



# Takács Quartet

Mozart, Dutilleux and Smetana

Sunday, Oct. 31, 4 p.m.

Monday, Nov. 1, 7:30 p.m.

Grusin Music Hall

## Program

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

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

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

### Ainsi la Nuit

Henri Dutilleux (1916-2013)

- I. Nocturne
- II. Miroir d'espace
- III. Litanies
- IV. Litanies II
- V. Constellations
- VI. Nocturne II
- VII. Temps suspendu

### —Intermission—

### String Quartet No. 1 in E minor ("From My Life")

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)

- I. Allegro vivo appassionato
- II. Allegro moderato à la Polka
- III. Largo sostenuto
- IV. Vivace

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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 No. 15 in D minor, K.421

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

In his deeply respectful dedicatory note to Haydn that accompanied six magnificent string quartets, Mozart referred to this gift as “my six sons.” And what a diverse gathering of siblings they are. The “Haydn” Quartets, as they would forever be known, explore in newfound ways the world of the string quartet—a still-youthful genre nurtured by Haydn and now elevated by Mozart. Each work in the collection is unique. Witness, for example, the various final movements of the six, offering a rondo here, a sonata form or fugue there, and—in the case of the D-minor, K. 421—a set of variations. Heavily influenced by Haydn’s earlier quartets, these masterpieces reveal a young composer excitedly diving into a world of possibilities fueled by an endless wealth of ideas.

Chronologically the second to be composed, K. 421 stands apart from the others as the only one that is set in a minor key. Unlike some of Mozart’s other works in D minor—notably the keyboard Fantasia, the Piano Concerto No. 20 and the Requiem—this quartet does not weep or cry out in anguish. Instead, it retains a nobility and a traditionally “classical” control over the inherent emotions of that darkly profound key.

Written mid-summer in 1783 (the complete six were presented to Haydn two years later), K. 421 emerged during a happy time for the composer. Newly married, Mozart was busy with numerous projects while he and Constanze anticipated the birth of their first child. Which brings up an anecdote about the arrival of little Raimund Leopold on June 17. Some years later, Mozart’s widow recalled the evening when her husband was working on the D-minor quartet as she writhed with the ravages of childbirth in the next room. The Andante, she noted, contains a sudden outburst of four octave drops (around three minutes in) meant to mimic her painful screams. Apocryphal or not, the story paints a vivid picture of a composer living and creating in the real world.

Another octave drop figures prominently at the opening of the first movement, dramatically introducing the opening tune and the work’s

tonality. The key of D minor is expressed even more forcefully in the Menuetto, then returns with a surprising dance-like brightness as the theme for the finale’s variations. Throughout, everything unfolds with a logic, clarity and inevitability that honor Haydn’s contributions to music and his influence on Mozart—something that did not go unnoticed by the master.

In a legendary anecdote, Haydn attended two informal readings of the half-dozen works dedicated to him, and praised his young composer-friend by telling Leopold Mozart that his son was “the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name.” And who are we to argue?

## Ainsi la Nuit

Henri Dutilleux (1916-2013)

Don’t be surprised if you experience déjà entendu during the seven movements of *Ainsi la Nuit* (“And So the Night”), the French composer’s only string quartet. Musical phrases and episodes are briefly suggested before or after they’re introduced in full. Dutilleux called it “reverse variation,” in which he inserts four brief “parentheses,” each quoting phrases heard elsewhere. This concept supports his stated goal of engaging the listener. As he expressed in an interview, “One of the principal aims in writing music is to search for a certain coherence, an equilibrium that does not deny fantasy.” Dutilleux said of those interludes: “Allusions to what follows—or what comes before—are placed and situated as reference points. I’ve often described them as ‘beacons,’ that’s to say reference points which sink gradually into the listener’s unconscious and later on become crucial in their appreciation of the work.” Near the beginning, for example, chords appear that will return in the second *Litanies* movement as well as in a later “parenthesis.”

All of this suggests a musical equivalent of Marcel Proust’s seven-volume *Remembrance of Things Past*. In fact, the composer doesn’t conceal the French novelist’s presence in the quartet: “This may perhaps show the influence of literature, of Proust and his notions about memory.” In these seven linked movements, time seems bendable and flowing. The last movement, for example, is titled “Suspended Time.”

