OK, since I still have to repair my Trabi.” (That was the little car most East Germans drove at that time.) Or: “Need definitely a ticket, since I have to drive 250 km to the concert,” and: “I am 10 years old, but I absolutely want to hear the Maestro.” More than 1,000 people came to the concert at the Berlin High School of Arts, among them about 800 G.D.R. citizens, who were not asked to pay. The performance of three Beethoven sonatas (op. 12, no. 3; op. 96; as well as op. 47, “Kreutzer”) created real storms of enthusiasm, but the reaction to Brainin’s final encore became the biggest compliment an artist can receive: first, a considerable silence, then a long standing ovation, since Brainin with his interpretation of the *Adagio* from Beethoven’s “Spring Sonata” in these turbulent times had hit exactly the right tone.

An equally moving example was his concert on March



Brainin signs autographs after a 1993 concert in Montgomery, Alabama in memory of Martin Luther King.

24, 1993 in Birmingham, Alabama, in honor of Martin Luther King, who had been murdered 30 years earlier. Two days before this concert, Brainin and Ludwig had played the same program—besides sonatas from Beethoven and Handel, they performed César Franck’s A-Major Violin Sonata “because of its deep religious character”—for a mainly African-American audience in Washington, D.C.; in the Ebenezer United Methodist Baptist Church, where America’s greatest President, Abraham Lincoln, and the former slave and freedom fighter Frederick Douglass had spoken. In Birmingham, the concert took place at the famous Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the center of the activities of the civil rights movement there in the 1960s, which in 1963 had been hit by a terrible bombing attack, killing several children. Many of the listeners, some of whom even brought their babies with them, had never attended a Classical concert at all, but were thrilled, and deeply moved. The Mayor of Birmingham declared this day to be “Dr. Norbert Brainin Concert Day in Memory of Civil Rights,” and presented a certificate of honor to him. Schiller Institute Vice President Amelia Boynton Robinson, who during the 1960s, had fought successfully side by side with Martin Luther King for the Voting Rights Act, declared afterwards: “These concerts laid the seed for the coming together of the civil rights movement and Classical culture, which we have to bring to life again in America.”

In every epoch there are sublime personalities in music, who because of their towering artistic capabilities and moral integrity are not only able to actually reach, inspire, and thrill people deep in their souls, but who also have the power to considerably shape their time. In the 20th Century, among these personalities were undoubtedly Wilhelm Furtwängler, Pablo Casals, Yehudi Menuhin—and Norbert Brainin.