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2020-21 Digital Programs

August-October 2020

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Richard O'Neill's time has arrived

By Becca Vaclavik

People often wonder how great talents come to fall in love with their craft. Most assume it's generational, raising questions of nature versus nurture. Are we born with our gifts? Or do the people we love instill their own dreams and desires within us?

"I believe it has to come from somewhere, right?" muses Richard O'Neill, the newest member of the Takács Quartet.

O'Neill doesn't come from a family of musicians. But the love and appreciation for music, at least, is in his blood. Growing up in his grandparents' home in rural Washington, he often had to find ways to occupy himself. From a very young age, O'Neill would spend hours every day making his way through their massive record collection and listening to various LPs.

Nurture, then. And nature, too.

"My mom wasn't a musician; she was never given the chance. But she could sit down at a piano and play church hymns without anyone showing her how.

She had perfect pitch. I think I got my gifts from her.”

The music of his childhood stuck with him. In the years since, O’Neill has built a career teaching and playing the viola internationally. Throughout it all, he confesses, he had his eye on the Takács Quartet. In fact, he first auditioned for the quartet in 2005, but Geri Walther was destined for the group at that time.

“I was deeply disappointed,” O’Neill confesses. “I took it very hard. I remember getting the call from them, but they said, ‘This is not the right time in your life.’”

The right time, as it turns out, is now. Last fall, O’Neill flew out to Boulder to audition once again for the group. “We dove into Bartók, Beethoven, Mozart and Brahms. It was like a dream.”

The rest is history, though a curious one. O’Neill was invited to join, as he puts it, one of the greatest string quartets of all time in one of the most beautiful communities in the world. But he officially took up rehearsals in June, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to rehearse, the group had to live very closed lives, hardly going out, except to one another’s homes.

The chaotic start has only reiterated that O’Neill is exactly where he was meant to be, where his childhood dreams have always been leading.

“For a lot of artists this has been a cataclysm—no concerts, no traveling, no music making. So to be in the quartet at this time, it’s fortuitous.

“Making music is sacred. It is one of our great gifts to be together and to share this sublime music with people. I can’t imagine anything more wonderful.”

While campus remains closed to audiences, this fall the Takács Quartet will livestream their Grusin Hall series concerts to subscribers in the comfort and safety of their own homes.



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Takács Quartet

Mozart, Debussy and Beethoven

Streaming Sept. 20-28, 2020
Virtual performance streamed from
Grusin Music Hall

String Quartet No. 15 in D minor, K. 421

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Andante
- III. Menuetto: Allegretto — Trio
- IV. Allegretto ma non troppo

String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

- I. Animé et très décidé
- II. Assez vif et bien rythmé
- III. Andantino, doucement expressif
- IV. Très modéré

— Intermission —

String Quartet No. 15, Op. 132

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

- I. Assai sostenuto – Allegro
 - II. Allegro ma non tanto
 - III. Molto adagio – Andante
 - IV. Alla marcia, assai vivace
 - V. Allegro appassionato
-

Program notes

By Marc Shulgold

String Quartet No. 15 in D minor, K. 421

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

The evening of June 17, 1783, witnessed a pair of births in the Mozart household. As Constanze later recalled, while little Raimond was entering the world, his attentive father cared for her during the final stages of labor in between putting the finishing touches on the *Menuetto* of his D minor string quartet. Alas, the boy lived only two months. The completed piece, however, would join its five siblings in the immortal collection of quartets that Mozart dedicated to his friend Haydn. The only one of the six set in a minor key, K. 421 is listed as second in order of composition by Mozart. While it is significant that these were a gift to the elder statesman of the string quartet (“...I send my six sons to you,” Mozart wrote in his note to Haydn), let’s remember that Haydn famously shared his reaction with the composer’s father after two readings of the quartets in early 1785, no doubt stunning Leopold by claiming, “Your son is the greatest composer known to me.”

All that aside, what stands out today is the individual brilliance of the half dozen works, acknowledged by Mozart to be “the fruit of a long and laborious endeavor.” There are wonders aplenty in the set, including the fugue that ends K. 387 and the otherworldly introduction that begins the aptly named “Dissonance” Quartet, K. 465. Marvels unfold in the D minor quartet as well, opening with a dramatic octave drop in the first violin that launches a journey alternating between darkness and light, moving effortlessly from the gentle *Andante* to the following anguished *Menuetto*, and culminating with another octave drop that concludes the theme-and-variation finale with a surprising major chord (known as a Picardy third).

String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

The final decade of the 19th century promised a world of change. Right in the thick of the dawning era and its exciting potential stood Debussy—long regarded as a singular force, a true original who was steering music’s shift into the unknown. But look closely at such early works as his G minor string

quartet, and it's obvious that the young Frenchman had been absorbing the plentiful sounds and aromas of Paris and beyond in the late 1800s.

