



Takács Quartet

All Beethoven

Sunday, Sept. 18, 2022, 4 p.m.

Monday, Sept. 19, 2022, 7:30 p.m.

Grusin Music Hall

Streaming Sept. 18-26

Program

String Quartet in A Major, Op. 18, No. 5

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

- I. Allegro
- II. Menuetto – Trio
- III. Andante cantabile con variazioni
- IV. Allegro

String Quartet in F minor, Op. 95

Ludwig van Beethoven

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Allegretto ma non troppo
- III. Allegro assai vivace ma serio – Trio
- IV. Larghetto espressivo – Allegretto agitato

—Intermission—

String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 127

Ludwig van Beethoven

- I. Maestoso – Allegro
- II. Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile
- III. Scherzando vivace – Trio
- IV. Finale. Allegro

PLEASE NOTE

- Masks are optional in public indoor spaces on the CU Boulder campus as of March 7, 2022.
 - 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 Henry Michaels

There is no greater composer—none who is more famous, whose works are more frequently heard, and whose life story is more widely known—than Ludwig van Beethoven. This universally acknowledged greatness offers something of a conundrum for all who experience his music: the difficulty of wading into an arena so full of experts, knowledge and opinions. And the discourse surrounding Beethoven is nothing if not full of knowledge and opinions. His music has been parsed in just about any way that you can imagine. It's been analyzed. It's been narrativized. It's been emulated, investigated, remixed, remodeled and discoified. And after all that, it's been analyzed again.

The eventuality of Beethoven's greatness colors everything we know about him, its ever-present inevitability providing us with a sense of relief. After all, one of the pleasures of hindsight is the comfort of always knowing how the story ends. But hindsight sometimes obscures as much as it clarifies. Our knowledge of Beethoven's seemingly inexorable fate can work to conceal the realities of a life lived *without* the comfort of knowing how the story would end.

The three string quartets on today's program cover the span of Beethoven's compositional career: one of his earliest contributions to the genre, one from the period of his maturation as a composer, and one of his towering late quartets. They also provide three distinct snapshots of who Beethoven was as both a person and a composer—not as a capital-G, capital-C Great Composer, but as someone who wrote music every day for a *living*.

Beethoven's first foray into the genre of the string quartet came in 1798 when he began work on what would eventually become his Op. 18, a set of six quartets that includes the **String Quartet in A Major, Op. 18, No. 5**. The entire set received final revisions late in the year 1800 before being published in 1801.

Although his Op. 18 quartets were his first, Beethoven was by no means a stranger to the genre. During the 1790s, for example, he was a regular attendee at string quartet parties hosted on a weekly basis at the homes of wealthy residents of Vienna.

He also spent time copying out by hand movements of quartets by Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart—the acknowledged masters of the genre—in order to better acquaint himself with their compositional processes. In a letter to his friend Karl Amenda, he wrote that copying out Haydn's and Mozart's works was one way he “learned how to compose string quartets.” Op. 18, No. 5, for example, is quite purposefully modeled on Mozart's String Quartet in A Major, K. 646.

Once he set about working on quartets of his own, it's clear that he treated them with the utmost seriousness. He worked out themes and ideas over time, as is evidenced by scholarly study of his sketchbooks from those years. And he certainly would have workshoped them with his friends, taking full advantage of the regular quartet parties that provided him with access to a mix of both professional musicians and highly skilled amateurs (amateurs in the truest sense of the word, meaning that they were not working musicians).

A few years prior to their publication, Beethoven had presented Karl Amenda, himself a regular quartet partygoer, with an early version of one of the quartets. After their release in 1801, he wrote to Amenda with some evident concern that the old version might somehow make its way into the public. Beethoven asked him to keep it to himself. “I have made some drastic alterations,” he wrote. “For only now have I learnt to write quartets.”

