

TAKÁCS QUARTET

EDWARD DUSINBERRE, violin
HARUMI RHODES, violin
RICHARD O'NEILL, viola
ANDRÁS FEJÉR, cello

W.A. MOZART

(1756-1791)

Quartet No. 15 in D Minor, K. 421

Allegro moderato Andante

Menuetto and Trio: Allegro Allegretto ma non troppo

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

(1913-1976)

Quartet No. 2 in C Major, Op. 36

Allegro calmo Vivace

Chacony

INTERMISSION

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(1770-1827)

Quartet No. 16 in F Major, Op. 135

Allegretto

Vivace

Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo

Der schwer gefaßte Entschluß. Grave ma non

troppo tratto—Allegro



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TAKÁCS QUARTET

The world-renowned Takács Quartet is now entering its 50th season. Edward Dusinberre, Harumi Rhodes (violins), Richard O'Neill (viola), and András Fejér (cello) are excited about the 2024–2025 season, which features varied projects including a new concerto written for them and the Colorado Music Festival orchestra by Gabriela Lena Frank. In the spring of 2024, the Takács released two albums, one for Hyperion of quartets by Schubert, and another for Yarlung with bandoneon virtuoso Julien Labro, including new works by Clarice Assad, Bryce Dessner, and Labro. Later in the season the group will release its latest Hyperion album with pianist Marc Andre Hamelin featuring works by Florence Price and Antonín Dvořák.

The Takács maintains a busy international touring schedule. In 2025 the ensemble will perform in South Korea, Japan, and Australia. As Associate Artists at London's Wigmore Hall, the group will present four concerts featuring works by Haydn, Britten, Ngwenyama, Beethoven, and Janáček, plus 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, the Bath Mozartfest, and Bern.

The group's North American engagements include concerts in New York, Vancouver, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., La Jolla, Berkeley, Ann Arbor, Tucson, and Portland, including collaborations with pianists Stephen Hough and Jeremy Denk.

The members of the Takács are Artists in Residence at the University of Colorado and during the summer months join the faculty at the Music Academy of the West, running an intensive quartet seminar there.

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. They are grateful to be Thomastik-Infeld Artists.

The Takács Quartet appears by arrangement with Seldy Cramer Artists, and records for Hyperion and Decca/London Records. www.takacsquartet.com

IN BRIEF

BORN: January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria **DIED:** December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria

DEDICATION: To Joseph Haydn

MOST RECENT FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC
PERFORMANCE: October 18, 2017, Quatuor Mosaïques

DURATION: 27 minutes

Mozart probably met Joseph Haydn in December 1781. It was the start of a remarkable friendship that lasted until Mozart's death ten years later. The two exerted a powerful mutual influence, with each leaving an imprint on the other's compositions. Nowhere in Mozart's musical output is this more evident than in the set of six string quartets he dedicated to Haydn. Asked why he had chosen to dedicate them to Haydn, Mozart responded, "Because I consider it my duty. It was from Haydn that I learned to write quartets."

Composed between 1782 and 1785—an exceptionally long time for Mozart, who usually composed with enviable ease and often with lightning speed—these so-called "Haydn" quartets constitute six of the ten great, mature Mozart string quartets. With the possible exception of the famous G minor Piano Quartet, K. 478, they are arguably his best-

NOTES

W.A. MOZART: QUARTET NO. 15 IN D MINOR, K. 421 known chamber music. Part of what makes them unusual is the autograph scores, which reveal how many changes Mozart made in his music. He took great care with these works.

There is a story, possibly apocryphal, that Mozart composed the D minor quartet during the summer of 1783, when Constanze was delivering their first child. Whether or not this is true, Mozart is always saying something important when he writes in D minor. Think of *Don Giovanni*, the Piano Concerto K. 466, and the Fantasia No. 3, K. 397. All are intensely expressive and dramatic works. This piece, the only one in minor key among Mozart's last ten quartets, packs a considerable emotional wallop, in part because of the almost unrelieved tension (Alexander Hyatt King calls it "nervous melancholy") created by such a preponderance of D minor. No major key codas compromise the seriousness of the outer movements. Extreme chromaticism underscores their dark expression. Surely this is the early manifestation of musical romanticism! The first movement's triple stops (three strings sounded together) in both violin parts are quite unusual in works by Mozart.

The second movement Andante is in F major, which is often a pastoral key. This slow movement, however, is no repository of unclouded lyricism. Hesitations and broken phrases lend it a breathless, tentative quality that interrupts the customary lilt of *siciliana* rhythm. Minor chords seem to lurk around every corner, and we never settle into unruffled serenity. A descending chromatic bass line in the minuet lends a strangely Baroque flair to the third movement; it half sounds like something Bach might have written. Once again, the chromaticism is a major component of the tension. The central trio section, a violin solo over pizzicato lower strings, reinforces the Baroque flavor, with a reverse dotted rhythm dominating the whole.

