

Saturday, January 25, 2025, 8pm

Sunday, January 26, 2025, 3pm

Hertz Hall

Takács Quartet

with Jeremy Denk, *piano*

Takács Quartet

Edward Dusinberre, *violin*

Harumi Rhodes, *violin*

Richard O'Neill, *viola*

András Fejér, *cello*

PROGRAM

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827) String Quartet in F major, Op. 18, No. 1
(1798–1800)

Allegro con brio

Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato

Scherzo

Allegro

Leoš JANÁČEK (1854–1928) String Quartet No. 1, *The Kreutzer Sonata*
(1923)

Adagio con moto

Con moto

Con moto – Vivace – Andante – Tempo I

Con moto

INTERMISSION

Johannes BRAHMS (1833–1897) Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34 (1864)

Allegro non troppo

Andante, un poco Adagio

Scherzo. Allegro

Finale. Poco sostenuto – Allegro non troppo

This performance is made possible in part by Jeffrey MacKie-Mason and Janet Netz.

*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*

*Jeremy Denk appears by arrangement with Opus 3 Artists.
www.jeremydenk.com*

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Ludwig van Beethoven**String Quartet in F major, Op. 18, No. 1**

Beethoven composed his F major String Quartet between 1798 and 1800, making the work roughly contemporary with his Symphony No. 1 and Piano Concerto No. 3. All these early works exhibit a command of form and gesture that tell us this composer knew his mind and knew where he was headed.

Published in 1801 as the first of a set of six string quartets, this was the second of that group to be composed. Beethoven liked it well enough to share what he had done with his friend Carl Amenda. Soon he looked again at the manuscript. He slapped his forehead, spread out the pages, and sharpened his pen. When he finished the rewrite, he pleaded with Amenda. *That music I sent you: do not show it around. "Only now do I know how to write quartets properly."*

The quartet launches with a commanding gesture, voiced twice in unison. As the exposition proceeds, that opening gesture is repeated, but it also generates figures at once new and familiar, bearing the unmistakable marks of the opening's DNA. This rich texture feels satisfying, expansive, complete. Wonderfully theatrical moves by the first violin are imitated by his colleagues. After a repeat of the exposition, the work's first bars are explored further in the development, the minor mode now dominating. The recapitulation arrives triumphantly and revels in the paradox of instrumental profiles strikingly individual but also integrated—as if, you could almost believe, by magic.

The slow movement is the first of the great adagios Beethoven reserved for his string quartets. It begins as the first violin sings a lament above the pulsing accompaniment sounded by his colleagues. The movement unfolds as an operatic scene that all but begs for words, and although Beethoven is not likely to have had words in mind as he wrote, he did tell Carl Amenda

that he was thinking of *Romeo and Juliet* while composing this music.

So many Beethoven scherzos are in-your-face numbers, sharp-tongued and bordering on rude, that this one is surprising in its restraint. It is elegant music, and only in the central trio section do we get a hint of a rougher side, a rustic dance marked by braying gestures. These are ancestors to the hee-haws depicting Bottom in Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* music.

The finale opens with a kind of yodel, a comic gesture that gives way to passages of fugato spelled by lyricism, reflective though never too serious. Even as the music rushes to the end, it does not so much race to a finish as dance toward it: good-humored, sinewy, a delight.

Leoš Janáček**String Quartet No. 1, *The Kreutzer Sonata***

Were he alive today, you might expect to see Leoš Janáček on the cover of the AARP magazine, an example of why age need not limit accomplishment. He was already 62 when his opera *Jenůfa* brought him his first wide acclaim, but even greater works were to come—inspired, we are given to understand, by his passion for Kamila Stösslová, a woman 38 years his junior. Kamila was married, and the romance unfolded mainly in Janáček's mind. But if love can move mountains, it can also help birth musical masterpieces. *Katya Kabanova*, *The Makropulos Case*, *The Cunning Little Vixen* (to name only three of the stage works Janáček composed after meeting Kamila in 1917, when he was 63)—these are among the 20th century's most captivating operas, and to those essential pieces you can add the Sinfonietta, the *Glagolitic Mass*, and his two string quartets.

The String Quartet No. 1, composed in nine days in 1923, is subtitled *The Kreutzer Sonata*, after the Tolstoy novella, which takes its title from Beethoven's Opus 47 sonata for violin and piano. In the heat it gen-



erates and the despair it captures, Janáček's quartet renders an emotional sense of Tolstoy's tale.

Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* fell victim to government censors upon its publication in 1889. It's a disturbing read. A jealous husband murders his pianist wife, imagining she is having an affair with a violinist she has accompanied in a performance of Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata*. The main action of the story is preceded by a long diatribe, misogynistic and preachy, that strains a reader's patience. And although the graphic violence of the murder is abhorrent, it is less off-putting than the narrator's self-pity. Tolstoy in a postscript reflects on the virtues of celibacy and makes clear that the tale represents his own thinking.

Why would a composer be attracted to a story like that? Especially if he meant the music it inspired as a love offering?

The answer is that Janáček inverts Tolstoy. He wrote that, in his quartet, he focused on the woman in the story. If the musical narrative is "told" from her point of view, we're given to understand that men have no monopoly on passion.

This is an emotionally raw work, though elegantly structured and balanced. No sooner do we hear the long melodic opening than the line is undercut by short stabbing gestures from the cello. The long line is twice repeated and twice more interrupted. This short introduction leads to faster music marked by an obsessively persistent figure. A pause, and then a lamenting passage that recalls the opening. The stabbing music recurs, then all four players recall the opening and join in an impassioned song that rises in intensity and volume, ending quietly.