Only then had he “learnt” to write quartets. This statement is telling, and it should rightly make us (temporarily) forget the monumental Beethoven and show us the Beethoven of that *particular* moment in time. The Beethoven of 1798 was still a young man—only 28, in fact—and he'd only seriously been pursuing the life of a composer since his early 20s. This is not the radical visionary with a shock of wild, graying hair and a galaxy-sized chip on his shoulder. This is an inexperienced youth, still a student of the genre—struggling, uncertain, *learning*. This is a Beethoven, in other words, who is figuring out himself as much as he is figuring out the quartet.

The Beethoven of the **String Quartet in F minor, Op. 95** was older, wiser, and more confident. Completed in 1810, premiered publicly in 1814 and published in 1816 this quartet hails from what scholars describe as Beethoven's middle period,

wherein he began pushing musical boundaries and asserting his artistic individuality. But Beethoven was still very much a product of his surroundings; this boundary breaking did not happen in a vacuum.

Since its earliest inception, the string quartet as a genre had most often been associated with domestic music-making, with the quartet parties of Beethoven's youth serving as a fine example. Beethoven clearly wanted to push beyond this. So, it was fortunate that he had at his disposal during this time a professional string quartet led by the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh. The high caliber of Schuppanzigh's group gave Beethoven the freedom to explore his creativity, to experiment. And experiment he did.

The String Quartet in F minor seems to inhabit an entirely different world than those that preceded it. Even its title, "Quartetto Serioso," marked it as something distinct. This was a serious quartet, a *learned* quartet, an attribute Beethoven played up with the inclusion of a *fugato* in the second movement. Scholar Joseph Kerman describes the work as "an involved, impassioned, highly idiosyncratic piece, problematic in every one of its movements, advanced in a hundred ways." It's harmonically adventurous, features strange musical outbursts, and ends with a rollicking fast finale that certainly couldn't have been played by anyone less than Schuppanzigh's professional crew. And yet, at the same time, it's as condensed as it is complex, packing all this exploration into one of Beethoven's shortest quartets.

The "Serioso" Quartet wasn't published until six years after its completion, a long time even for a composer who was known to keep his publishers waiting. When he finally did send it to a publisher, he did so along with this note: "The Quartett [op. 95] is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public. Should you wish for some Quartetts for public performance I would compose them to this purpose occasionally."

People often point to this quartet as a spiritual predecessor to the increasingly difficult and esoteric late quartets of the 1820s, and rightly so. The work is advanced and seems to have more in common with his later output than with its closer temporal neighbors. Here again, though, hindsight may put us at a bit of a disadvantage because it skips the intermediary step of this work's

immediate fallout. In his statement to the publisher, Beethoven acknowledges the elephant in the room: The piece was not for the faint of heart—it was both difficult to play and difficult to comprehend. But there is something else, too, a sense of self-consciousness perhaps. Here is a composer with all the confidence—and yes, also the luxury—to try out new things, but without a clear answer yet for the implications of his experimentation. Here is Beethoven seemingly saying, "Yes, but now what do I *do* with this?"

It was not a question with an immediate answer, as Beethoven didn't touch the quartet genre again until over a *decade* later. Promised first to a publisher in 1822 and then to a patron, Prince Nikolai Galitzin, in 1823, Beethoven's **String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 127**, wasn't completed until early 1825. It's a work rife with difficulties, featuring an intensely fugal scherzo, unexpected harmonic turns and rhythmic complexity. In other words, it picks up right where he left off more than 10 years prior.

At some point after his note to the publisher of the "Serioso," though, Beethoven decided that perhaps this type of quartet was suited for public performance, after all. It was premiered publicly by Schuppanzigh's quartet only a month after its completion. The performance did not go well. The work was too difficult even for Schuppanzigh's group, who suffered greatly from an inadequate amount of rehearsal time. Beethoven, who wasn't in attendance at the premiere, was furious. Despite promising the exclusive performance rights to Schuppanzigh, Beethoven turned the work over to a rival violinist, Joseph Böhm. Böhm's performance was much better received.

