

# Takács Quartet

Britten, Bartók and Mozart

4 p.m., Sunday, Oct. 30, 2022

7:30 p.m., Monday, Oct. 31, 2022

Grusin Music Hall

*Streaming Oct. 30-Nov. 6*

## Program

### String Quartet No. 1, Op. 25

Benjamin Britten

1. Andante sostenuto – Allegro vivo
2. Allegro con slancio
3. Andante calmo
4. Molto vivace

### String Quartet No. 6

Béla Bartók

- I. Mesto – Più mosso, pesante – vivace
- II. Mesto – Marcia
- III. Mesto – Burletta
- IV. Mesto

—Intermission—

### String Quartet in D Major, K. 499

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

- I. Allegretto
- II. Menuetto: Allegretto
- III. Adagio
- IV. Molto allegro

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#### 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/audio 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

## String Quartet No. 1, Op. 25

Benjamin Britten

That English composer Benjamin Britten's last name shares its pronunciation with that of the word "Britain" is one of those delightful little accidents of the universe that tend to make a person smile. He remains, after all, an artist who is strongly associated with his homeland, as evidently British of a composer as Aaron Copland was American or Jean Sibelius was Finnish. And while it would perhaps be easy to imagine Britten composing his String Quartet No. 1, Op. 25 adjacent to some windswept bit of coast in southeastern England, the real story—one which features a shed in California and the "patron saint of American chamber music"—is about as decidedly non-British as can be.

In 1939, Britten and his life partner Peter Pears set sail for an open-ended trip to the United States. With the specter of war casting a heavy pall over Europe, many artists and intellectuals had begun to look toward America for respite. Add to that the avowed pacifism of both Britten and Pears, Pears' desire to advance his singing career and the recent emigration to America of Britten's good friend, the poet W.H. Auden, and America was a logical choice for the pair. It was an interesting time in the composer's life, one that included a "Bohemian" stint that saw him sharing a New York apartment with, among others, Auden and the son of German novelist Thomas Mann, an apartment that was frequented by the likes of Salvador Dalí and the famed burlesque entertainer Gypsy Rose Lee.

For a time, it seemed to Britten that he and Pears might never return to England. So serious were they about staying, in fact, that they headed to California to make permanent their immigration status by leaving the United States and reentering from Mexico. It was around this same time that Britten was approached by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, a wealthy patron of the arts who had done so much to advance the cause of chamber music in the United States that she was often called "the patron saint of American chamber music." Coolidge offered Britten good money to compose a new string quartet, and Britten was only too happy to oblige.

Britten's base of operations in the Golden State was the home of husband-and-wife piano duo Rae Robertson and Ethel Bartlett, both also natives of the United Kingdom, and it was in their Escondido abode north of San Diego that he set about working on the quartet. It was, perhaps, not the most conducive atmosphere for composing. Besides the difficulty posed by the fact that Bartlett apparently fell *madly* in love with Britten—a doubly awkward situation given the pairing of her husband's knowledge of the infatuation with Britten's utter lack of interest in her specifically or women generally—Britten also had to deal with the near-constant piano practice of his hosts. To get his work done, he composed in a shed on their property with an electric fan to drown out the sound of their playing. The finished work was premiered in Los Angeles by the Coolidge Quartet in September of 1941. Britten, who was in attendance, wrote afterward that he was pleased by both the work and the performance. That same year, the Library of Congress awarded him the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Medal for "eminent services to chamber music."

Eminent services notwithstanding, Britten would only write two other string quartets (an unnumbered quartet from his college days also exists). Nor did he become a permanent resident of the United States. Perhaps it was his time in California that set him upon a new path. While living out west, he read an article about the English poet George Crabbe, who had lived in and written about the same part of England in which Britten had been raised. Suddenly both homesick and inspired, Britten and Pears began planning two things: their return to England and a new work based on the poetry of Crabbe, an opera—the genre for which Britten is most famous—called *Peter Grimes*.

