

Sunday, November 12, 2023, 3pm
Hertz Hall

The Takács Quartet

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

PROGRAM

Joseph HAYDN (1732–1809) String Quartet No. 63 in B-flat major,
Op. 76, No. 4, *Sunrise* (1796–1797)
Allegro con spirito
Adagio
Menuetto
Finale

Nokuthula Endo NGWENYAMA (b. 1976) *Flow* (World Premiere, 2023)
Prelude
Adagio
Quark Scherzo
Finale

INTERMISSION

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827) String Quartet No. 8 in E minor,
Op. 59, No. 2, *Razumovsky* (1806)
Allegro
Molto adagio
Allegretto
Finale

*Flow is co-commissioned by Cal Performances (Berkeley, CA),
Friends of Chamber Music (Portland, OR), BroadStage (Santa Monica, CA),
Shriver Hall Concert Series (Baltimore, MD), Boston Celebrity Series, 92nd Street Y (New York, NY),
Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, Capital Region Classical (Schenectady, NY),
and University Musical Society (Ann Arbor, Michigan).*

*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 Françoise Stone.

Outbursts of Energy:**Two Classics and a World Premiere**

The string quartet, according to composer Nokuthula Endo Ngwenyama, “is considered a ‘perfect’ ensemble. It inspires delicacy, sensitivity and adventure. The core range is smaller than that of the piano, yet its timbre allows for beautiful interplay.” For the first of its two Cal Performances appearances this season, the Takács Quartet presents the world premiere of Ngwenyama’s debut in the genre, which the ensemble commissioned “because of our admiration for her as a virtuosic violist and performer who understands the dramatic and sonorous possibilities of a string quartet.”

Ngwenyama demonstrates this understanding in her new work, *Flow*, a centerpiece of the Takács Quartet’s current season. Responding to the ensemble’s request to write something inspired by “the natural world,” she locates her new composition in a tradition that recognizes the string quartet as uniquely well-suited to conveying profound reflections on existence and the human condition. As the composer notes, she drew on impulses from a vast array of findings in the life sciences as well as from her studies in theology and yoga practice to depict, through this intimate medium of four string players, the phenomenon of “a common flow to existence tying us to the initial outburst of energy and matter at the birth of our universe.”

The Takács Quartet aptly frames this premiere with works from the very heart of the repertoire. By evolving the string quartet across the arc of his career—and across an era of revolutionary change in philosophical concepts and political worldviews—Joseph Haydn honed the genre into a vehicle for the most sophisticated compositional craft as well as the most searching musical truths. Its lofty status is rooted in Haydn’s legacy, as exemplified by the Op. 76 quartets, which represent a pinnacle of his oeuvre and of the Western tradition alike.

Ludwig van Beethoven learned much about the subtle art of quartet writing from close study of Haydn’s example, as his first official foray into the genre with the six Op. 18 quartets shows—“the most ambitious single project of his early Vienna years,” as biographer Maynard Solomon observed. These in turn served as the springboard for his trailblazing extension of the string quartet in future works, in which Beethoven stretched its potential to unprecedented extremes of imagination and daring.

The Takács has chosen an example from the composer’s ensuing set of quartets, named for their patron Count (later Prince) Andrey Kirillovich Razumovsky, a Russian aristocrat and ambassador to Vienna. With its slow movement said to be inspired by the composer’s musing on “the music of the spheres,” the E minor Quartet of the Op. 59 set is an especially fitting choice to juxtapose with the cosmic speculations to which Ngwenyama gives voice in her contemporary take on the genre.

Sunrise and Surprise

Commissioned in the mid-1790s and dedicated to Count Joseph Georg von Erdödy, the six Op. 76 quartets are the last complete set in Haydn’s catalogue and represent the composer at the zenith of his creative power and self-confidence. He had already become an internationally acclaimed celebrity, riding a new wave of success after his two residencies in London, which resulted in the magnificent final dozen symphonies.

Haydn had since returned to Vienna and was spending the summers as Kapellmeister on the Esterházy Estate in Eisenstadt when he took up this quartet commission in 1796–1797. It represented an exception to the new creative orientation of this period, as Haydn’s focus otherwise shifted from instrumental composition toward producing sacred choral music; he would soon embark on the oratorio *The Creation*, the work that crowned his final decade with glory.



