

Preview

Cleveland Chamber Music Society: fifteen minutes with Cuarteto Casals violist Jonathan Brown

by Daniel Hathaway



Formed in Barcelona in 1997, Cuarteto Casals soon rose to international prominence with first prizes at string quartet competitions in London and Hamburg. Violinists Vera Martínez Mehner and Abel Tomàs Realp, violist Jonathan Brown and cellist Arnau Tomàs Realp have joined the King of Spain on diplomatic visits and

have performed on the special, decorated Stradivarius instruments housed at the Royal Palace in Madrid. Collaborations with György Kurtág, Christian Lauba and James MacMillan have underlined the ensemble's commitment to contemporary music.

Cuarteto Casals will appear in its latest collaboration, with Cuban-born guitarist Manuel Barrueco, on the Cleveland Chamber Music Society series at Plymouth Church on Tuesday, October 29 at 7:30 pm. The performance, itself a collaboration with the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society, features Eduard Toldrà's *Quartet "Vistes al mar,"* Debussy's *Quartet in g, op. 10,* Boccherini's *Quintet in D, "Fandango,"* and the premiere of Roberto Sierra's *Fantasia.*

Violist Jonathan Brown, a native of Chicago, joined the quartet in 2002. We reached him by telephone in Gainesville, FL at the beginning of Cuarteto Casals current United States tour.

Daniel Hathaway: You've been with Cuarteto Casals now for eleven years. How did you come to join the ensemble?

Jonathan Brown: I was studying in Salzburg and playing with the Camerata Salzburg and the quartet was studying with the Alban Berg Quartet in Cologne. The official story is that we had a mutual teacher, Rainer Schmidt from the Hagen Quartet who lived in Salzburg and who I knew from the Mozarteum and with whom the quartet had also had a number of master classes. When the quartet's previous violist left, Rainer recommended them to me and me to them. Unofficially — but truthfully — the day that their violist finally decided to leave, Arnau (one of the two brothers in the quartet) was in Spain teaching and Abel was still in Cologne. They were on their cell phones with each other talking about what they would do — somewhat panicked because they had competitions, recordings and concerts coming up and all of a sudden they had no violist. So Abel was walking

on the street near the cathedral and he saw somebody eating some bread out of a bag and carrying a viola. As a joke, he said to his brother, well, here's a violist, why don't we just ask this person. Later that night, Abel went to a concert by the Philharmonie in Cologne where the Camerata Salzburg was playing, and saw the same violist sitting in the section. And sure enough, when I showed up to audition with the quartet six weeks later, I was the same person. If he'd asked me on the street, it would have saved about six weeks of rehearsal time.

DH: How was it adapting to life in Catalunya?

JB: That was great. I've lived there now for ten years. At the beginning it was much harder because I had come to Europe to study in Austria and I spoke German, but when I moved to Spain I spoke no Spanish and certainly no Catalan. Adjusting linguistically was difficult, although now with Spanish and Catalan it's fine. It's a great place to live. Barcelona is a beautiful city, the sun shines, the food is great, the lifestyle is great.

DH: How does the quartet communicate? In Spanish or Catalan?

JB: Spanish. The two brothers speak in Catalan with each other, and both Vera and I speak Catalan, so we understand everything they say, but we're so used to Spanish we stay with that language.

DH: Let's talk about your program in Cleveland. You're playing with Manuel Baruecco. How did you get together with him?

JB: Actually it's more a case of mutual admiration. Of course we've heard his recordings and seen a lot of videos of his playing. He's somebody we've always wanted to play with, and he evidently felt the same way about us, so when the opportunity came along, we both jumped at it. This is the first tour we're playing with him, and we're very excited about it.

DH: How did Roberto Sierra come into the mix?

JB: Manuel has played a lot of pieces by Roberto Sierra, so they have a long relationship. We always have this trouble because we love to play music of Boccherini, whether it's quartets or quintets with two cellos or quintets with guitar, but when we play with guitar, the *Fandango* quartet is nice, but it's not a full second half piece like the Schumann or Dvorak piano quintets or the Schubert cello quintet. So we're always looking for more pieces to put on the program. It turns out that there is a version of this Boccherini for the changing of the guard in Madrid, "Music from the Night Life in Madrid." There's a version for two cellos which is effective and a version for guitar and quartet that is less effective. What Sierra has done is taken the version for two guitars and modernized it so we have the best of both worlds: what we think is the best version of the piece with an overlay of very modern improvisations or digressions.

DH: Tell me a bit about the Toldrá.

JB: Toldrá is a very interesting 20th century Catalan composer not so well-known outside of Spain who wrote in a very beautiful, almost French Impressionist style and in a very open and friendly idiom. And he based this piece on three poems by the famous Catalan poet Joan Maragall describing different views of the sea.

DH: That flows rather nicely into the Debussy, I should think.

JB: That was our idea. The Debussy is sort of the pivot piece around which all the others rotate, so to speak. It has a lot of almost flamenco guitar-like effects, especially in the second movement, which we thought would be effective with the Boccherini *Fandango*, and at the same time, Debussy and Ravel were hugely influential for composers in Spain and Catalunya in the 20th century. There's a very clear relationship between Debussy and Toldrá.

DH: What instruments will you play on in Cleveland?

JB: We'll have four different instruments. We always try to match our sounds as much as possible, but we haven't been dogmatic about trying to find instruments from the same maker or the same period. So Vera Martínez, who plays first violin on Toldrá and Debussy, plays an old Italian Ceruti violin, and Abel, who plays first on the Boccherini *Fandango* quintet, plays a violin by a living Catalan maker David Bague, who makes wonderful instruments. Arnau plays a 20th century Italian cello made in the 1930s or 40s, and my viola is of unknown origin, first half of the 17th century, probably from southern Germany or Austria, possibly from northern Italy, but nobody is able to say for sure.

DH: How often does the quartet get their hands on those Spanish Strads?

JB: That we've done about once every year or once every other year. Those are wonderful instruments. They're incredible as art objects. As instruments to play, it's difficult because we don't have so much time to practice or rehearse on them and they're very, very different from our own. So it's always a challenge playing them, but of course it's a great privilege.

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