## String Quartet No. 6

Béla Bartók

*Mesto*. It's a word in Italian that can be translated as sad or pensive and, when used as a musical marking, indicates a slow, plodding tempo and a mournful character. Hungarian composer Béla Bartók made regular use of this marking in his String Quartet No. 6, each movement of which opens with a slow introduction marked *mesto*.

That Bartók chose to open each movement of his Sixth String Quartet with the *mesto* marking

is simultaneously remarkable and utterly unsurprising—remarkable in the way that he weaves this thematic material throughout the quartet and unsurprising he might choose to foreground such melancholic music. The thematic material is familiar each time, although not without alterations; in the first movement, for example, the viola provides the mournful tune solo, while in the second movement the full quartet takes up the theme in a contrapuntal fashion. The fourth movement differs from the others in that it features the *mesto* theme throughout.

Bartók began working on the Sixth String Quartet in August of 1939, a difficult time not just for the composer but for all of humanity. The rise of fascism and Germany's consolidation of power in Central Europe were rapidly pushing the continent toward a second major war in nearly as many decades. Bartók followed the developments as closely as anyone, not least of which because his publisher, the Vienna-based Universal, had been nazified after Germany's annexation of Austria. And with both Austria and Czechoslovakia under Nazi control, he feared that his native Hungary might be close behind.

Bartók tried as best as he could to stay ahead of the situation. He secured a new publisher, the London firm Boosey & Hawkes, and began sending his manuscripts and other papers to safe havens abroad. By 1939, he had decided that the best course of action was to leave Europe altogether and immigrate to the United States. One thing was stopping him, though. A year earlier, he had written: "I have my mother here: shall I abandon her altogether in her last years?—No, I cannot do that!" Severely ill at the time, there was no way that his mother could leave Europe, but neither could Bartók leave her. He wouldn't begin making final preparations for his immigration to America until after her death in late 1939. In 1940, with the Sixth String Quartet, his last contribution to the genre, finished and world war looming, Bartók embarked on his journey to the United States, where he would live out the final five years of his life.

## String Quartet in D Major, K. 499

*Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*

Although when it was written and published in 1786 it was typical to compose string quartets in sets of often six, Mozart's String Quartet in D Major, K. 499 was written as a one-off. This marks the quartet as something of an odd duck not just in comparison to the custom at the time, but also the remainder of Mozart's output in the genre (excluding his youthful First Quartet, K. 499 is Mozart's only quartet that doesn't belong to a set; it was preceded by three sets of six—the Milanese, Viennese and Haydn Quartets, respectively—and followed by the three Prussian Quartets).

To find an explanation for this lone quartet, one need look no further than its dedicatee: Franz Anton Hoffmeister. Hoffmeister was a Viennese composer who had in 1785 started his own publishing firm. It was no ordinary publishing firm, however. Hoffmeister's business model was based on subscriptions. The plan was that a new volume of music would be released each month, allowing his subscribers the opportunity "over several years [to form] a whole library of original musical works."

It was a brilliant idea. Or at least, it would have been if he'd been able to execute it fully. Hoffmeister was a prolific composer and a gifted idea man, but he had little in the way of business acumen. In reality, it was difficult to put together the monthly publications, and although he was ultimately successful for a time, he was also perpetually behind schedule (at least one subscription publication came out nearly two full years after its promised release date).

A close friend of Hoffmeister's, Mozart wrote the String Quartet in D Major, K. 499 specifically for an edition of Hoffmeister's subscription publications. Timing was, as ever, an issue. Mozart recorded the completion date of the quartet as August 19, 1786. Yet the work was published in October, meaning that the copying and printing was likely a rush job. And if any further evidence is needed of the problematic nature of Hoffmeister's business model, the title of that October issue was: "For the month of *June* 1786 featuring quartet by Mozart."

## About the performers

The world-renowned **Takács Quartet** is now entering its 48th season. **Edward Dusinger**, **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 Dutilleul. 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 Dusinger'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.