Amanda Tipton

In Op. 76, Haydn synthesizes decades of trailblazing experience in shaping the modern string quartet. These works are replete with his trademark inventiveness and genius for upending expectations. Like Shakespeare, Haydn juxtaposes comic and tragic outlooks within a single work. Along with formal conceptualization, Haydn expands the “conversational” dimension of the genre (to allude to Goethe’s famous metaphor of the quartet as “four intelligent people conversing among themselves”).

The Quartet in B-flat major, No. 4, is one of three in the Op. 76 set to carry a nickname, the others being No. 2 (*Fifths*) and No. 3 (*Emperor*). It has become known as *Sunrise* (“Sonnenaufgang”) because of the preludial opening, in which the first violin serenely rises above a chordal grounding from the other strings, its melody encompassing an octave-and-a-half ascent. This metaphorical “sunrise” happens twice, before what would seem to be the actual first movement takes off. But Haydn sets all of these events within the same Allegro con spirito tempo. The idea is even reversed,

with the cello moving in the opposite direction, against the ensemble harmony of the other strings. A remarkable sense of organic interconnection is sustained throughout the contrasts and detours that ensue.

The Adagio anticipates the hard-won simplicity and contemplation of late Beethoven. Even the ornamentation of this sacred secular song is more than decoration: it seems revelatory. The pathos-tinged twilight of the movement’s end is contrasted with a cheerful and downright sunny minuet. Its irresistible dance rhythm frames a peculiar outing to the countryside by way of dreamy drones—another extension of the chordal anchor that opened the piece—and unexpected pauses.

Haydn builds on a folk-like theme in the finale, subjecting it to delectable variations. The tempo accelerations in the final pages—virtuosic gear shifts—leave the listener with ever giddier pleasure.

The Flow of Existence

Nokuthula Endo Ngwenyama, who is of Zimbabwean-Japanese parentage, explains

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that her first and last names, respectively, signify “mother of peace” and “lion” in Zulu. A native of Los Angeles who is now based in Phoenix, Ngwenyama studied at the Colburn School, the Curtis Institute, and the Paris Conservatoire. She initially came to international attention as a violist at the age of 16, winning first prize at the fourth edition of the Primrose International Viola Competition in 1993. Her distinguished career as a violist has taken Ngwenyama to audiences around the world—including at the White House.

Parallel to her career as a soloist and chamber musician, Ngwenyama has emerged in recent years as a composer with a growing catalogue of works primarily for strings. “I write from the place that I know, which tends to come from the viola,” she says. “I think of it as the heart of the sound and feel very comfortable there.” She became the first-ever composer-in-residence with the Phoenix Chamber Music Society and is now devoting the majority of her creative time to composing—including a second piano quartet for *Espressivo!* with Anna Polansky, Jaime Laredo, Milena Pájaro-van de Stadt, and Sharon Robinson and a new piece commissioned for the semi-final rounds of the 2024 Primrose International Viola Competition, which will be held in June at the Colburn School in Los Angeles.

While performing at the Marlboro Music Festival, Ngwenyama got to know violinist Harumi Rhodes and welcomed the opportunity to write a piece for the Takács Quartet but also experienced a mix of emotions: “I was surprised, greatly honored, and fear-

ful,” she recalls. The ensemble’s request that she write “about anything in the natural world”—in keeping with lead commissioner Cal Performances’ suggestion—led to more than a year’s worth of research into topics encompassing “the life cycle, carbon reclamation, environmental protection, animal communication, startling murmurations, our last universal common ancestor (LUCA), black hole collisions, and the subatomic realm.”

Along with Ngwenyama’s scientific investigations into such matters as cosmogony and quantum physics, *Flow* distills her deep study of spiritual traditions: in particular, of yoga and its understanding of the meaning of breath. (The composer also holds a master’s degree in theological studies from Harvard Divinity School.) The concepts of *Om*—which she defines as “the first source of sound and act of creation”—and *Prana* (“creative energy”) are central to *Flow*. Ngwenyama asks the quartet to manifest these concepts and connect with each other through breath control, which in turn is meant to encourage a mindful awareness within the audience.

