

Sunday, February 24, 2019, 3pm
Hertz Hall

The Takács Quartet

Edward Dusingberre, *violin*
Harumi Rhodes, *violin*
Geraldine Walther, *viola*
András Fejér, *cello*

PROGRAM

Franz Joseph HAYDN (1732–1809) String Quartet in D Major, Op. 20, No. 4
Allegro di molto
Un poco adagio affettuoso
Minuet. Allegretto alla zingarese – Trio
Presto e scherzando

Béla BARTÓK (1881–1945) String Quartet No. 1 in A minor, Op. 7
Lento
Allegretto
Introduzione – Allegro vivace

INTERMISSION

Edvard GRIEG (1843–1907) String Quartet No. 1 in G Minor, Op. 27
Un poco andante – Allegro molto ed agitato
Romanze: Andantino
Intermezzo: Allegro molto marcato –
Più vivo e scherzando
Finale: Lento – Presto al saltarello

*The Takács Quartet appears by arrangement with Seldy Cramer Artists,
and records for Hyperion and Decca/London Records.*

*The Takács Quartet is Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Colorado in Boulder
and the musicians are Associate Artists at Wigmore Hall, London.*

www.takacsquartet.com

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Franz Joseph Haydn

String Quartet in D Major, Op. 20, No. 4

Accustomed to the breadth and expressiveness of string quartets by those who followed Franz Joseph Haydn, we may not recognize his own quartets as groundbreaking. They were. Haydn defined what a quartet could be—giving composers new ways of thinking about the genre, demonstrating strategies that enabled them to communicate.

Haydn composed the six quartets of his Opus 20 in 1772, while serving Prince Nikolaus Esterhazy as palace music director, a secure position that allowed him the leisure and freedom to experiment. Around this time, the extravagant postures of the European Baroque gave way to *Sturm und Drang*, a movement that would morph into Romanticism, with its elevation of human feelings and instabilities, and a love of dark forests and craggy mountain ranges. In two years, Goethe would publish his novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which in Western literary history ruptured past from future as surely as Haydn's Opus 20 bade farewell to the style of earlier quartets.

Consider the fourth of the Opus 20 quartets. Treating every member of his ensemble as an individual with a special strength, putting each on equal footing, Haydn proves that a composer can span as much emotional territory as a novelist. No lighthearted diversion, this work enters new territory for a string quartet.

Especially in the first two movements, the inverted thematic material casts shadows. Anchoring the Allegro is a four-note thrum first heard in the cello, the others singing a languorous melody around it, asserting themselves with it, and finally sounding it one last time until the momentum spends itself. Next comes a movement made of variations, every member contributing his or her own version of a resigned, mournful song. It starts over an accompaniment in a low register, as the first violin sings a sparely ascetic tune. The second violin and viola respond to this, supported by cello and first violin. Now the dark-voiced cello steps forward with a lament. After the first violin returns with a searching, intense variation of his own, he reprises the opening. All members join

in a coda whose mood vacillates between enervation and frustration.

The temperament changes with a brief and bracing dance to refresh the emotional palette. For a finale, the first violin launches a perpetual-motion patter song. Suddenly the dynamic level drops. Haydn whispers goodbye.

Béla Bartók

String Quartet No. 1 in A minor, Op. 7

As you gather background about the String Quartet No. 1 by Béla Bartók, you will learn that it reflects the composer's fascination with folk songs. Perhaps you will encounter the claim that it possesses a wealth of melody—a “superabundance,” as the composer's biographer Halsey Stevens writes. Such assertions might lead you to expect you were in for easy listening. A few bars will set you straight.

Which is not to take issue with those assertions. Bartók completed his First String Quartet in 1908. He had recently discovered the music of Debussy, and since 1905 he had immersed himself in what became another source of inspiration: peasant music. Armed with wax cylinders and a recorder, Bartók visited villages in his native Hungary, urging (often with a pint's encouragement) the men and women there to sing the old tunes passed down to them but never notated. Soon he expanded his research to other lands, including Romania, Turkey, and North Africa. Peasant tunes helped shape Bartók's mature style. Yet he did not usually incorporate folk tunes into his work literally, the way Aaron Copland used the Shaker song “Simple Gifts” in *Appalachian Spring*. As Bartók scholar Peter Laki points out, the composer “did not quote any actual folk songs in his quartets; instead, he isolated certain structural elements from these folk songs, such as a melodic turn, a rhythmic pattern, or a typical scale.”

Perhaps it was through Debussy that Bartók assimilated a sense of ebb and flow, structural fluidity. Along with that, he filled his stylistic arsenal with the thousand musical tricks that farmers and wheelwrights and washer-women demonstrated for him in taverns and fields. All this seems unlikely preparation for the body of work that would follow, which includes six

string quartets that at least one writer, Stevens, believes “worthy of being placed beside those of the Viennese masters.”

