



TAKÁCS  
QUARTET

# ALTIUS QUARTET

Haydn, Shostakovich and Mendelssohn

Jan. 21–22, 2018

CU ★ PRESENTS

# Program

**String Quartet in C Major, Op. 76 No. 3 “Emperor”**

Joseph Haydn

- I. Allegro
- II. Poco adagio; cantabile
- III. Menuetto. Allegro
- IV. Finale. Presto

**String Quartet No. 8 in C minor, Op. 110**

Dmitri Shostakovich

- I. Largo
- II. Allegro molto
- III. Allegretto
- IV. Largo
- V. Largo

## INTERMISSION

**through fog**

JP Merz

**String Quartet in E minor, Op. 44 No. 2**

Felix Mendelssohn

- I. Allegro assai appassionato
- II. Scherzo: Allegro di molto
- III. Andante
- IV. Presto agitato

# Program Notes

Notes by Marc Shulgold

## String Quartet in C major, Op. 76, No. 3, “Emperor”

*Franz Joseph Haydn*

You’ve probably heard this Quartet’s second movement before, perhaps sung by a large number of Germans. It is that country’s national anthem, “Deutschlandlied”—its words written in 1841. In the beginning, however, it was simply a two-part melody with four easy-to-follow variations tucked into the third of the six quartets of Op. 76. The set was completed in 1798 by the aging composer, and dedicated to Count Joseph Georg von Erdödy. Haydn’s catchy tune achieved a new life as a celebratory piece, “Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser” (“God Save Emperor Franz”), presented to Francis II of Austria on his birthday, Feb. 12, 1797.

The melody’s inspiration can be traced to Haydn’s two visits to London earlier in the 1790s. There, the composer heard “God Save the King” and was impressed by its patriotic passion. Mindful that Napoleon’s army had threatened Vienna in 1796, Haydn looked at the Quartet movement and realized he had created a stirring piece of music. An ardent nationalist, the composer approached his music-loving friend Baron von Swieten to commission a heartfelt text by Lorenz Haschka, which would celebrate the emperor and serve to inspire his countrymen through a time of crisis. And so it did. Soon after that first royal performance, Viennese theaters were ordered to perform the piece, which added greatly to Haydn’s popularity. In 1847, it became the anthem of Austria’s emperors—replaced in the 1920s by a new melody (once thought composed by Mozart), which became the nation’s official anthem. That switch was likely motivated by the Germans adopting Haydn’s music as *their* anthem in 1922.

No surprise that, after the 1938 Anschluss, Austrians were forbidden to sing it. Amazing how an elegant little melody can carry so much political baggage and generate so many emotions. Haydn clearly loved the tune, as can be discerned by the respectful way he crafted four straightforward variations, with each restatement of the the tune democratically given to a different player. It is said that, in his last years of failing health, the composer would play the emperor’s anthem on the piano and weep. (After finishing the set of six on Op. 76, Haydn would write only three more quartets.) The movements that surround the famous *Poco adagio, cantabile* show no signs of experimentation or novel approaches. That’s a departure for Haydn, who all but invented the string quartet, and who infused his 80 works for four strings with increasingly innovative ideas. Not here. In this piece, he seems content to let the Emperor’s noble, uncomplicated anthem set the tone. There’s nothing particularly earth-shaking in the opening *Allegro*’s smile-inducing main theme (highlighted by a charming drone-accompanied peasant variant), and certainly few surprises in the pleasant *Menuetto*. The three attention-grabbing minor-key chords that spark the *Finale* are a bit of a jolt, bringing fresh depth to the work and reminding us of the composer’s earlier dabblings with the histrionics of the slam-bang *Sturm und Drang* fad.

## String Quartet No. 8, Op. 110

*Dmitri Shostakovich*

Five linked movements in this spine-chilling eighth of Shostakovich’s 15 string quartets seem to depict a journey into the soul of the composer, expressing his private anguish experienced in the tense world of post-war, post-Stalinist Russia. Or is it something else? A musical mystery, perhaps? The work was written in three days in 1960, during a visit to the rebuilding city of Dresden, which had been fire-bombed by the Allies during World War II. That was the same year, it should be noted, that Shostakovich joined the Communist Party and became an administrator in the nation’s Composers Union (known for its strong dislike of anything deemed anti-socialist). The composer proclaimed that the work was written “In memory of victims of fascism and war.” No mention of Stalin or the devastating purge of the composer’s fellow artists. On closer examination, it’s clear that there is more here.