The operatic second movement speaks in short phrases. Over a drone in the cello comes a trembling, first in viola, then second violin, then first. The drama alternates between the languid and the inflamed, the fever peaking before subsiding into silence.

As cello and first violin sing a lament, viola and second violin interrupt with slashes of grating *sul ponticello* playing, bows scraping the bridges of the instruments. The lament is derived from Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata*—the first movement's second theme, heard here in a minor-mode version. Those nervous, slashing gestures return, and the movement grows alternately frenzied and yearning.

The finale opens with a recollection of the first movement. The first violin leads the dirge that follows. Faster music intrudes and the intensity ratchets up. The music gallops toward its goal, and then, like each of the preceding movements, subsides.

Johannes Brahms Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34

The harshest critic of his own work, Johannes Brahms honed his material until he was satisfied. His F minor Piano Quintet, for example, began life in 1862 as a string quintet, then was recast as a sonata for two pianos, and ended two years later in its present form. In the contrasting sounds of keyboard and strings, Brahms believed he had finally found the configuration that realized his ideas most perfectly. (If you are not familiar with this music in its version for two pianos, you owe yourself the treat of hearing it that way and can access recordings via youtube. The resonant writing for the keyboard duo produces a sonority that lovers of Brahms will find utterly characteristic, a sound such as Robert Schumann must have had in mind when he called Brahms' piano sonatas "veiled symphonies.")

Brahms could write music of heart-piercing sweetness and poignancy. Not here. The quintet is a big, tightly built drama dominated by the minor mode. This is Brahms at his most serious.

The Allegro non troppo begins with a stern theme, outlined slowly, quickly gathering momentum. The lyrical second theme transforms into a march-like passage, re-

emerges in its lyrical guise, and leads to a chorale that rounds out the exposition. In the development, these themes enter myriad byways, revealing dramatic possibilities Brahms continues to explore in the recapitulation. The extended coda starts in wistful reserve and grows into a great tragic capstone.

A song from the piano begins the Andante and becomes the foundation of this movement. Angry plucked cello strings open the scherzo, which knots itself into a ball of concentrated force, giving way to a heroic march. A nervous figure intrudes, crazed and obsessive. At its height it exhausts itself, introducing a lyrical episode—a brief respite, for again plucked notes on the cello lead to a reprise of the opening section, tension rising to its most fevered.

A grave opening in the strings begins with the same notes as the first movement and introduces a finale built on that movement's scale. The allegro proper is a clipped dance with distant Gypsy roots. Mournful strings offer contrast. The coda returns to the movement's slow introduction, builds in speed and volume, and compacts the emotional

strands of this movement into a projectile. Its explosion marks the end.

Jan Swafford, in his 1998 biography *Johannes Brahms*, points out how, in this work, the composer matched formal means and expressive ends, moving forward in his creative evolution. Swafford continues:

Of the subtleties composers aspire to and only occasionally manage to achieve over the course of long pieces, [the] feeling of unity—within emotional variety—is one of the most elusive. It has little to do with technique as such, or motivic and tonal relationships as such; it cannot be taught, can hardly be analyzed, only felt intuitively by composer and listener alike. For Brahms this began to happen, perhaps, with the F Minor Quintet.... [T]he emotional intensity he achieved in it seems at times anguished, at times (in the scherzo) demonic, at times tragic. Yet the whole quintet remains a unified dramatic plot without becoming monochrome: one story.

—Larry Rothe

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

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

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 MarcAndré 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 Schubert'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 troupe'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. 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.

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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.

Jeremy Denk is one of America's foremost pianists, proclaimed by the *New York Times* as "a pianist you want to hear no matter what he performs." Also a *New York Times* best-selling author, Denk is the recipient of both the MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship and the Avery Fisher Prize, and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

During the 2024–25 season, Denk continues his collaboration with longtime musical partners Joshua Bell and Steven Isserlis, with performances at the Tsindali Festival and Wigmore Hall, following his multi-concert artist residency at the Wigmore in 2023–24. He also returns to the Lammermuir Festival in multiple performances, including the complete Ives violin sonatas with

Maria Wloszczowska and a solo recital featuring works by female composers from the past to the present day. He performs this same solo program on tour across the US, as well as continuing his exploration of Bach in ongoing performances of the complete Partitas. Denk is also known for his interpretations of the music of American visionary Charles Ives, and in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the composer's birth, Non-esuch Records will release a collection of the pianist's Ives recordings later this year.

Denk has performed frequently at Carnegie Hall, and in recent years has worked with such orchestras as the Chicago Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, and San Francisco Symphony. Meanwhile, he has performed multiple times at the BBC Proms and the Klavierfestival Ruhr, and appeared in such halls as the Köln Philharmonie, Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, and Boulez Saal in Berlin. He has also performed extensively across the UK, including recently with the London Philharmonic, Bournemouth Symphony, City of Birmingham Symphony, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, BBC Symphony, and Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

Denk is also known for his original and insightful writing on music, which Alex Ross has praised for its "arresting sensitivity and wit." His *New York Times* bestselling memoir, *Every Good Boy Does Fine*, was published to universal acclaim by Random House in 2022, receiving coverage on *CBS Sunday Morning* and NPR's *Fresh Air*, as well as in the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*. Denk also wrote the libretto for a comic opera presented here at Cal Performances as well as at Carnegie Hall and the Aspen Festival, and his writing has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *New Republic*, *Guardian*, and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*.