

Sunday, February 25, 2024, 3pm
Hertz Hall

The Takács Quartet

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

PROGRAM

Hugo WOLF (1860–1903) *Italian Serenade* (1887)

Béla BARTÓK (1881–1945) *String Quartet No. 2 in A minor* (1914–1917)
Moderato
Allegro molto, capriccioso
Lento

INTERMISSION

Franz SCHUBERT (1797–1828) *String Quartet No. 15 in G major*,
D. 887 (1826)
Allegro molto moderato
Andante un poco moto
Scherzo – Allegro vivace
Allegro assai

This concert is dedicated in memory of Liz Lutz.

*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.*

www.takacsquartet.com

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Hugo Wolf

Italian Serenade

Listening to music as upbeat as Hugo Wolf's *Italian Serenade*, seven effervescent minutes, you cannot imagine it composed by a man who struggled with debilitating depression, the maladies of self-pity, and the ravages of syphilis, all ailments that fueled his bad temper. Wolf made his mark not just as a composer but also as a critic, where his irascibility erupted in scathing reviews repaid by their targets with equally scathing assessments of his music. German composers in the later 19th century fell into two camps, and the mutual contempt between conservatives and progressives stopped just short of what we endure in today's US politics. Wolf's devotion to the pathbreaking Wagner stoked his hatred of the classicist Brahms, whom he once called a master of "composing without ideas." As proof, he offered the great Fourth Symphony. There, Wolf wrote, Brahms outdid himself in "nothingness, emptiness and hypocrisy."

Insults like that won no friends among Viennese critics who adored Brahms, and Wolf paid the price. Yet after he turned from criticism to full-time composing, the quality of his music prevailed, no doubt helped by what is said to have been his personal charm. Apparently his temperament resembled a panorama of lovely peaks and dismal valleys. His bipolar ordeal, along with syphilitic dementia, drove Wolf in 1899 to attempt suicide. After that, he asked to be committed to a sanatorium. He lived only four more years. He is remembered today mainly for his songs, which enjoy a place in the lieder tradition of Schubert, Schumann, and Wolf's nemesis, Brahms. They are that good.

Wolf composed the *Italian Serenade* in two days, in May 1887, shortly after giving up his work as a music critic. In 1892, he orchestrated the serenade for chamber ensemble. He intended to expand the quartet version to three movements and the orches-

tral version to four, but he carried out neither plan. The serenade suggests nothing of its creator's trials or anxieties. Such leaping, swinging music—you could almost believe it is folk music—might be encountered in the Tuscan hills. Imagine it in the background at a long *al fresco* table set with overflowing platters and full decanters and laughing companions.

Béla Bartók

String Quartet No. 2 in A minor

When he completed his First String Quartet in 1908, Bartók 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, he visited villages in his native Hungary, urging (often with the encouragement of a pint) 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 they rarely made their way into his work literally. As Peter Laki points out, "Bartók did not quote any actual folk songs in his quartets; instead, he isolated certain structural elements from these folksongs, 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, Halsey Stevens, believes "worthy of being placed beside those of the Viennese masters."

Bartók wrote his Second String Quartet between 1914 and 1917, and its pages seem saturated with the gloom of the First World



War. Analysis seems to miss the point of this gut-punching music. Bartók's friend and fellow composer Zoltán Kodály could not resist attaching a sketchy program to it, though to characterize its three movements (as he did) as representing "1. A quiet life. 2. Joy. 3. Sorrow" illustrates the shortcomings of programs. Yet if this music were a film score, its angles and sharp edges might evoke the Great War—not its battles so much as the spiritual wounds those battles left.

The tortured, lamenting first movement seems touched by the heated late-Romantic spirit we find in a work such as Schoenberg's *Transfigured Night*. The second-movement Allegro is a wild peasant dance, agitated, intense, and obsessive, spelled by a slower middle section in which the players meditate upon a keening passage. The lamenting Lento finale might remind us that, when the quartet was premiered, seven months of the war were still left. The violins begin the dirge. A little more than halfway through the movement's 10-odd minutes, a figure for high voices moves upward in thirds and is answered by the lower voices, recalling music Bernard Herrmann composed for Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. From this the music gathers momentum, draws back, searches for an exit, finds it in the last dying lines and the plucked final notes.

Franz Schubert

String Quartet No. 15 in G major, D. 887

Like so many composers, Schubert aspired to write symphonies like Beethoven's, and, like so many composers, he fell short. Yes, he wrote an elegant Fifth Symphony, a profound *Unfinished*, an architecturally massive Great C major. Many Schubert lovers, however, will tell you to seek the composer first of all in his chamber music. He discovered his genius not in emulating Beethoven but in being himself. That genius is intimate. It is subtle. It asks us for our time.