What is hidden within the Quartet’s pages are private thoughts that dare not be spoken. Shostakovich, like so many Soviet artists, was forced to keep any anti-government complaints to himself, lest he be publicly humiliated (or worse). We sense a continuous need for his anguish to be given voice in the Quartet, as expressed in the recurring appearance of his four-note, DSCH “signature”: D, E-flat, C and B. Could that

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phrase, heard in other works such as the 10th Symphony, represent a cry of defiance, a reminder of his survival? And what about those terrifying three notes in the *Largo*, hammered out over a low, sustained tone from the first violin? Some have suggested they represent the feared three knocks on the door from KGB agents, coming to whisk another citizen into custody and oblivion—a very real fear for Shostakovich years earlier, after he had fallen in disfavor with Stalin. If we view this piece as autobiographical, it's not surprising to hear quotes from his earlier works: the march-like tune from his wildly applauded First Symphony, or the “Jewish” theme from his Second Piano Trio, emerging almost as a scream amid the aggressive *Allegro molto*.

All of these recognizable or hidden snippets remind us of the strange, tragic, enigmatic life of one of the 20th century's greatest composers. What does this work really mean? Sure, we can spend our energies prying into its secrets and drawing theoretical conclusions. Or we can become immersed in the painfully personal, unstoppable human drama so compactly and brilliantly laid out in this, one of Shostakovich's greatest works.

## through fog

*JP Merz*

As a violist myself, I found that this work for the Altius Quartet began as an exploration of my favorite techniques for bowed string instruments. The piece is filled with fluttering harmonics, resonant open strings, glassy or scratchy tones, and folk-style lyrical embellishments. These sounds were shaped into melodies, harmonies and rhythmic figures that emerge and fade from a constantly evolving, hazy texture. I was struggling to settle on a title for this work until I made an anxious, fog-filled drive from Wisconsin to Colorado. The farms, cities, cars and natural landscapes I was driving past were blurry, nebulous and faint. But occasionally, the fog would lift and a clear, striking image would suddenly appear.

This work not only evokes the sensory experience of that drive but also touches on the dedication it takes to endure through difficult experiences. For me, “through fog” creates a space to reflect on perseverance and the will to keep moving forward.

—*JP Merz*

## String Quartet in E minor, Op. 44, No. 2

*Felix Mendelssohn*

For nearly all of his life, Mendelssohn seemed to be favored by the gods. Born into a well-to-do Jewish family (his grandfather Moses was a revered philosopher, his father Abraham a wealthy banker), young Felix was educated by private tutors and received intense musical training by only the best pedagogues. His composing began early and showed an immediate talent—reaching a promising pinnacle at age 16 and 17 with the Octet for Strings and Overture to “A Midsummer Night's Dream.” He grew to be a handsome man of the world, successful at every turn (he was even a gifted sketch artist). He'd been in demand as a pianist, performing all over the continent while composing almost nonstop and serving as conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig and as founder/director of the Conservatory in that city.

Yes, life was grand for Mendelssohn—and then it got even better. In 1836, he met the girl of his dreams: a beautiful woman of 16 named Cécile Jeanrenaud. The courtship went well and the two agreed to marry. “My head is quite giddy from the events of the day,” he wrote his mother after Cécile accepted his proposal. Both sets of parents approved, and on March 28, 1837, the two were married in Frankfurt, followed by a month-long honeymoon in the Black Forest.