More than one scholar has made the argument that by this point in his career, Beethoven was composing more-or-less to please himself. Some talk of his late works' *Innigkeit*, or inwardness, while others characterize this time period as one in which he wrote to an audience of one: himself. Beethoven's reaction to the premiere seems at odds with this, however. While the mental image of the composer railing at musicians and decrying the audience's lack of an appropriate reaction to his work might seem completely in line with our assumptions, his insistence upon having the work correctly performed and appropriately appreciated certainly belies the notion that he was only concerned with pleasing himself.

So, which is it? Was Beethoven writing for an audience of one or for an actual audience? The answer is, of course, yes. Beethoven was writing to please himself *and* to please his audience. If this is at all at odds with our romantic ideal of the under-appreciated artist, ahead of their time, bravely going it alone against a sea of detractors—good. Let it serve as a reminder that artists are also people. Beethoven was a person, after all, a person with the same mundane concerns and internal contradictions as us. Beethoven’s music may give musician and listener alike access to the sublime and the otherworldly, but we should never lose sight of his fundamental humanity.

About the performers

The world-renowned **Takács Quartet** is now entering its 48th season. **Edward Dusinberre**, **Harumi Rhodes** (violins), **Richard O’Neill** (viola) and **András Fejér** (cello) are excited about the 2022-2023 season that begins with a tour of Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea, and includes the release of two new CDs for Hyperion Records. A disc of Haydn’s opp. 42, 77 and 103 is followed by the first recording of an extraordinary new work written for the Takács by Stephen Hough, *Les Six Rencontres*, presented with quartets by Ravel and Dutilleux. As Associate Artists at London’s Wigmore Hall, the Takács will perform four concerts there. In addition to programs featuring Beethoven, Schubert and Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, one concert consists of works by Britten, Bartók and Dvořák that highlight the same themes of displacement and return explored in Dusinberre’s new book *Distant Melodies: Music in Search of Home*. The book is published by Faber and the University of Chicago Press in the fall of 2022. The quartet will perform the same program at several venues in the United States, complemented by book talks. During this season the quartet will continue its fruitful partnership with pianist Jeremy Denk, performing on several North American series.

Throughout 2022 and 2023 the ensemble will play at prestigious European venues, including the Edinburgh and Schwetzingen Festivals, Madrid’s Auditorio de Música, Bilbao’s Philharmonic Society, Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw and the Bath Mozartfest. The group’s North American engagements include concerts in New York, Toronto, Vancouver, Philadelphia, Ann Arbor, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Tucson, Portland and the Beethoven Center at San Jose State University.

The Takács Quartet is known for innovative programming. In 2021-22, the ensemble partnered with bandoneon virtuoso Julien Labro to premiere new works

by Clarice Assad and Bryce Dessner, commissioned by Music Accord. In 2014, the Takács performed a program inspired by Philip Roth’s novel *Everyman* with Meryl Streep at Princeton, and again with her at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto in 2015. They first performed *Everyman* at Carnegie Hall in 2007 with Philip Seymour Hoffman. They have toured 14 cities with the poet Robert Pinsky and played regularly with the Hungarian Folk group Muzsikás.

The Takács records for Hyperion Records, recently winning awards for their recordings of string quartets by Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn, and—with pianist Garrick Ohlsson—piano quintets by Amy Beach and Elgar. Other releases for Hyperion feature works by Haydn, Schubert, Janáček, Smetana, Debussy and Britten, as well as piano quintets by César Franck and Shostakovich (with Marc-André Hamelin), and viola quintets by Brahms and Dvořák (with Lawrence Power). For their CDs 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 in the Recordings section of the quartet’s website.

In 2014, the Takács became the first string quartet to be awarded the Wigmore Hall Medal. In 2012, Gramophone announced that the Takács was the first string quartet to be inducted into its Hall of Fame. The ensemble also won the 2011 Award for Chamber Music and Song presented by the Royal Philharmonic Society in London.

Based in Boulder at the University of Colorado Boulder, the members of the Takács Quartet are Christoffersen Faculty Fellows and the grateful beneficiaries of an instrument loan by the Drake Foundation. The members of the Takács are on the faculty at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, where they run a summer string quartet seminar, and 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. The group 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.