Take, for example, the Schubert we hear this afternoon. This is his last string quartet, written in 1826 (in 10 days) and first played at a private performance in 1827, the year before the composer died. Late Schubert, though not modeled on late Beethoven, is likewise filled with distinctive oddities such as most contemporary audiences had not encountered, and it relies on listeners to set aside preconceptions and engage actively with the music. This is the same Schubert whose many songs, whether cheerful or melancholy, were gifts that needed no unwrapping, for they appealed openly and directly to those who heard them. In songs, of course, the music conveys the meaning of the texts, but the reverse is also true, the texts help us enjoy the music, help us believe we have grasped the composer's intent. In Schubert's chamber music, the absence of textual aids leaves us confronting an abstract span of sound. In making sense of such works—taking them to our hearts, making them ours, *getting* them—we're on our own. And while all music lacking text or program presents a listener with a similar challenge, the contrast in Schubert is especially striking—the vividly concrete songs on the one hand, the elusive late chamber music and sonatas on the other. Schubert is hardly the only composer to produce some music that appeals to a wide audience and other music that appeals to connoisseurs, but the two aspects of Schubert's artistry seem to have created a conflict that undid him. While he could count on listeners for his salon pieces, he believed immortality lay in more ambitious productions, but publishers remained unwilling to back his aspirations with their resources. Perhaps he simply needed better luck, better contacts, better PR skills. Imagine his reaction to a letter from the publisher Probst, rejecting a set of late works he had hoped to sell. "The public does not yet sufficiently and generally

understand the peculiar, often ingenious, but perhaps now and then somewhat curious procedures of your mind's creations." This translates to *Don't quit your day job*, useless advice for a man whose day job was composing.

The G major quartet begins with a long inhalation, a major triad that immediately leaps upward and into minor, dynamics simultaneously building to *fortissimo*. The gesture creates enormous tension. Schubert biographer Brian Newbould identifies it as the work's first "theme," and in various guises you will hear it again and again. The breath just taken in is expelled: a staccato outburst of six short notes, the last two echoed softly before the brief opening gesture is repeated. Without warning, Schubert now asks us to focus on something different, an extended tremolo passage, *pianissimo*, above which the first violin introduces a theme derived from the staccato outburst, only now it is serene, and in the major mode rather than minor. The cello responds to this, and then all join in full-throated song, radiant, even ecstatic. The music feels big. It all but begs for orchestration.

Now listen even more closely, for nothing that follows in this long movement is obvious. The radiant song segues into the movement's second theme. Is it stalking or innocent? Melancholy or optimistic? Without answering those questions, the music grows impassioned. As it subsides, the cellist explores the second theme from a pensive point of view; but, as though impatient with such brooding, the others intervene with a more aggressive version of the same music, then retreat to allow the viola his upbeat take on the theme. The tremolos return, but what was subdued earlier is now forceful. Then, led by first violin and viola, comes a riff on the radiant song heard minutes ear-

lier. Tremulous, tortured passages ensue, spelled by moments of otherworldly calm. The recapitulation is no literal repeat of music we have heard earlier. In a stroke more readily described than discerned, the opening gesture is now reversed, a minor chord here giving way to major, and the tension of the opening dissipates briefly. With the ever-present tremolos and a recollection of the quartet's first moments, the movement ends.

The mournful song that opens the Andante sounds like a country dance played at half speed, as though this is a recollection of happier times. An impassioned outburst, and then tremolos intrude, seeming to come from nowhere. The sad dance is reprised and explored. Heard over tremolos, it yearns to be optimistic and rises into major, residing there tentatively, until a short coda ends the movement.

The scherzo trembles, agitated and anxious until the central section, which the cello introduces with a long held note. The others join in a song, sweet and melancholy—again, to call this ecstatic is no overstatement. It is cut short with the return of the nervous music of the movement's first section.

Opening abruptly, the finale unfolds in stabbing rhythms and nervous song, an obsessive perpetual motion that now and again attempts to relax but cannot. Were it not for the full stop proclaimed by the final unison gesture, we could imagine the music continuing to careen toward the catastrophe that has haunted this unsettling quartet from its first moments.

—Larry Rothe

Larry Rothe writes about music for Cal Performances and San Francisco Opera. Visit larryrothe.com.



Amanda Tipton

The world-renowned Takács Quartet is now in the midst of its forty-ninth season. Edward Dusinger, Harumi Rhodes (violins), Richard O'Neill (viola), and András Fejér (cello) are excited about a schedule that features varied projects including the new work the group premiered here in Hertz Hall last November, Nokuthula Ngwenyama's *Flow*, an exploration and celebration of the natural world. The work was commissioned by nine concert presenters throughout the USA. The season also sees the release of a new recording of works by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and Dvořák for Hyperion Records, while later in the year the quartet will release works by Schubert including his 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-André 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 prestigious 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 Seymour 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 Quartet made its North American debut tour in 1982. Members of the Takács Quartet are the grateful beneficiaries of an instrument loan by the Drake Foundation.

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