It was during this blissful time that Mendelssohn began working on three quartets, published together the following year as Op. 44. The E-minor came first, though the composer would package it as the second of the set. The work's key, Mendelssohn lovers may recall, is the same as that of his beloved Violin Concerto. Don't let the minor-key setting fool you: Just as the Concerto avoids any suggestion of sadness, instead brimming with warm feelings, so too does Op. 44, No. 2, unfolding with an energy and confidence that reflects the composer's contentment. The other two of that opus, in D and E-flat, would be completed in 1838 (the same year as the Violin Concerto). The E-flat, incidentally, was finished a day

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before the birth of Carl Wolfgang Paul, the first of the couple's five children. Unexpectedly, there would be no more quartets until the fifth and last, Op. 80 in F minor, completed 10 years later and only two months before his sudden death. After a gentle, dark introduction, marked by a little ascending figure, the opening *Allegro* of the E-minor Quartet takes off, demanding a high degree of ensemble virtuosity that is the hallmark of three of the four movements (most notably in a dizzying *Scherzo*). The lovely *Andante*, reminiscent of Mendelssohn's series of keyboard "Songs Without Words," serves as the Quartet's only extended respite from a high-speed journey through the composer's ever-inventive imagination. Perhaps feeling self-conscious about the sweetness of the *Andante*, he instructs his musicians to avoid over-sentimentalizing the music, instructing them to play without dragging things out (*nicht schleppend*).

## Biographies

**Altius Quartet** is an ensemble determined to further the art of chamber music through performance, education and outreach. Deriving their name from the Olympic motto, "Citius, Altius, Fortius" (Latin for "Faster, Higher, Stronger"), Altius strives to communicate art to a more diverse audience through community engagement and innovative repertoire. Hailed as "rich" and "captivating" by the renowned music blog I Care If You Listen, the Altius Quartet is garnering an international reputation and enrapturing the hearts of audiences through its charisma and dynamism. Having just released its second album, Dmitri Shostakovich's String Quartets Nos. 7, 8 and 9, the quartet has received critical acclaim from Fanfare Magazine, which describes the recording as "thrilling and enthralling" and the performance "visceral and wrenching."

As a grand prize winner in the Classics Alive Young Artists Competition, Altius Quartet was awarded management with Executive Director, Jean Schreiber. Altius has also been awarded prizes at many internationally respected competitions, including the 2016 Alice and Eleonore Schoenfeld International String Competition, the 2014 Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition, the 2014 Coltman Chamber Music Competition and the 2013 Plowman Chamber Music Competition. In the spring of 2017, Altius released its debut album "Dress Code" on the PARMA label and was highly praised for its musicianship and versatility.

Formed in 2011 at Southern Methodist University Meadows School of the Arts, the quartet has just completed its tenure as Fellowship String Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Colorado Boulder, where its four musicians were mentored by the

renowned Takács Quartet. The quartet has an active performance schedule, including engagements at music festivals, series and universities throughout the United States, including Carnegie Hall, Chamber Music Cincinnati, the Aspen Music Festival, Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival and the Fayetteville Chamber Music Festival. During its tenure at Southern Methodist University, Altius Quartet served as Ensemble-in-Residence working closely with Matt Albert, Emanuel Borok and Andres Diaz. In addition, Altius has worked with and been guided by many of the foremost artists in chamber music, including Donald Weilerstein, Sylvia Rosenberg, James Dunham, the Emerson String Quartet, Pacifica Quartet, Miró Quartet, Shanghai Quartet and Kronos Quartet. In addition, Altius has collaborated with many celebrated artists including Håkan Rosengren, Anton Nel, Andres Diaz, Peter Nagy and Geraldine Walther.

Altius Quartet is deeply committed to outreach, often performing concerts and teaching master classes in public schools and alternative performing venues, including jazz clubs, bars and cafes. In 2014, the quartet partnered with the Aspen Music Festival and School in educational outreach residencies throughout the Roaring Fork Valley. And since 2016, Altius has worked alongside Denver Friends of Chamber Music and Arts Longmont performing outreach events for schoolchildren in the Denver-Boulder metro area.

When not recording or performing, the musicians of the Altius Quartet enjoy experiencing the great outdoors and maintaining a friendly rivalry in their Fantasy Football league.



CU Boulder's former graduate string quartet-in-residence, hailed as "rich" and "captivating" by new music website I Care If You Listen, is committed to bringing chamber music to diverse audiences. Taking its name from the Latin word for "higher," the Altius Quartet injects young energy and passion into music both old and new.





# Takács Quartet

Feb. 4-5 · Grusin Music Hall

The Grammy Award-winning string quartet has been moving audiences and selling out concerts for three decades at CU Boulder. Their irresistible blend of virtuosic technique and engaging personality has led The Guardian (London) to proclaim, "The Takács Quartet are matchless, their supreme artistry manifest at every level."

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