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*The Grammy Award-winning **Takács Quartet** has
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2020-21 Digital Programs

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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

Fanny Mendelssohn and
Felix Mendelssohn

Streaming Nov. 1-29, 2020
Virtual performance streamed from
Grusin Music Hall

String Quartet in E-flat Major

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805-1847)

- I. Adagio ma non troppo
- II. Allegretto
- III. Romanze
- IV. Allegro molto vivace

String Quartet No. 6 in F minor, Op. 80

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

- I. Allegro vivace assai
- II. Allegro assai
- III. Adagio
- IV. Finale: Allegro molto

—Intermission—

String Quartet No. 2 in A minor, Op. 13

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

- I. Adagio – Allegro vivace
 - II. Adagio non lento
 - III. Intermezzo. Allegretto con moto –
Allegro di molto
 - IV. Presto – Adagio non lento
-

Program notes

By Marc Shulgold

String Quartet in E-flat Major

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805-1847)

Despite extensive musical training, Fanny Mendelssohn never achieved a public profile, spending her sadly brief life in her younger brother Felix's illustrious shadow. In fact, Fanny's published songs were credited to her brother. (No, Felix didn't intend to steal them; it was a necessary ruse, given the prejudice against women who composed.)

During Felix's visit with Queen Victoria in 1842, Her Majesty sang a favorite song of his, "Italien," after which he informed her that it was in fact written by his sister. Late in life, Fanny finally submitted works under her own name, and her music was performed at private parties called "Sunday Musics" in the home she shared with her husband, the painter Wilhelm Hensel.

There is an intriguing freedom of construction in Fanny's quartet, noticeably in its opening movement, which is miles away in tonality and mood from the work's stated key of E-flat. The sadness in

that music is broken by the energetic *Scherzo*-like *Allegretto* — shimmering music understandably favored by Felix. Observe its well-drawn fugal section in the middle. The soul of this quartet lies in the dark, passionate *Romanze* in G minor, displaying Fanny’s unbridled, often rebellious personality (in contrast to her brother’s more reserved demeanor). In the high-energy final *Allegro*, the home key of E-flat emerges. Those close harmonies and unison passages in the violins and the soaring melodies over agitated accompaniment show Felix’s influence. The work was likely played at one of Fanny’s “Sunday Musics,” though she clearly hoped for more exposure: “Receive my thanks for your satisfactory review of my quartet,” she wrote her brother, adding, “Will you have it performed sometime?” Alas, Felix never followed up on her request.

String Quartet No. 6 in F minor, Op. 80

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

“If the sight of my handwriting checks your tears, put the letter away for we have nothing left now but to weep from our inmost hearts.” So wrote Felix Mendelssohn to the husband of the composer’s beloved sister Fanny. It’s no exaggeration to suggest

that Felix's life ended with her sudden death on May 14, 1847—six months prior to his own passing on Nov. 4. Receiving the news sent him into a permanent depression. She had been, in his words, “present at all times, in every piece of music, and in everything that I could experience, good or evil.” His health quickly deteriorated and life turned to “gray on gray.” Encouraged by his wife Cécile, he traveled to Lucerne, where he painted and managed to compose. In September, he completed his sixth and final string quartet.

This piece should not be heard simply as a journey through Mendelssohn's state of mind. Yes, we sense his anguish in the devastating opening pages of the *Allegro assai*, a fury that continues in the following, equally anguished *Allegro*—which concludes with the hopeless wisp of quietly plucked strings. Emotion pours out in every phrase of this piece. And yet, we can admire its controlled brilliance, such as the wave of whirlwind tremolos in the breathtaking finale, an *Allegro molto* unbridled until the last two chords. Predictably, the *Adagio* is a relief from the fury of its surrounding movements, emerging as an elegy to Fanny (Felix described the quartet as a requiem for her). This movement may bear the same F-minor

key signature as the other three, but here the music unfolds in the brighter relative major, A-flat. Still, there is no solace—only heartbreak.

String Quartet No. 2 in A minor, Op. 13

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

At the tender age of 18, Felix Mendelssohn carried all the passions of a youth living in a passionate time—and it shows in his early works. For an example of the romantic era at its early peak, look no further than Mendelssohn's exquisite A-minor quartet. On the one hand, subtle nods to Beethoven's late quartets, the use of dramatic pauses, several soliloquy-like recitatives and brief motifs reveal Beethoven as Mendelssohn's inspiration. But then, also present is a young lady—no, not Cécile, whom he married later—Betty Pistor, a friend of his sister Rebekah. Mendelssohn poured his feelings into a poem titled “Frage” (“Question”), with an alternate title, “Ist es wahr?”, asking, “Is it true that you are always there?” He then turned his poem, which he ascribed to “H. Voss,” into a song, affixed to the quartet's title page. Both the song (Op. 9, No. 1) and Op. 13 were published in 1830.

The song's melancholy tune serves as the basis for the A-minor quartet. It's heard in the plaintive opening (the words "Ist es wahr" are represented by a three-note phrase just prior to the agitated *Allegro*'s start). This touching beginning will return as a final acceptance of loss in the quartet's subdued conclusion. The tender second movement is marked by an unexpected fugue, introduced by the viola, that becomes anxious until a violin recitative brings the calming *Adagio* full circle. Mendelssohn, the lover of fluttering forest fairies, emerges in the middle section of the otherwise gentle *Intermezzo*. More angst surfaces in the galloping finale, launched by yet another recitative from the first violin, with more episodes of dramatic introspection culminating in an extended bit of weeping from the solo violin and a reprise of the opening movement's question of longing.

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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