

Sunday, March 3, 2019, 3pm
Hertz Hall

The Takács Quartet

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

PROGRAM

Franz Joseph HAYDN (1732–1809) String Quartet in G Major, Op. 76, No. 1
Allegro con spirito
Adagio sostenuto
Menuetto. Presto
Allegro ma non troppo

Béla BARTÓK (1881–1945) String Quartet No. 6
Mesto – Più mosso, pesante – Vivace
Mesto – Marcia
Mesto – Burletta: Moderato
Mesto

INTERMISSION

Felix MENDELSSOHN (1809–1847) String Quartet No. 6 in F minor, Op. 80
Allegro vivace assai
Allegro assai
Adagio
Finale: Allegro molto

*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 G Major, Op. 76, No. 1

This compact string quartet by Franz Joseph Haydn, as diverting and high-spirited as the composer's late symphonies, emerges from an artistry so complete it is virtually invisible. The three introductory strokes that open the quartet will also close it roughly 20 minutes later. Between those margins a tightly unified work unfolds, yet within that unity Haydn appears to offer unbounded variety. Even focusing on something so simple as melodic contours, we can appreciate the elegant workmanship—hear how (for example) the main themes of the first, third, and fourth movements all bear similar shape and character, how the restrained opening of the Adagio reflects back on the insistent opening of the preceding movement, or how the quick-dance close of the first movement is mirrored in the scherzo. Which is only one way that, from start to finish, Haydn stitches a delightful entertainment.

He devised this entertainment for the pleasure of the Hungarian count Joseph Erdödy, who commissioned the six quartets of Opus 76 in 1796. The composer completed this music the following year. For context, consider that this quartet was premiered just two years after the first performance of Haydn's last *London* Symphony (No. 104), and that it was composed around the time he was working on his oratorio *The Creation*. When he tackled Opus 76 he was 64 years old, in firm command of apparently limitless powers. Here, in the first installment of that opus, those powers combine in what seems to be effortless mastery, all in a work that often ignores standard operating procedure for an 18th-century string quartet.

After the short, three-chord opening, the cello introduces a figure taken up in turn by the others. It sounds like the subject for a fugue but never turns into one, instead growing into a cheerful Allegro filled with the *con spirito* character Haydn specifies. This sun-filled movement gives way to the lovely, consoling song-without-words that begins the Adagio and wells up again and again throughout the movement, a flowing chorale that alternates with

rhapsody and figuration against a background of pulses and nervous ticks. A third-movement scherzo anticipates the rushing and aggressive music Beethoven would create for his early symphonies, and although Haydn still labels this a minuet, he emphasizes how far he has come from the minuet's world by introducing a different kind of dance in his central section, a dance sooner heard in the village square than the ballroom, and conjuring the scents of countryside and new mown-hay. The minor-mode music that dominates the finale inclines toward something brighter as Haydn modulates here and there into the major, finally making his intentions clear when he slows the pace and allows the major mode to blossom in a sweet song. He means to end happily, which he does as the music gathers momentum, pauses for a few quirky moments of string-plucking, then sprints to the finish.

Béla Bartók

String Quartet No. 6

Like the Mona Lisa or the Sistine Chapel's ceiling, the sixth string quartet of Béla Bartók is one of those works of art whose complexities never stand between it and its audience. You need understand nothing about music's processes or forms to enter the world of the sixth quartet, this music filled with grief, anger, reflection, and acceptance. You do yourself and Bartók most justice if you simply succumb to the work's flow. Waiting for you at the end is that sense of completeness and affirmation with which music so right in all its gestures repays your listening.

Bartók composed the quartet during an unhappy time for the world and for him personally. He began writing it in the summer of 1939. For years, Hitler had blustered and threatened and terrorized Europe and his own country, and by the time Bartók finished the quartet that November, the continent was at war again. Against that background, Bartók also looked inward. Soon, he knew, he would lose his much-loved mother, who lay gravely ill. Almost simultaneously, he completed his quartet, his mother died, and he decided to set out for the United States. After a concert tour stateside, he

returned to his native Hungary for a short visit, then gathered his family and in the fall of 1940 settled permanently in the US. The following January, the String Quartet No. 6 was premiered in New York by the Kolisch Quartet, to whom he dedicated it.