As you listen, consider these words of Peter Laki’s: Bartók’s “non-traditional harmonies can sound harsh and dissonant at first hearing, but he used them in such a coherent and logical way that the ear soon accepts them as a natural idiom.” The ear soon discovers the “melodic superabundance” that at first seems submerged.

The signposts leading the way through this music are often difficult to spot. The quartet opens as the two violins engage in a dirgelike duet. Soon cello and viola join them, imitating the opening lines. The four players enter a give-and-take easily absorbed by the ear yet complex in its implications: for all the beauty that resides in the rich textures, the indeterminate tonality is unsettling. Already, scarcely more than a minute having passed, we’ve been promised an interesting journey.

Rising to an impassioned crest and subsiding, the action turns now to the cello, whose commanding bow strokes introduce a heated viola solo. As the textures lighten, the cello responds with a flowing, affirmative passage. The violins reprise the opening, and again, with all four players participating, the texture fills and the music rises to a transcendent moment. Without a break, the second movement begins, now at a faster tempo.

The third movement opens with the cello declaiming an introduction in a voice that could be mistaken for speech. The first violin answers this in a soaring passage that ends in an ethereal register. In the ensuing Allegro, traces of folk songs emerge. The tempo broadens, leading to a fugato passage that gives way to a frenzied dance. After a moment of reflection, momentum builds to a triumphant conclusion.

All that is an unoriginal way to describe very original music (even though the path this music travels, from darkness to light, is as archetypal as it gets). You’re not likely to leave this concert humming tunes from Bartók, but his music is likely to remain with you. Which tells you more than what anyone could say about what he has given us here.

Edvard Grieg

String Quartet No. 1 in G minor, Op. 27

Many music lovers think of Edvard Grieg as a two-hit composer, those hits being his Piano Concerto and his incidental music for Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, which actually includes a subset of hits such as “Morning Mood” and “In the Hall of the Mountain King.” If you claim you’re familiar with this string quartet, you will either be an especially cultivated listener, or you’ll be making it up. While his Piano Concerto is among the most loved of all concert pieces, Grieg’s String Quartet No. 1 is one of the least known.

Unlike the handful of works that have earned Grieg his place in the repertory, this quartet of 1878 offers few tunes that drill their way immediately into the ear—despite the fact that it includes hints of folk music, or that references to Grieg’s song “Spillemaend” (“The Minstrel”) run through it (this tune appears initially about two minutes in, introduced as the roiling subsides and the first violinist commences with a lyrical interlude; it reappears in the introduction to the final movement and again at the very end). And while composers such as Liszt and Tchaikovsky admired the quartet, critics treated it badly, faulting it not for what it contained, but for what it lacked—meaning it failed to meet their conventional expectations, which Grieg had never aimed to fulfill at all.

For this is no orthodox piece of chamber music. Having just heard quartets by Haydn and Bartók, your ears will be accustomed to music that moves not only in a horizontal line, from start to finish, but which also (and at the same time) moves vertically, lending a sense of depth to any given moment. Grieg’s quartet moves primarily in one straight line. It is homophonic with a vengeance.

So you may be startled by the Grieg. Perhaps it will sound as though something is missing. I once reacted like this when, after a long bout of reading Henry James’ architecturally elaborate sentences, I turned to Graham Greene’s spare prose. The experience was something like the uncharacteristic ease of lifting a 20-pound weight after a week of working out with 100

pounds. This is not to say that either Graham Greene or Edvard Grieg are lightweights, nor that more is necessarily better. But we ought to be prepared for what lies ahead. As Grieg's critics were not.

Grieg's string writing here has been called "semi-orchestral," a nod to its big sound, achieved with an abundance of double stops. The music unfolds like a narrative, seeming to reflect psychological states more than to present a musical argument. It advances in episodes (punctuated throughout with a gesture like that heard in the keyboard chords that open Grieg's Piano Concerto) and includes heated drama presented in big, silent-movie gestures; tender, dreamy interludes; elegant salon music (the lyrical sections of the bipolar second movement); and the dances of Grieg's native Norway (he may call the last movement a *saltarello*, but Italy never spawned music like this).

Today we encounter Grieg more often on pops programs than in "serious" concerts, but this quartet shows how wrong we are to pigeon-hole him. As much as the unexpected dissonances must have riled critics in 1878, this music's hand-wringing passion—which displays a little-known side of Grieg—is contained within a musical structure based more on motifs and rhythm and dramatic gesture than on any conventional form—the sort of form Grieg's critics sought in vain to find here. Little did they know he was pointing in a direction others would one day follow.

