

Borrowing from the past

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

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Musical thievery — plundering the past to create new works — is nothing new. Beethoven wrote variations on Mozart. Brahms did the same with Handel. Busoni practically made his living off Bach. So if Mark Steinberg and the Brentano String Quartet go back to the Renaissance to pilfer a few gems from the madrigals of Gesualdo, nobody will be clamoring for an arrest.

If you go...

WHAT: Brentano String Quartet, at Rockport Chamber Music Festival

WHERE: Shalin Liu Performance Center, 37 Main St., Rockport

WHEN: Saturday, July 1, 8 p.m.

TICKETS: \$29–\$46. Visit www.rockportmusic.org or call 978-546-7391.

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So if Mark Steinberg and the Brentano String Quartet go back to the Renaissance to pilfer a few gems from the madrigals of Gesualdo, nobody will be clamoring for an arrest.

Of course it's not simply about picking the pocket of a 16th-century composer. Steinberg, first violinist of the eminent Brentanos, making a return to the Rockport Chamber Music Festival this Saturday, has been hard at work re-arranging the five-voice madrigals for the quartet.

"As a group we've done a lot of Renaissance music," Steinberg says. "We love it dearly. We've stolen from vocalists, and viol players, and here from the five-part madrigals.

"In terms of voice, each member of the quartet gets a line, of course. What we lose is the text, and that's a big deal. What we do is look closely at the text, and try to create the type of articulations in the instruments that would come from the sound of the words."

Brentano's RCMF program has been changed somewhat from what was originally announced. The Gesualdo arrangements replace other arrangements by Bruce Adolphe of different madrigals from the same composer. The group had also planned on playing Stephen Hartke's brief "From the First Book," part of a commissioning project called "Fragments" that celebrated Brentano's 20th anniversary in 2011, and which was performed in Rockport that year.

Hartke has since expanded the original one-movement work into a complete quartet, and Rockport audiences will be among the first to hear it — Brentano premiered it last fall.

That work is also closely related to madrigals. "Stephen has written four other books of madrigals, but only two are vocals. His madrigals are very changeable, very immediate, like ideas that change with the text. He just takes the ideas into the instruments."

Beethoven's first Razumovsky quartet completes the evening. But the Gesualdo arrangements are clearly a highlight for the group, which has explored repertory covering close to seven centuries in its years together.

"Perhaps Haydn is my favorite," Steinberg says, "and when we played Bach's "Art of the Fugue" — well, it speaks to what the string quartet is, absolutely everything a string quartet can achieve.

"It's part of the four instruments speaking — passing material back and forth — and the more experience we have like that the better quartet we become. And it expands the timeframe of this music."

The Brentano String Quartet plays music of Gesualdo, Hartke and Beethoven on Saturday, July 1 in the Shalin Liu Performance Center, part of the ongoing Rockport Chamber Music Festival. For tickets and information visit www.rockportmusic.org or call 978-546-7391.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith); email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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