The anxiety of impending war and the regret of leave-taking inhabit this music. Bartók himself calls it sad—*mesto*, in Italian. *Mesto* is his title for the slow music that introduces each of the first three movements, as well as his marking for the entire finale.

The viola opens with the first introductory lament. Then all join in a tense *vivace*, obsessive and searching, the many strands of melody criss-crossing. The quartet reaches a lyrical high point at the end, the music resolving in repose.

If anything, the lament intensifies in the second *mesto* introduction. Now comes the quartet's most unsettling music, starting with a propulsive march and a parody of what could be a military tune. In the central section, as plucked viola strings imitate the Hungarian cimbalom, the cello introduces a nightmarish passage that might have been derived from the folk songs Bartók loved, and which shaped so much of his music. The instruments seem to mimic air-raid sirens. As the march returns, it reveals a kinship with Mahler, especially the sardonic first-movement march of his grim Sixth Symphony.

Another *mesto* lament, then the burlesque continues the bitterness of the march movement. If you hear something off-center, it's because Bartók specifies that the second violin is to play a quarter-tone flat.

The finale seems to hover in place, the music drilling ever deeper, melodies unspooling and spilling down a well. Two heartrending cries lead to a reprise of the *mesto* music that opened the work, then to a pensive denouement.

Felix Mendelssohn

String Quartet No. 6 in F minor, Op. 80

If you want lovely tunes and deftly turned drama without unwieldy passions, Felix Mendelssohn is your man. So goes the facile stereotype, which Mendelssohn's most popular

works do little to dispel. The *Italian* and *Scottish* symphonies, the Violin Concerto in E minor, the Octet for Strings, the incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—in all these, elegance and easy optimism outweigh emotional depth. For a different view of Mendelssohn, you need to turn to something like the String Quartet No. 6. When he composed this, among his last pieces, he had been working hard for years. Here we meet a prodigy grown up, a man who by now has encountered a thing or two he might just as happily have avoided.

By early 1847, Mendelssohn was exhausted and disillusioned with the whims of the music world. The low spirits he had been battling proved an insignificant prelude to what followed. In May, his sister Fanny, as close to him as anyone, died of a stroke—a blow all the more shocking because of her age, 41. Mendelssohn found a retreat from his despair in Switzerland. He spent the summer there, and during this sojourn he composed what would be his final quartet. By November, he too was dead, also of a stroke.

No one can prove that music reflects biographical details, but listening to this work with those details in mind can deepen our response to it, right from the start—hearing those tense tremolos as ticking bombs, hearing the three stabbing chords that follow as the shocked response to news never expected or desired, or hearing the gentler heartfelt episodes in this first movement as a memory of Fanny. (Consider those three stabbing chords, present throughout the Allegro. You could set words to them: “Oh! My God!” The English phrase scans exactly as Mendelssohn's native German, “Ach! Mein Gott!”) Call this sentimental nonsense, but try to stay clear-headed in the face of the music that ends this movement, as the first violin one last time recalls the stabbing figure we now know well, the pace accelerates suddenly, and the normally decorous composer threatens to abandon control.

The stabbing figure from the opening Allegro gives birth to the obsessive motif that drives through the second movement, prolonging the tension, even in the quietly unsettled central episode.

The harried motif that galloped through the music we just heard transforms into the opening caress of the miraculous Adagio, the heart of this quartet. Reflective music such as we hear now seems to come most naturally to Mendelssohn and shows him at his best. This is not a lament so much as a song of gratitude, the quartet's most sincere revelation, in which the composer displays his vulnerability. In the first four minutes, the music repeats itself just once, and then only for a moment. The serene introductory melody yields to rising agitation, recalling the second movement's driving pulse, though here that drive slackens in resignation. With composure regained, the end looks back to the movement's opening.

The finale returns to the mood established at the quartet's outset. From an initial reserve, the music turns angry, simmering even through spells of calm. And now passion threatens to gain the upper hand. Just as the opening movement ended in frenzy, the first violin tears loose here, screaming while the others urge him on, partners in grief.

—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 Andrés 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 ensemble 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 Ohls-

sohn 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 Andrés 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.