Equally significant are the continual references to night—not just in the name of the work and some of the movement titles. As the composer wrote,

“Everything transforms unthinkingly into a sort of nocturnal vision.” His fascination with the night can also be observed in his 1978 orchestral work that he subtitled “The Starry Night,” after Van Gogh. There are also impressionist touches here that are drawn from Debussy, Ravel and, principally, Bartók, specifically his *Out of Doors* and fourth string quartet.

Aware that he hadn’t attempted a string quartet since his student days in Paris, Dutilleux dove into the output of chamber music masters in preparation for writing this piece, which was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation and intended for the Juilliard Quartet. (It was first performed in Paris in January 1977 by the Quatuor Parrenin.) In 1974, the composer “practiced” with three movements of *Ainsi la Nuit* (originally titled *Nuit*), which he sent off to the Juilliard. Apparently, the results were satisfactory. Today, the quartet is universally recognized as one of the modern era’s most important chamber works.

## String Quartet No. 1 in E minor (“From My Life”)

*Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)*

When a composer offers an unconcealed autobiographical work, it seems to create an instant appeal for audiences (and program annotators). If there’s a tale to be told, the work becomes easier to follow (and explain). Knowing, for example, that Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* chronicles the soap opera that was his pursuit of Harriet Smithson adds an irresistible accessibility. Similarly, the story line in Smetana’s first of two string quartets brings us closer to its wonders. His title to the piece piques our curiosity from the get-go: “From My Life.” Oh, *do* tell!

But what was it that propelled the Czech composer to create such a painfully personal chamber work—one that he admitted was “contrary to the conventional style of quartet music”? Not ego, evidently, since his written explanations for the piece (notably in a detailed letter to a Czech music critic) brim with self-effacing comments such as, “I shall gladly leave judgment ... to others and I will not be angry at all if they do not like it.” A prime impetus for this confessional work likely grew out of a great tragedy from his later life: deafness.

The hearing loss, which quickly became complete and irreversible, had begun with severe tinnitus in

1874, two years before this quartet was written. Just as with Beethoven, that affliction did not end Smetana’s composing, but instead led to a flood of brilliant works, including his orchestral suite, *Má vlast* (“My Homeland”).

Nationalism had already become a fixture in the composer’s output, and it found its way into the first string quartet. He adored the folk songs and dances of Bohemia, here displayed notably in the joyous second movement, *Allegro moderato à la Polka*. Smetana explained that the music is a reminder of “the joyful days of youth when I composed dance tunes and was known everywhere as a passionate lover of dancing.” Before tragedy strikes in the final movement, he wrote, there are more folk-like elements, representing “the discovery that I could treat national elements in music, and my joy in following this path.”

And yet, what hits listeners hardest are those deeply sad expressions of loss, most famously in the final *Vivace* when deafness suddenly arrives. In the midst of a frisky dance, everything stops, a portentous tremolo is heard, and a high E enters, played by the first violin as an eerie harmonic, held for seven ominous measures—arguably the single most shattering moment in chamber music.

There is also darkness much earlier, however: The first movement begins with the viola stabbing repeatedly with a held note followed by a sharp drop in pitch—a phrase that increases in urgency, described by Smetana as “a kind of warning of my future misfortune.” (That warning is heard again in the last movement, right after the violin harmonic.) The third movement reveals heartbreaking love and loss in a *Largo sostenuto* that recalls “the happiness of my first love, the girl who later became my wife.” This sweet music is tinged with sadness, as a quiet reminder that Katařina died of tuberculosis in 1859 (he would remarry a year later).

Smetana’s life was one of emotional extremes: struggling to achieve recognition and finally gaining international success; finding inspiration in his country’s infectious music, and capturing it in his instrumental works and operas; marrying his childhood sweetheart and establishing a family, then losing three of four young daughters and then his wife; finally, confronting his own deafness. All of these joys and sorrows are captured in his first string quartet. How tragic that the horrible high note

in the finale is followed, as Smetana described it, with “the outlook into the sad future, the tiny rays of hope of recovery, but remembering all the promise of my early career, a feeling of painful regret.”

## About the performers

Recent winners of the 2021 Gramophone Classical Music Awards Chamber category, 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 András 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.