

# Takács Quartet

Haydn, Janáček and Schubert

Sunday, Sept. 12, 4 p.m.

Monday, Sept. 13, 7:30 p.m.

Grusin Music Hall

*This performance is also streamed Sept. 12-20, 2021.*

## Program

### String Quartet in F minor, Op. 20 No. 5

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

I. Moderato

II. Menuet

III. Adagio

IV. Finale—Fuga a 2 Soggetti

### String Quartet No. 2, “Intimate Letters”

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

I. Andante—Allegro

II. Adagio

III. Moderato

IV. Allegro

—Intermission—

### String Quartet No. 14 in D minor, “Death and the Maiden”

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

I. Allegro

II. Andante con moto

III. Scherzo. Allegro molto.

IV. Presto

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#### PLEASE NOTE

- Masks are required in public indoor spaces on the CU Boulder campus regardless of vaccination status.
  - Latecomers will be seated at the discretion of the house manager.
  - Photography and video recordings of any type are strictly prohibited during the performance.
  - Smoking is not permitted anywhere. CU Boulder is a smoke-free campus!
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# Program notes

By Marc Shulgold

## String Quartet in F minor, Op. 20 No. 5

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Many a musicologist has thrashed about in search of the proper words to describe the significance of Haydn's Op. 20 string quartets—works that are now viewed as a turning point in the evolution of this most important genre. We'll leave it to Sir Donald Tovey: "Every page of the six quartets of Op. 20 is of historic and aesthetic importance ... There is perhaps no single opus in the history of instrumental music which has achieved so much." Even Haydn couldn't disagree. Late in life, during a conversation with his friend Anton Reicha, he gazed back at the importance of 1772, the year of Op. 20's completion. Referring to that year, according to Reicha, Haydn spoke of how he had begun "a complete course in composition to strengthen himself and his art and to learn its secrets better." The same year coincided with Haydn's so-called "Sturm und Drang" period, which produced several dark, storm-driven symphonies.

The six quartets of Op. 20 brilliantly mixed that brooding intensity with an elegant lightness and wit, reflecting the aristocratic world of the Esterházy Palace, where the 40-year-old Haydn was employed. In a methodical, evolutionary process traceable through his earlier quartets, a sense of equanimity was established among the four voices of Op. 20. At the time, we should remember, the concept of the string quartet was still very new. In fact, the composer had thought of his earlier Opp. 1 and 9 (first-violin-dominated efforts) as "Divertimenti." With the publishing of the Op. 20 "Sun" Quartets (so nicknamed because a rising sun decorated their cover), the genre had suddenly grown up. What began as a format for mildly diverting, tuneful little pieces had developed, in Haydn's hands, into a fertile place for daring experimentation in organizational structure, intricate counterpoint and dramatic intensity.

Though the publisher positioned the F-minor quartet second-to-last, Haydn chose to list it first in his catalog, one of three works culminating in a fugue (along with those in A and C major). The presence of those fugues—No. 5 in fact boasts two subjects in that final movement—emphasizes

the collection's intriguing mixture of musical tradition and innovation. Equally important was the presence of two quartets in minor keys: No. 5 in F minor and No. 3 in G minor, suggesting that Haydn was moving away from the galante style of composition, which displayed pleasant, courtly elegance and simplicity.

The darkness of the F-minor quartet appears immediately in the work's opening measures with a quiet, haunting tune played by the first violin. Secondary themes flirt with major keys but can't escape the mournful tone. Even the following *Minuet* continues this somber mood as it slides between major and minor. It's curious that the quartet's slow movement, an *Adagio* in F major, seems more dance-like as it glides sweetly through a *Siciliana* (a lilting Italian dance), offering a concerto-like feel as the first violin's busy embellishments soar above the other players. The concluding fugue is truly a wonder for the ears, with its two subjects seemingly co-existing in a magical, continuous interplay—a look back at baroque composers' fondness for counterpoint. In fact, the first subject's five slow notes can be found in such works as Handel's *Messiah*.