Mozart's finale, another *siciliana* in dotted rhythm, surely bears some indebtedness to Haydn's finale—also variations in D minor, also in 6/8 meter—in the Op. 33

No. 5 ("Fifths") quartet, which Mozart knew and probably played. A generation later, Franz Schubert, in his turn, must have studied Mozart's K. 421 when he composed the variations to his own D minor quartet, "Death and the Maiden."

IN BRIEF

BORN: November 22, 1913, Lowestoft, United Kingdom

DIED: December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh, United Kingdom

FIRST PERFORMANCE: November 21, 1945, Zorian String

Quartet, London's Wigmore Hall

MOST RECENT FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC
PERFORMANCE: February 25, 2015, Calder Quartet

DURATION: 30 minutes

The form of Britten's quartet is original. By limiting the work to three movements, Britten distanced himself from the traditional four-movement sonata structure of classical quartets, yet his first movement is in a recognizable, albeit flexible, sonata form. The second movement, a scherzo/trio, functions more as an interlude, a scant few minutes interpolated between the great pillars of the two outer movements. Britten's finale, a giant *Chacony* (he uses Henry Purcell's spelling of the French *chaconne*) is the most overt gesture of homage to his Baroque predecessor. Yet its musical language is full of surprises.

The quartet opens with the two violins and cello in unison over a double-stopped drone in the viola. Was Britten alluding to Purcell's *Fantasia Upon One Note*, which sustains a single pitch as a drone for its duration? The quartet continues its remarkable texture for nearly a minute and a half before introducing a new, imitative idea in staccato eighth notes. The pedal point has not disappeared, however, and recurs at strategic moments throughout the movement.

Still more ideas unfold, now lyrical, now energetic. Then Britten starts recalling fragments of each musical paragraph, intertwining them—remembrance of things past? —never stopping the stream of varied material. Listen

BENJAMIN BRITTEN: QUARTET NO. 2 IN C MAJOR, OP. 36

BRITTEN'S SECOND QUARTET: A TRIBUTE TO HENRY PURCELL

England's greatest Baroque composer was Henry Purcell, who lived from 1659 to 1695. Until the renaissance in English music that blossomed at the beginning of the 20th century through Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Host, and others, Purcell reigned supreme as the principal figure in the country's musical heritage.

As the 250th anniversary of Purcell's death approached, plans were underway in England for a series of concerts commemorating his life and work. These included new compositions that paid tribute to Purcell's legacy. Benjamin Britten wrote two pieces for the occasion: a set of nine *Holy Sonnets of John Donne* for voice and piano, and a second string quartet (performed this evening).

Britten admired Purcell's songs and his instrumental music. In fact, one of his best-known compositions, A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, is variations on a hornpipe by Purcell. The Second Quartet adapts Purcellian features in a different fashion and owes much of its mood and harmonic vocabulary to the opera Peter Grimes, which Britten completed early in 1945.

for a glissando leap, usually in tenths, same as the interval of the opening viola drone.

Imitation between and among the four players is near constant, but not so methodical as it might be in a Baroque piece. Britten writes as if the four musicians are both flirting and arguing with one another, in the animated conversation of great chamber music that so often defies analysis.

All four players are muted for the duration of the Scherzo, which is constructed of rapid arpeggios played staccato. The mutes alter the string sound but cannot mask the irrepressible energy of Britten's string writing. This is a tarantella in overdrive. The central trio section switches to the pulse of duple time, even though the meter nominally remains in 6/8. A six-measure ground bass hints at the Chacony to follow. Britten gives us fantasy music, with a vague weirdness, as if he had absorbed some Hungarian Gypsy flavor. It goes like the wind and evaporates into nothingness.

A stern opening with all four players delivering the sarabande rhythm in music makes it clear that the Chacony (see sidebar) is serious business. Sharply dotted rhythm suggests a French overture. Britten's structure is nine-bar paragraphs, an irregular number would have been radical for Purcell, but it works. The lead voice switches among the players, sometimes featuring one as soloist, sometimes a duet with the other two players accompanying, occasionally returning to dramatic unison as at the opening.

The 20 variations grow seamlessly, one unfolding from the previous and proceeding to the next, with seemingly endless imagination in texture, pacing, and melodic flow. If the cello sustains a single pitch through one variation, it will have the only moving part in the next, with the other three players relatively static. A chorale that blends the four players in chordal sonorities gives way to a cello cadenza (later, viola and first violin have their own cadenzas). You can track the variations by following the changes in texture, but some are very subtle.

One of the quartet's most startling traits is occasional passages of bitonality. In one variation, the upper three strings trill in sweet, inverted triads, while the cello plays pizzicato chords in a different key. At the end of this monumental Chacony, Britten sets forth an argument between C major and several other key centers. C major is clearly determined to win and asserts itself with four decisive iterations at the end. A word to the wise: wait to applaud until the players have lowered their bows!

