

Sunday, January 29, 2023, 3pm
Hertz Hall

The Takács Quartet

Edward Dusinberre, *violin*
Harumi Rhodes, *violin*
Richard O'Neill, *viola*
András Fejér, *cello*

PROGRAM

Benjamin BRITTEN (1913–1976) String Quartet No. 1 in D major, Op. 25 (1941)
Andante sostenuto – Allegro vivo
Allergro con slancio
Andante calmo
Molto vivace

Bela BARTÓK (1881–1945) String Quartet No. 6, Sz. 114 (1939)
Mesto – Più mosso, pesante – Vivace
Mesto – Marcia
Mesto – Burletta – Moderato
Mesto

INTERMISSION

Antonín DVOŘÁK (1841–1904) String Quartet No. 13 in G major, Op. 106 (1895)
Allegro moderato
Adagio ma non troppo
Molto vivace
Finale: Andante sostenuto – Allegro con fuoco

*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;
the members are Associate Artists at Wigmore Hall, London.*

This performance is made possible, in part, by Rockridge Market Hall.

Music has the power to bridge and accentuate distance. A fragment of melody triggers a memory, rekindling a connection to home or exposing a painful separation from a place left behind. The pieces on this program were written by composers during periods of their lives shaped by departures and homecomings, themes explored in my new book *Distant Melodies: Music in Search of Home*.

In May 1939, when the 25-year-old Benjamin Britten crossed the Atlantic on the RMS *Ausonia*, he did not know how long he might stay in North America. The summer months that Britten and Peter Pears spent in California in 1941 proved to be pivotal. Britten composed his String Quartet Op. 25 that summer while staying at a sunny orange ranch north of San Diego. At the same time he read an article by E.M. Forster about the Suffolk poet George Crabbe (1754–1832). Forster linked the crashing waves of the North Sea and the bleak mudflats of the estuary near Aldeburgh to the troubled character of Peter Grimes, the protagonist in Crabbe's grim story of an ostracized fisherman. Forster's essay increased Britten's homesickness for the Suffolk seascape of his youth, sparked his interest in Crabbe and provided the impetus for what would become Britten's most famous opera.

The String Quartet Op. 25 was first performed in September 1941 in Los Angeles by the Coolidge Quartet. In June 1945, three years after Britten and Pears returned to England, *Peter Grimes* received its premiere at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in London with Pears singing the title role. The undulating melodic lines and sense of uneasy calm in the earlier string quartet's slow movement surfaced again in "Moonlight," one of the opera's orchestral interludes. Two years later, Britten and Pears moved to Crabbe Street in Aldeburgh, the town that would become their permanent home. As Britten later recalled, it was during the summer months of

1941 that he came to realize what was missing from his life in California and that he wished to make his home in England.

In August 1939, three months after Britten crossed the Atlantic, Bartók was beginning to compose his Sixth Quartet at a peaceful Swiss chalet in Saanen. Bartók's initial concept for the piece consisted of an introductory *Mesto* (Sad) section for each of the four movements. Initially he intended the fourth movement to end with fast music. Bartók rushed back to Budapest shortly before September 1, when Hitler's invasion of Poland commenced. In November, as he contemplated the likelihood of having to leave his homeland, Bartók abandoned his ideas for a fast *finale*, instead allowing the *Mesto* mood to take over the whole movement. At the moment that Bartók had originally planned fast music, he added a brief setting of the *Mesto* melody as a kind of chorale, followed by the return of the two primary melodies from the first movement, devoid of vigor and momentum. When the second violin and viola recalled the second tune, Bartók's instruction to the players was: *Più dolce, lontano*—"more sweetly, at a distance." By assigning the tune to the middle voices in the quartet, Bartók avoided the more extreme registers of first violin and cello, increasing the sense of remoteness. *Lontano*: the music to be experienced at a distance—an idea that Bartók imagined against a background of advancing chaos and horror.

In December, his mother died following a long illness, shattering one tie to Budapest. Bartók and his second wife Ditta eventually left Hungary in October 1940. When he began the Sixth Quartet in Saanen, Bartók had doubtless imagined its first performance would take place in Budapest but the Kolisch Quartet gave the premiere on January 20, 1941 in New York—the same day that Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated for his third term. Although Bartók had hoped to be able to return to Hungary, he gradually

became resigned to remaining in the USA. He died in September 1945 in New York due to complications from leukemia.

By October 1892, Antonín Dvořák had arrived in New York under happier circumstances than Bartók, to assume a prestigious and well-paid position as director of the National Conservatory. Although Dvořák enjoyed the stimuli offered by a new environment and the rapturous reception of his *New World Symphony*, a part of his identity remained firmly rooted in Bohemia, particularly in the village of Vysoká, 42 miles south-west of Prague. A dedicated collector of pigeons, Dvořák stayed in touch with the caretaker of his country retreat there, asking if his pigeons were getting enough food and suggesting that if the young doves were well-behaved, they should be allowed to fly out of the coop. The longer Dvořák stayed in America the more his yearning for Bohemia intensified. He became fascinated by the steamers that transported his letters back to friends and family, sometimes travelling by overhead tram to Battery Park at the most southern tip of Manhattan to follow the progress of the ships, until he could see them no more.

