

Sunday, February 16, 2025, 3pm  
Hertz Hall

## Takács Quartet

### Takács Quartet

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

### PROGRAM

Joseph HAYDN (1732–1809) String Quartet in C major, Op. 54, No. 2,  
Hob. III:57 (1788)  
Vivace  
Adagio  
Minuet – Trio  
Finale: Adagio – Presto – Adagio

Benjamin BRITTEN (1913–1976) String Quartet No. 2 in C major,  
Op. 36 (1945)  
Allegro calmo, senza rigore  
Vivace  
Chacony: sostenuto

### INTERMISSION

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827) String Quartet in F major, Op. 59, No. 1,  
Razumovsky (1808)  
Allegro  
Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando  
Adagio molto e mesto  
Thème Russe: Allegro

*Major support for this performance is provided by Taube Philanthropies.*

*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](http://www.takacsquartet.com)*

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**Joseph Haydn****String Quartet in C major, Op. 54, No. 2, Hob. III:57**

By 1788, when Haydn composed the quartet we hear this afternoon, his music and his fame had spread far beyond the Hungarian marshes and the palace of Prince Nikolaus Esterhazy, where he served as music director. Paris especially could not get enough of Haydn. In 1787, he began a set of six string quartets intended for that city's music lovers. When he completed them the following year, he turned them over to Johann Tost, who proved the ideal agent. Tost, a virtuoso himself, was leaving his post as leader of the Esterhazy orchestra's second violins. He was headed for Paris, where he hoped to start a new career as a soloist. Tost was a shrewd negotiator and sold Haydn's quartets to the Paris publisher Sieber, who released the works as two sets of three, Haydn's Opp. 54 and 55. For the obvious reason, these are called Haydn's *Tost* quartets. (A third set of *Tost* quartets, Haydn's Op. 64, is dedicated to the violinist.)

This C major quartet, like the Beethoven quartet that concludes this program, is filled with much that was new for its time, but in Haydn's compact package those novelties and beauties come in inverse proportion to size. Haydn begins here with a virtuosic figure in the first violin. After pausing twice, the music continues with an abrupt key change—at about 20 seconds into the piece, this was indeed an oddity for 1788—when we're catapulted into a bright, dancelike movement. Why that key change? Often, Haydn inserts new ideas just because he can—to show what music can do, and to keep audiences' ears fresh.

The Adagio that follows is reflective and dirgelike, but also a showpiece for the first violin, which meanders above the dirge in a song that rises into the highest registers. Almost before we know it, the music ends, as though suspended.

The Minuet seems a conventional dance until the middle section, where we en-

counter a sound such as listeners in the late 18th century would not have expected, dissonant keening variants of the first section's theme. No less expected would have been the Finale. Here audiences would have looked for fast music. What they got was an adagio, reflective and calm, then spelled briefly by a speedy *presto* episode before the slow music returns to close the quartet.

**Benjamin Britten****String Quartet No. 2 in C major, Op. 36**

Just as Beethoven revered Handel as a musical god, Benjamin Britten esteemed his 17th-century forebear Henry Purcell above all composers. In 1945, he contributed his String Quartet No. 2 to a concert commemorating the 250th anniversary of Purcell's death. The quartet came shortly after the triumphant premiere of Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*. But although the quartet is so much smaller in scale than *Grimes*, Britten believed it represented the greatest step forward he had yet made as a composer. "It has given me encouragement," he said, "to continue on new lines."

The quartet is serious and reflective, elemental stuff, perhaps a prelude to the music Britten would compose in the remaining 31 years of his life. For in work after work, he fashioned a concentrated, meditative language, deliberate and powerful and designed for journeys of probing introspection. Consider the first movement of this quartet. It is a search, the character of the music shifting constantly and abruptly, seeking solid ground, some base. Perhaps the best way to listen is to give yourself to the music, ride its current, for so emotionally charged is it that analysis fails to do it justice, let alone help the listener. In the simplest terms: Over an organ-like drone in the viola (possibly modeled on Purcell's *Fantasia Upon One Note*), the other players intone a wavering theme. The pace increases suddenly, then, with an abrupt halt, the music

descends into an indeterminate passage that sounds as though the instruments are tuning. From this odd texture, the first violin emerges in a variant of the opening music, introducing a *tutti* section. The sonic texture here is rich and varied and in a way quasi-orchestral. The texture thins. The drone-like music returns, and above this come high whoops of sound. Again the texture thickens, each player contributing turns no less disturbing or angry for the virtuosity demanded. Quiet ruminations return in an extraordinary coda that anticipates the work's final moments, though the tranquil atmosphere here will become assertive later.

The second movement, not quite four minutes long, is something out of a fevered dream. In the pace Britten requests and in the extraordinary sounds he asks for, this music is hugely difficult to play. Commentator Roger Parker has likened it to Bernard Herrmann's music for Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

Britten called his finale Chacony, a spelling such as Purcell would have used to label a chaconne, variations over a repeated bass. The variations here are grouped into four sections, the first three sections each concluding with a solo cadenza—for cello, then viola, then first violin—and the last with a *tutti* coda. Roger Parker advises against trying to listen for each variant and suggests instead “listen[ing] on a larger scale to the alternations between solo passages and increasingly complicated ensemble textures.”