IN BRIEF

BORN: December 1770, Bonn, Germany

DIED: March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria

FIRST PERFORMANCE: March 1828, Schuppanzigh Quartet

MOST RECENT FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC PERFORMANCE: December 11, 2019, Spektral Quartet

DURATION: 27 minutes

Most chamber music listeners are aware of the significance and depth of Beethoven's late string quartets. What may come as a surprise in hearing this, his last quartet, is its brevity. The other late quartets are lengthy and monumental. The *Grosse Fuge*, Op. 133, takes 17 minutes. The Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131, comprises seven movements and upwards of 40 minutes of music. The five movements of Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132, exceed three-quarters of an hour in performance. What, then, are we to make of Op. 135, whose modest and apparently conventional four movements elapse in a mere 27 minutes, the approximate length of a mature Haydn or Mozart quartet?

The answers to this question are complex. The simple response is akin to the proverb "Don't judge a book by its cover." For Op. 135 is as extraordinary as its siblings. Its slow movement is as transporting, its scherzo as wild and experimental, its finale as mysterious and thought-

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN: QUARTET NO. 16 IN F MAJOR, OP. 135 provoking as anything that Beethoven composed. Part of the quartet's mystery is its terseness. Op. 135 is economical in the extreme. Beethoven wasted not a note, composing with an intensity that recalls the *Quartetto Serioso*, Op. 95 in F minor.

Beethoven sketched Op. 135 when he was completing the C-sharp minor quartet, Op. 131. His concentrated work on the F major quartet commenced in late July 1826. In early August 1826 his nephew Karl attempted suicide. That catastrophe does not surface openly in the music of Op. 135, but knowledge of its occurrence heightens the quartet's enigmatic character. Beethoven completed it in October during a visit to Gneixendorf, where he visited his brother Nikolaus Johann (Karl's other uncle). This quartet was Beethoven's last completed composition.

About the music

The opening *Allegretto* is the most traditional of the four movements and the least confounding. Its melodic material is fairly straightforward and the dialogue among the four players is direct. From the second movement on, however, Op. 135 gets progressively more challenging, subtly drawing the listener into Beethoven's private demons and ecstasies. His *Vivace*, a wild movement of less than four minutes, is formally lopsided, allotting disproportionate time and musical substance to its middle trio section. It opens with a lurching, syncopated ride and a decidedly sarcastic undertone. The middle section shifts startlingly to G major, launching into a buzzing, virtuosic scramble among the three lower strings, while the first violin dances demonically up above. It is a strange, unsettling movement.

The slow movement is one of Beethoven's sublime variations sets. The *Lento assai cantante e tranquillo* is a ten-measure theme in D-flat major with four variations. In two of them, we hear the theme as an undercurrent. Rather than state it explicitly, Beethoven implies it through the shimmer and richness of his string writing.

An enigmatic finale

The finale has a German superscription in the printed score: Der schwer gefaßte Entschluß, usually translated "The hard-won decision" or "The difficult resolution." This motto is followed by a musical example and the words "Muss es sein? Es muss sein!" (Must it be? It must be!), the name of a canon Beethoven also composed in 1827. Musicians have long debated whether Beethoven was probing the fundamental questions of existence.

But at least two stories associated with this canon are more down to earth. According to one anecdote, a musicloving Viennese court official named Ignaz Dembscher had missed the Schuppanzigh Quartet's performance of Beethoven's Op. 130 in March 1826. Beethoven was adamant that Dembscher should honor his financial commitment and send Ignaz Schuppanzigh the price of his subscription all the same. Dembscher allegedly asked, "Must it be?" Beethoven sent him the canon in response. The other version of the story is that Dembscher wanted to borrow the parts to Op. 130 for a private performance and Beethoven insisted he pay for them since Dembscher had not been an original subscriber at the quartet's première.

Whichever tale is true, there is a dichotomy between the weighty implications of two German headings and the practical explanation implied by these stories. Beethoven's finale is similarly divided. The introduction (based on the first phrase of the canon) is mysterious and questioning. The bulk of the movement (based on the canon's second phrase) is lighter: if not capricious, then certainly more accessible and direct. Beethoven's strange introduction is part of this quartet's enigma, just as his Allegro is part of its reassuring charm. He leaves us considerable leeway to arrive at our own conclusions as to his motivation.

Program notes by Laurie Shulman ©2024

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Danish String Quartet Thu, Feb 6, 2025 | 7:30 pm

Benjamin Beilman, violin Steven Osborne, piano Thu, Mar 6, 2025 | 7:30 pm

Quartetto di Cremona Basil Vendryes, viola Wed, Apr 9, 2025 | 7:30 pm

Miró Quartet Steven Banks, saxophone Wed, May 14, 2025 | 7:30 pm

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Ivalas Quartet Tue, Sep 24, 2024 | 6:30 pm Dazzle Denver 1080 14th Street, Denver Tickets: dazzledenver.com

Ivalas Quartet Thu, Sep 26, 2024 | 6:30 pm Daniels & Fisher Tower 1601 Arapahoe Street, Denver

"Stories Underscored" Tue, Oct 1, 2024 | 6:00 pm RedLine Contemporary Art Center 2350 Arapahoe Street, Denver Free to the public (reservations encouraged)

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