—Larry Rothe

Larry Rothe is author of Music for a City, Music for the World and co-author of For the Love of Music.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

The **Takács Quartet**, now in its forty-third season, is renowned for the vitality of its interpretations. The *New York Times* recently lauded the ensemble for "revealing the familiar as unfamiliar, making the most traditional of works feel radical once more," and the *Financial Times* described a recent concert at London's Wigmore Hall: "Even in the most fiendish repertoire these players show no fear, injecting the music with a heady sense of freedom. At the same time, though, there is an uncompromising attention to detail: neither a note nor a bow-hair is out of place." Based in Boulder at the University of Colorado, Edward Dusing, Harumi Rhodes (violins), Geraldine Walther (viola), and András Fejér (cello) perform 80 concerts a year worldwide.

During the 2018–19 season the musicians will continue presenting their four annual concerts as Associate Artists at London's Wigmore Hall. In August 2018 the quartet appeared at the Edinburgh, Snape Proms, Menton, and Rheingau festivals. Other European venues later in the season include Berlin, Cologne, Baden-Baden, Bilbao and the Bath Mozartfest. The en-

semble will perform extensively in the United States, including two concerts at New York's Lincoln Center, and at the University of Chicago and Princeton. A tour with Garrick Ohlsson will culminate in a recording for Hyperion of the Elgar and Amy Beach piano quintets. The latest Takács CD, to be released this coming spring, features Dohnányi's two piano quintets and his second string quartet, with pianist Marc-André Hamelin.

In 2014 the Takács became the first string quartet to win the Wigmore Hall Medal. The honor, inaugurated in 2007, recognizes major international artists who have a strong association with the hall. Recipients so far include András Schiff, Thomas Quasthoff, Menahem Pressler, and Dame Felicity Lott. In 2012 *Gramophone* announced that the Takács was the only string quartet to be inducted into its first Hall of Fame, along with such legendary artists as Jascha Heifetz, Leonard Bernstein, and Dame Janet Baker. The ensemble also won the 2011 Award for Chamber Music and Song presented by the Royal Philharmonic Society in London.

Well known for its innovative programming, the Takács Quartet performed Philip Roth's *Everyman* program with Meryl Streep at Princeton in 2014, and again with her at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto in 2015. The musicians first performed *Everyman*—which was conceived in close collaboration with Roth—at Carnegie Hall in 2007 with Philip Seymour Hoffman. They have toured 14 cities with the poet Robert Pinsky, collaborate regularly with the Hungarian folk group Muzsikás, and in 2010 collaborated with the Colorado Shakespeare Festival and David Lawrence Morse on a drama project that explored the composition of Beethoven's late quartets. Aspects of the ensemble's interests and history are explored in Edward Dusinberre's book *Beethoven for a Later Age: The Journey of a String Quartet*, which takes the reader inside the life of a professional string quartet, melding music history and memoir as it explores the circumstances surrounding the composition of Beethoven's quartets.

The Takács records for Hyperion Records, and its releases for that label include string quartets by Haydn, Schubert, Janáček, Smetana, Debussy, and Britten, as well as piano quintets by Franck and Shostakovich (with Marc-André Hamelin), and viola quintets by Brahms (with Lawrence Power). For their CDs on the Decca/London label, the quartet has won three *Gramophone* Awards, a Grammy Award, three Japanese Record Academy Awards, Disc of the Year at the inaugural *BBC Music Magazine* Awards, and Ensemble Album of the Year at the Classical Brits. Full details of all recordings can be found in the Recordings section of the quartet's website (www.takacsquartet.com).

The members of the Takács Quartet are Christoffersen Faculty Fellows at the University of Colorado Boulder, where they have helped to develop a program with a special emphasis on chamber music and where students work in a nurturing environment designed to help them develop their artistry. Through the university, two of the quartet's members benefit from the generous loan of instruments from the Drake Instrument Foundation. The Takács members are also on the faculty at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, where they run an intensive summer seminar, and Visiting Fellows at the Guildhall School of Music.

The Takács Quartet was formed in 1975 at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest by Gabor Takács-Nagy, Károly Schranz, Gabor Ormai, and András Fejér, while all four were students. It first received international attention in 1977, winning First Prize and the Critics' Prize at the International String Quartet Competition in Evian, France. The group also won the Gold Medal at the 1978 Portsmouth and Bordeaux Competitions and First Prizes at the Budapest International String Quartet Competition (1978) and the Bratislava Competition (1981). The quartet made its North American debut tour in 1982. After several changes of personnel, the most recent addition is second violinist Harumi Rhodes, following Károly Schranz's retirement in April 2018. In 2001 the Takács Quartet was awarded the Order of Merit of the Knight's Cross of the Republic of Hungary, and in March 2011 each member of the group was awarded the Order of Merit Commander's Cross by the President of the Republic of Hungary.