## String Quartet No. 2, "Intimate Letters"

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

"I've begun to write something nice. Our life will be in it." So wrote the Czech composer Leoš Janáček to the woman who had become his muse. It was 1928, the year of his death—a year that marked the end of an inspired string of operas and chamber works that cemented his place among music's immortals. We owe that late flurry of creativity to his undying love for an enigmatic figure named Kamilla Stösslová, a married woman 38 years Janáček's junior, who entered his life in 1917 and never left it. This was hardly a passionate affair, however—in fact, there was scarcely any direct contact between the couple. (He too was married.) Their platonic relationship continued for 11 years, confined to the nearly 730 flowery letters penned by Janáček. Her replies were infrequent and usually perfunctory.

The mention of "something nice" in his letter to Stösslová referred to his second string quartet, originally titled "Love Letters" but which he changed to "Intimate Letters." Those hundreds of correspondences, and the intense music they inspired, might suggest a sad tale of unrequited

love. Yet, with only months to live, Janáček was finally able to enjoy the company of his muse, who was at his side at the end. Touchingly, he presented her with the score of that work, his final completed composition.

Despite the music's autobiographical subtext, the quartet can mislead the listener into searching in vain for references to specific episodes from this strange and wondrous love story. Yes, he did inform Stösslová that it was his "first composition which sprang from directly experienced feeling." But in its constant use of melodic snippets, contrasting mood swings, recallings of earlier themes and motifs, the music—completed in only three weeks—is almost overwhelming in its complex and impassioned journey through the mind (and heart) of a love-struck composer. Our reactions to the quartet's ebbs and flows in fact mirror those of the composer, as he sat in on a run-through by the Moravian Quartet on the evening of June 27, 1928. "Did I write that?" He wrote to Kamilla: "Those cries of joy, but what a strange thing, also cries of terror after a lullaby ... Confusion and high-pitched song of victory: 'You've found a woman who was destined for you.' Oh, it's a work as if carved out of living flesh."

Janáček described the first movement to Stösslová as depicting their first meeting at a resort spa in the summer of 1917. Two contrasting themes give way to a gentle tune. Notice the prominent solos by the viola throughout, music originally intended to be played on the 18th century viola d'amore (the composer loved its name—the "viola of love"). The next movement presents a set of variations, along with late reminders of the work's two opening melodies. In his letter to Stösslová, the composer confessed that the *Moderato* movement represented his desire that she bear his child. Here, the music changes moods often and dramatically, ending suddenly—thus offering a dramatic portrait of his confused and troubled passions. (Yes, his wife Zdenka, legally separated from the composer, was well-aware of her husband's infidelity.) The concluding rondo revolves around an energetic, oom-pah folk dance that returns with increasing anguish each time. There are more lyrical, introspective episodes in between, the music concluding with another unexpectedly sudden upswing—as if an acceptance that the affair (and his life?) would soon end without consummation.

## String Quartet No. 14 in D minor, "Death and the Maiden"

*Franz Schubert (1797-1828)*

For much of his tragically short life, Schubert was obsessed with death. In later years, this preoccupation intensified due to his unending suffering from the syphilis he apparently contracted in 1822 or 23. In March 1824, he wrote to a friend, "I feel myself to be the most unhappy and wretched creature in the world ... Each night I go to bed hoping never to wake again." That same year witnessed the completion of two inescapably dark chamber works: the String Quartets Nos. 13 and 14, the latter known as "Death and the Maiden"—drawn from *Der Tod und das Mädchen*, a chilling little poem by Matthias Claudius (1740-1815).

Schubert's setting for voice and piano, published in 1817, seems prophetic, given the devastating illness that later spread through his body. The song's haunting, repeated long-short-short piano chords would be recast seven years later as the basis for the second movement of the D-minor quartet. Those ominous chords had originally accompanied the Maiden as she pleads with Death:

"Pass me by, ah, pass me by,  
Cruel man of bones!  
I am still young – go, dear one  
And do not touch me."

Death responds with reassuring words: "I am a friend and come not to punish." In the quartet, the funeral march serves as the basis for five increasingly expansive variations in G minor. The melody's incessant rhythm was perhaps inspired by the same pulse in the *Allegretto* of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, which at one point in the quartet expands into a direct quote of the symphony's familiar long-short-short-long-long. These brilliantly constructed variations explore every possibility in the melody, which gains momentum as it's distributed among the four players—including a soulful reading by the cello. Schubert then converts the tune from minor to major, thus inserting a ray of hope, before the specter of mortality returns with the quiet darkness of the *Andante's* opening.