Dvořák composed his Opus 106 late in the autumn of 1895, several months after he returned to Bohemia for good. Although this often ebullient music can be described as a celebration of homecoming, some of the most memorable moments occur when familiar melodies return transformed. The momentum of the bustling last movement is arrested when slower music from the first movement intrudes. The effect is ambiguous, the recognizable tune reassuring but also disruptive. Dvořák subjects the primary melody of the somber slow movement to extreme variations: dramatic outbursts and ethereal wanderings that seem to suggest absence and loss—both at times elements of homecoming. To pigeon hole this music as merely celebratory is to lessen its emotional charge.

As they composed the works on tonight's program, Britten, Bartók, and Dvořák's lives were shaped by ideas of home and the emotional impact of absence. Their music allows for the contemplation of contrary emotions, the uneasy balancing of past and present. Nostalgia may be defined as the yearning for a time or place that cannot be recovered but sometimes music offers a recovery of its own.

—Edward Dusinberre

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

The world-renowned **Takács Quartet** is now in its 48th season. Edward Dusinberre, Harumi Rhodes (violins), Richard O'Neill (viola), and András Fejér (cello) are excited about the 2022–23 season, which began with a tour of Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea, and includes the release of two new CDs for Hyperion Records. A disc of Haydn's Opp. 42, 77, and 103 is followed by the first recording of an extraordinary new work written for the quartet by Stephen Hough, *Les Six Rencontres* (heard here in Hertz Hall last February, in its Bay Area premiere), presented with

quartets by Ravel and Dutilleux. As Associate Artists at London's Wigmore Hall, the Takács will perform four concerts there. In addition to programs featuring Beethoven, Schubert, and Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, one concert (the one performed today) consists of works by Britten, Bartók, and Dvořák that highlight the same themes of displacement and return explored in Edward Dusinberre's new book *Distant Melodies: Music in Search of Home*. The book was published in November by Faber and the University of Chicago Press. The quartet will perform the same program at several

venues in the United States, complemented by book talks. Also this season, the quartet will continue its fruitful partnership with pianist Jeremy Denk, performing on several North American series.

Throughout 2022 and 2023 the ensemble will play at prestigious European venues including the Edinburgh and Schwetzingen festivals, Madrid's Auditorio de Música, Bilbao's Philharmonic Society, Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, and the Bath Mozartfest. The group's North American engagements include concerts in New York, Toronto, Vancouver, Philadelphia, Ann Arbor, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Tucson, and Portland, and at the Beethoven Center at San Jose State University.

The Takács Quartet is known for innovative programming. In 2021–22, the ensemble partnered with bandoneon virtuoso Julien Labro to premiere new works by Clarice Assad and Bryce Dessner, commissioned by *Music Accord*. In 2014, the Takács performed a program inspired by Philip Roth's novel *Everyman* with Meryl Streep at Princeton, and the artists repeated the program at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto in 2015. It first performed *Everyman* at Carnegie Hall in 2007 with Philip Seymour Hoffman. The quartet has toured 14 cities with the poet Robert Pinsky, and played regularly with the Hungarian Folk group Muzsikás.

The Takács records for Hyperion Records, recently winning awards for its recordings of string quartets by Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn, and—with pianist Garrick Ohlsson—piano quintets by Amy Beach and Elgar. Other releases for Hyperion feature works by Haydn, Schubert, Janáček, Smetana, Debussy, and Britten, as well as piano quintets by César Franck and Shostakovich (with Marc-André Hamelin), and viola quintets by Brahms and Dvořák (with Law-

rence Power). For its 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.

In 2014, the Takács became the first string quartet to receive the Wigmore Hall Medal. In 2012, *Gramophone* announced that the Takács was the first string quartet to be inducted into its Hall of Fame. The ensemble also won the 2011 Award for Chamber Music and Song presented by the Royal Philharmonic Society in London.

Based in Boulder at the University of Colorado, the members of the Takács Quartet are Christoffersen Faculty Fellows and the grateful beneficiaries of an instrument loan by the Drake Foundation. The members of the ensemble are on the faculty at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, where they run a summer string quartet seminar, and Visiting Fellows at the Guildhall School of Music, London.

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. The group received international attention in 1977, winning First Prize and the Critics' Prize at the International String Quartet Competition in Evian, France. The quartet also won the Gold Medal at the 1978 Portsmouth and Bordeaux competitions and First Prizes at the Budapest International String Quartet Competition in 1978 and the Bratislava Competition in 1981. The quartet made its North American debut tour in 1982.

www.takacsquartet.com