In 1889, he'd visited the Paris World Exposition and was swept away by the percussive rhythms of Balinese Gamelan. Those sounds would dominate the *pizzicato* second movement of that string quartet, a work that mystified listeners at its premiere in late 1893. Most of those in attendance were loyal to César Franck and his fondness for a cyclical structure that developed a single musical idea across the span of four movements. That approach also dominates Debussy's quartet—yet, while the opening phrase does appear in three of the four movements, it does so in cleverly concealed ways. Also nearly invisible are the early influences of his study in Italy in 1884, as winner of the Prix de Rome, plus his summer in Russia four years earlier, working for Nadezhda von Meck (Tchaikovsky's patroness). And how could Debussy ignore the paintings of Monet or the symbolist writings of Mallarmé, Maeterlinck and Verlaine?

What is inescapable is the confident individuality of the G minor quartet (his only mature work given a

key signature). Despite an abundance of episodic ideas and numerous changes in key and tempo, the clarity of structure is easily embraced, as is the sweetly flowing tune in the quartet's third movement. Music was changing, thanks to this and Debussy's other early masterpieces, *L'après-midi d'un faune* and *Pelléas et Mélisande*. All products of a vibrant new era, distilled by this brilliant young composer.

String Quartet No. 15, Op. 132

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Locked in a world of near-silence brought on by an agonizingly slow march toward deafness, Beethoven spent most of his final days creating five string quartets that continue to astonish with their bold sonic journeys, and with their confessional utterances so personal, it seems as if we're invading the composer's private thoughts and emotions. Beethoven fully intended for these works to be heard and felt by contemporary audiences and those of future generations. We'll leave it to serious scholars to analyze and "explain" the details of works that, truth be told, are best experienced, rather than understood.

Three of those quartets were composed in 1825, with Op. 132 completed that summer, written during and after one of Beethoven's serious bouts with illness (this time, a painful attack of intestinal inflammation). Reluctantly obeying doctor's orders to lay off spicy foods and liquor, the composer recovered, expressing his joy and relief in the quartet's extraordinary third movement, the immortal *Heiliger Dankegesang* (meaning "Sacred Song of Thanks"). The centerpiece of this five-part work, the movement's music travels from a slow, deeply spiritual hymn to episodes displaying renewal and optimism, evaporating into profound silence.

It seems strange that such profundity would be followed by a little march—but this juxtaposition reminds us that Beethoven never shied away from contrasts of darkness and light, utter seriousness and good-natured fun, brevity and expansiveness. A similar contrast unfolds in the spontaneous mood shifts of the opening movement, followed by a *minuet* built on a simple repeating six-note motif (surrounding a charming bagpipe-flavored *trio*). Through its unexpected twists, Op. 132 manages to hold its shape, supporting an emotional message delivered straight from Beethoven's soul.

About the performers

The Takács Quartet, now entering its 46th season, is renowned for the vitality of its interpretations. The Guardian recently commented: “What endures about the Takács Quartet, year after year, is how equally the four players carry the music.” BBC Music Magazine described the group’s recent Dohnányi recording with pianist Marc André Hamelin as “totally compelling, encapsulating a vast array of colours and textures.” Based in Boulder at the University of Colorado, Edward Dusinberre and Harumi Rhodes (violin), Richard O’Neill (viola), and András Fejér (cello) perform 80 concerts a year worldwide.

In June 2020, the Takács Quartet was featured in the BBC television series *Being Beethoven*. The ensemble also released an album of piano quintets by Amy Beach and Edward Elgar, a fitting way to celebrate Geri Walther’s 15 years as the Takács’ violist before her retirement from the group. The members of the quartet welcomed Richard O’Neill as their new violist in June and are looking forward to many exciting projects during their first season together.

The Takács records for Hyperion Records, and its releases for that label include string quartets by

Haydn, Schubert, Janáček, Smetana, Debussy and Britten; piano quintets by César Franck and Shostakovich (with Marc-André Hamelin); and viola quintets by Brahms (with Lawrence Power). For its albums 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 at [**takacsquartet.com**](http://takacsquartet.com).

The members of the Takács Quartet are Christoffersen Faculty Fellows at the University of Colorado Boulder. The quartet has helped to develop a string program with a special emphasis on chamber music, where students work in a nurturing environment designed to help them develop their artistry. Through the university, two of the quartet's members benefit from the generous loan of instruments from the Drake Instrument Foundation. The members of the Takács are on the faculty at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, where they run an intensive summer string quartet seminar, and are Visiting Fellows at the Guildhall School of Music.



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