“We are part of that same energy, we are the dust from these ancient creative events,” Ngwenyama observes. “And thus we are all tied together.” She describes her musical representation of *Om* as appearing mostly “on an upbeat as a widely vibrated pizzicato glissando in the cello imitating rhythmic placement of the gong in Balinese gamelan. That, in turn, imitates the vibrational birthing energy of our universe.” *Flow* relies on other extended techniques as well, such as

Nokuthula Endo Ngwenyama’s own extensive essay commenting on *Flow* is accompanied by video, audio samples, and illustrations, as well as a mind-bogglingly far-ranging 12-page bibliography of sources that inspired her. To access this commentary, please use your smartphone to scan the QR code provided at the right. NOTE: *This link includes embedded sound files. Please do not access it during the performance.*





Nokuthula Endo Ngwenyama

sul ponticello overtones or astonishingly high pitches, to evoke a sense of these moments of cosmic drama.

The *a priori* template of a four-movement quartet was not part of Ngwenyama's initial concept. The "*Prana* moment" of *Flow* itself—its point of origin—was instead a solo idea for the viola early in what became the finale. She continued by writing music that would culminate in this passage and was surprised to discover that the piece naturally took shape as a multi-movement form, the first three movements serving as a "pre-amble" leading to this original inspiration. But these in turn developed in new direc-

tions. Material from the first movement is thus developed in the finale, for example, "because all matter was put into our universe in an instant."

Here is an excerpt from the commentary Ngwenyama has provided:

Flow starts like gas seeping from an infinitely full balloon about to pop. Then, as matter inflates space, climactic material is presented almost immediately before abruptly burning out for the universal dark ages. The Prelude examines "B'ing/BE'ing" melodically and harmonically through moments of *pranayama* (the transformative power of breath) [the notes "B" and

“B” in tandem with “E” symbolizing hydrogen and helium, respectively]. It ends with a trailing *Om*.

The Lento brings further cooling and space in chorale around an octave B-centric pedal. Prelude motifs are given room to develop. The “Quark” Scherzo explores our fundamentally playful selves vibrating here, there—and where? Our sub-atomic realm giddily waltzes up and down while we embrace the ideas of solidity and ego. The opening cello mimics quark motion [i.e., triad combinations of protons and neutrons in an “up” or “down” direction]. The trio, whose only claim to three is triplets in the cello line, provides no break for anyone and instead intones a ballade. The movement ends in virtuosic flurry.

The Finale settles into a stylized recitative where three lower strings solo before coming together to feature a soaring treble voice. Flowing triplets turn into a Classical Indian *Dadra Tal* (even six beat) rhythm in the bass line while upper strings bow their bouts to simulate Cosmic Microwave Background (CMB) radiation. Upper strings join in via pizzicato glissandi. There is a return to the Prelude opening, then a slingshot into awe-inspiring starling murmurations. Lower strings drive unrelentingly while violin lines chase the other as one mind, instantaneously turning, merging, and transforming beyond individuality. They eventually land, the sky calms through a long D overtone glissando, and a retreating tremolo reveals: Enjoy and go with the Flow, we only know what we know.

A Return to the Quartet

When Beethoven published his first six Op. 18 string quartets in 1801, he was taking a major gamble to stake a claim within the tradition so closely associated with Haydn. He returned to the genre in 1806 in response to a commission from the Russian ambassador Count Andrey Razumovsky. But by this time, Beethoven had changed profoundly, as a man and an artist. Unlike the Op. 18 quartets, which were not published in the chronological order in which they had been composed, the three Op. 59

quartets appeared in the sequence in which they had been written when they were made public in 1808.

The first quartet of the Razumovsky set, the Quartet in F major, is often likened to the *Eroica* Symphony in terms of its scope and ambition, and it represents a genuine game-changer for the string quartet. Not until his late quartets (in particular, the A minor Quartet, Op. 132) did Beethoven return to such vast dimensions. The opening Allegro of the Quartet in E minor (an unusual key choice for this composer) is likewise extensive in its proportions. But it contrasts in intriguing ways with the corresponding movement in the F major Quartet. This is the only Op. 59 quartet composed in the minor mode; moreover, Beethoven here matches his economy of material—at times bordering on a kind of “anti-melody”—with a dramatic use of tense silences in a way that prefigures the Fifth Symphony (in the first stages of being sketched at the time).