The movement opens with the “theme”—stated in long, slow sentences, meandering, seeking direction. Throughout the 21 variations that follow, the music is yearning, searching, ecstatic. Toward the end, tremolos in a long ethereal passage create a sense of levitation. All four members come together in a broadly melodic hymn, culminating in great slashes of C major chords, ending the work with a sense of deep fulfillment. “After the equivocation of the first movement and the eerie violence of the second movement”—Parker again—“and the

stately progress of the third-movement Chacony, suddenly, and against the odds, we seem to have arrived somewhere—a victory, or perhaps a home-coming, is grandly declared.”

**Ludwig van Beethoven**  
**String Quartet in F major, Op. 59, No. 1,**  
*Razumovsky*

The Beethoven literature tends to treat his string quartets with a reverence and a solemnity that has surely scared many potential listeners. Will they grasp just what makes this most revolutionary, most serious of composers so revolutionary and so serious? Anyone nervous about getting the message can set aside those anxieties in the presence of this, the first of Beethoven's three *Razumovsky* quartets. Yes, this music is revolutionary, and it's serious. But forget that while you listen. Because this is also among Beethoven's most exuberant, life-affirming works, the sort of thing we need especially today, at our current juncture of history.

Count Andrei Razumovsky, Russia's ambassador to the Viennese court, was a patron of Beethoven's. With Prince Joseph Franz von Lobkowitz, he shares the dedication of the composer's Fifth and Sixth symphonies. He was also a musician, with chops that enabled him to play the second violin part of the three quartets he commissioned from Beethoven when they were introduced in 1807. The *Razumovskys* were not received well, not by the public nor by the other members of the ensemble that performed them. No quartet such as the one we hear this afternoon had been heard before, and surely not one 40 minutes long. Neither the innovations nor the length need concern us. Beethoven knew what he was up to. This was music, he told one puzzled player, “for a later age.”

That earworm of a first theme, played by cello above the pulsating strings of his partners, sings with an optimism and a nimbleness that never flags throughout this

## PROGRAM NOTES

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propulsive movement, whose duration seems paradoxically shorter because of how much Beethoven packs into it, how much he gives us to focus on: the ever-changing shapes of the main theme, surprises such as a recapitulation that starts but veers immediately into the development, a fugue that balances the lightness of the opening, and a sonority of almost orchestral richness. Despite what those first listeners and players thought, this is music to be enjoyed.

The scherzo—*sempre scherzando*, always joking—alternates between the nervous, taunting jabs of the first bars and a longer, swaying melody. What follows in the Adagio could not be a greater contrast. The long meandering melody is a lament, and Beethoven proceeds to explore its deep expressive possibilities. Some commentators have compared this music to the funeral march

of the *Eroica* Symphony. The tragedy expressed here is on a more human level. After some 13 or 14 minutes the first violin is spotlighted in a virtuosic passage that hints at something lighter. The cello introduces a new theme that triggers the finale, a deliciously upbeat dance based on a Russian folk tune, in homage to Count Razumovsky. The spirit of the first movement returns, and again the marvel is the variety of color and texture Beethoven creates with four instruments. In the playful coda, dynamics suddenly drop and the pace slows. Then, with an outburst, the work gallops to the end.

—Larry Rothe

*Larry Rothe writes about music for Cal Performances and San Francisco Opera. Visit [larryrothe.com](http://larryrothe.com).*

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

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The world-renowned **Takács Quartet** is now in the midst of its 50th anniversary season.

Edward Dusinberre, Harumi Rhodes (violins), Richard O'Neill (viola), and András Fejér (cello) are excited about projects including a new concerto for them and the orchestra of the Colorado Music Festival by Gabriela Lena Frank. In November the group released its latest Hyperion project, Nokuthula Ngwenyama's *Flow*. A new album with pianist Marc-André Hamelin will be released in the spring featuring works by Florence Price and Antonín Dvořák.

The Takács maintains a busy international touring schedule. This year the ensemble will perform in South Korea, Japan, and Australia, with the Australian tour centered around a new piece for quartet and narrator by Kathy Milliken. As Associate Artists at London's Wigmore Hall, the group will present four concerts featuring works by Haydn, Britten, Ngwenyama, Beethoven, and Janáček and two performances of Schu-

bert's cello quintet with Adrian Brendel. During the season the ensemble will play at other prestigious European venues including Barcelona, Budapest, Milan, Basel, Bath, Bern, and the Mozartfest.

Along with two programs at Cal Performances, the group's North American engagements this season include concerts in New York, Vancouver, Philadelphia, Washington DC, La Jolla, Ann Arbor, Chicago, Tucson, Portland, and Princeton, and collaborations with pianists Stephen Hough and Jeremy Denk.

The members of the Takács Quartet are Christoffersen Fellows and Artists in Residence at the University of Colorado, Boulder. During the summer months the ensemble joins the faculty at the Music Academy of the West, running an intensive quartet seminar.

The Takács has recorded for Hyperion since 2005. The group's most recent album includes Schubert's final quartet D. 887. This and all their other recordings are available

to stream at [www.hyperion-streaming.co.uk](http://www.hyperion-streaming.co.uk). In 2021, the quartet 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 Franck and Shostakovich (with Marc-André Hamelin), and viola quintets by Brahms and Dvořák (with Lawrence 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.

The Takács Quartet is known for its innovative programming. During the 2021–22 season, 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 again with her at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto in 2015. They first performed *Everyman* at Carnegie Hall in 2007 with Philip Seymour Hoffman. The group has 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 group are the grateful beneficiaries of an instrument loan by the Drake Foundation. The musicians are grateful to be Thomastik-Infeld Artists.