The work's three other movements remain steadfastly in D minor. The opening *Allegro* explodes powerfully out of the gate with isolated chords and climactic build-ups. The stern *Scherzo* reveals a battle between dark and light, while the

concluding *Presto* is a skipping tarantella—albeit a macabre dance of death. Surprisingly, this masterful piece didn't generate immediate public acceptance. In 1826, the famed violinist (and Beethoven champion) Ignaz Schuppanzigh commented to Schubert on the D-minor quartet: "Brother, this is nothing at all. Let well alone. Stick to your Lieder."

## About the performers

The world-renowned Takács Quartet is now entering its 47th season. Edward Dusinberre, violin; Harumi Rhodes, violin; Richard O'Neill, viola; and András Fejér, cello; are excited to bring to fruition several innovative projects for the 2021-22 season. With bandoneon/accordion virtuoso Julien Labro, the group will perform new works composed for them by Clarice Assad and Bryce Dessner across the U.S. This season also marks the world premiere of *Les Six Rencontres*, a new quartet written for the Takács by Stephen Hough. The Takács will record this extraordinary work for Hyperion Records, in combination with quartets by Ravel and Dutilleux.

During the last year, the Takács marked the arrival of Grammy award-winning violist Richard O'Neill by making two new recordings for Hyperion. Quartets by Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel and Felix Mendelssohn will be released in the Fall 2021, followed in 2022 by Haydn's Opp. 42, 77 and 103.

The Takács Quartet members continue their roles in 2021-22 as Associate Artists at London's Wigmore Hall, performing four concerts there this season. In addition to many concerts in the U.K., the ensemble will play at prestigious European venues including the Paris Philharmonie, Berlin Konzerthaus, and Teatro Della Pergola, Florence. The Takács will perform throughout North America, including concerts in New York, Boston, Washington, Princeton, Ann Arbor, Berkeley, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Vancouver, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Cleveland and Portland.

In June 2020 the Takács Quartet was featured in the BBC television series *Being Beethoven*. The ensemble's 2019 album for Hyperion of piano quintets by Amy Beach and Elgar with pianist Garrick Ohlsson won a Presto Classical Recording of the Year.

In 2014 the Takács became the first string quartet to be awarded the Wigmore Hall Medal. The Medal, inaugurated in 2007, recognizes major international artists who have a strong association with the Hall. Recipients include Andras Schiff, Thomas Quasthoff, Menahem Pressler and Dame Felicity Lott. In 2012, Gramophone announced that the Takács was the first string quartet to be inducted into its hall of fame, along with legendary artists such as Jascha Heifetz, Leonard Bernstein and Dame Janet Baker. The ensemble also won the 2011 Award for Chamber Music and Song

presented by the Royal Philharmonic Society in London.

The Takács Quartet is known for innovative programming. The ensemble performed a program inspired by Philip Roth's novel *Everyman* with Meryl Streep at Princeton in 2014, and again with her at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto in 2015. It first performed *Everyman* at Carnegie Hall in 2007 with Philip Seymour Hoffman. The group has toured 14 cities with the poet Robert Pinsky, collaborates regularly with the Hungarian Folk group Muzsikás, and in 2010 it collaborated with the Colorado Shakespeare Festival and David Lawrence Morse on a drama project that explored the composition of Beethoven's last quartets.

The Takács records for Hyperion Records, and their releases for that label include string quartets by Haydn, Schubert, Janáček, Smetana, Debussy and Britten; as well as piano quintets by César Franck and Shostakovich (with Marc-André Hamelin), Amy Beach and Elgar (with Garrick Ohlsson), and viola quintets by Brahms and Dvorák (with Lawrence Power). For their 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/recordings](http://takacsquartet.com/recordings).

Based in Boulder at the University of Colorado, the members of the Takács Quartet are Christoffersen Faculty Fellows. 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, 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. It first 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. In 2001 the members of the Takács Quartet were awarded the Order of Merit of the Knight's Cross of the Republic of Hungary, and in March 2011 the Order of Merit Commander's Cross by the President of the Republic of Hungary.