The ensuing Adagio, which Beethoven asks to be “played with a great deal of feeling,” already anticipates the cosmic intimacy and spiritual inwardness of the slow movements to come in the late quartets—specifically, the epiphanic peace of the *Heiliger Dankgesang*—the “holy song of thanksgiving”—from the Op. 132 A minor Quartet composed in 1825. It opens with transcendently simple music in E major, hymn-like in phrasing and assurance, that spells a never-before-heard language of musical sublimity. We have no direct evidence from the composer himself as to extra-musical impulses, but Beethoven’s pupil Carl Czerny claimed that it represents his response to gazing at the starry sky above and contemplating the philosophical concept of the music of the spheres. Others might liken the rising and falling scales that recur within this rapt meditation to the angelic messengers going up and down on Jacob’s Ladder.

The nervous intensity of the Allegretto that follows comes as an almost shocking surprise in the Adagio's wake but picks up the note of anxious unease left unresolved from the first movement. Razumovsky had requested that Beethoven include references to Russian songs in these quartets. He obliges here in the trio, set in the major, with a tune that subsequently appeared in the Coronation Scene of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. (It has appealed to several other Russian composers as well.) In Beethoven's hands, this idea gets an ironically lightweight, if not satirical, interlude.

The struggle between C major and E minor that was staged in the first movement

comes to the forefront in the finale, a driven presto dance whose impulse to celebrate becomes entangled in instability. Although Beethoven seems ready to vouchsafe a "happy ending" in the accelerated coda, E minor is allowed to claim victory.

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Thomas May is a writer, critic, educator, and translator. Along with essays regularly commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony, the Juilliard School, the Ojai Festival, and other leading institutions, he contributes to the New York Times and Musical America and blogs about the arts at www.memeteria.com.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

The world-renowned Takács Quartet is now entering its forty-ninth season. Edward Dusing, Harumi Rhodes (violins), Richard O'Neill (viola), and András Fejér (cello) are excited about the 2023–24 season, which features varied projects including a new work written for them, to be premiered at this afternoon's concert. Nokuthula Ngwenyama composed *Flow*, an exploration and celebration of the natural world. The work was commissioned by nine concert presenters throughout the USA. July sees the release of a new recording of works by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and Dvořák for Hyperion Records, while later in the season, the quartet will release works by Schubert including the composer's final quartet in G major. In the spring of 2024 the ensemble will perform and record piano quintets by Price and Dvořák with long-time chamber music partner Marc-Andre Hamelin.

As Associate Artists at London's Wigmore Hall, the Takács will perform four concerts featuring works by Hough, Price, Janáček, Schubert, and Beethoven. During the season, the ensemble will play at other presti-

gious European venues including in Berlin, Geneva, Linz, Innsbruck, Cambridge and St. Andrews. The Takács will appear at the Adams Chamber Music Festival in New Zealand. The group's North American engagements include concerts in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington DC, Vancouver, Ann Arbor, Phoenix, Los Angeles, Portland, Cleveland, and Santa Fe, as well as at Stanford University. The ensemble will perform two Bartók cycles at San Jose State University and Middlebury College and appear for the first time at the Virginia Arts Festival, with pianist Olga Kern.

The members of the Takács Quartet are Christoffersen Fellows and Artists in Residence at the University of Colorado, Boulder. For the 2023–24 season, the quartet enters into a partnership with El Sistema Colorado, working closely with its chamber music education program in Denver. During the summer months the Takács joins the faculty at the Music Academy of the West, running an intensive quartet seminar.

In 2021, the Takács won a Presto Music Recording of the Year Award for its recordings of string quartets by Fanny and Felix

Mendelssohn, and a *Gramophone* Award with pianist Garrick Ohlsson for 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 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.

The Takács Quartet is known for its 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. The Takács performed a program inspired by Philip Roth's novel *Everyman* with Meryl Streep at Princeton in 2014, and again with her at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto in 2015. The group first performed *Everyman* at Carnegie Hall in 2007 with Philip Sey-

mour Hoffman. The ensemble has also toured 14 cities with the poet Robert Pinsky and played regularly with the Hungarian Folk group Muzsikás.

In 2014, the Takács became the first string quartet to be awarded 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.

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 Takács made its North American debut tour in 1982. Members of the quartet are the grateful beneficiaries of an instrument loan by the Drake Foundation.