

CAL PERFORMANCES
AT HOME

Streaming Premiere – Thursday, February 25, 2021, 7pm

Takács Quartet

Edward Dusinberre, *violin*

Harumi Rhodes, *violin*

Richard O'Neill, *viola*

András Fejér, *cello*

Filmed exclusively for Cal Performances
at the Lone Tree Arts Center in Boulder, Colorado
on January 15–16, 2021.

PROGRAM

- Franz Joseph HAYDN (1732–1809) String Quartet No. 66 in G major, Op. 77, No. 1,
Lobkowitz
Allegro moderato
Adagio
Menuetto: Presto – Trio
Finale: Presto
- Benjamin BRITTEN (1913–1976) String Quartet No. 3 in G major, Op. 94
Duets. With moderate movement
Ostinato. Very fast
Solo. Very calm
Burlesque. Fast—*con fuoco*
Recitative and Passacaglia (*La Serenissima*). Slow
- Johannes BRAHMS (1833–1897) String Quartet No. 3 in B-flat major, Op. 67
Vivace
Andante
Agitato (Allegretto non troppo) – Trio – Coda
Poco Allegretto con Variazioni

Owen Zhou, Videographer
www.opuszero.net

The *Cal Performances at Home* Spring 2021 season
is dedicated to Gail and Dan Rubinfeld, leading supporters of Cal Performances
and the well-being of our artists for almost 30 years.

The Takács Quartet appears by arrangement with Seldy Cramer Artists,
and records for Hyperion and Decca/London Records.

The Takács Quartet is Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Colorado in Boulder;
the members are Associate Artists at Wigmore Hall, London.

www.takacsquartet.com

*Note: following its premiere, the video recording of this concert
will be available on demand through April 28, 2021.*

Franz Joseph Haydn**String Quartet No. 66 in G major,****Op. 77, No. 1, *Lobkowitz***

Franz Joseph Haydn, as prolific as composers come, wrote almost 70 string quartets. Compare that with Britten and Brahms, who each wrote three. Such comparisons say more about the composers than about their music. Britten, occupied by opera during the last half of his life, had little time for other genres. To Haydn, composing came fluently, for throughout his long working life he remained unburdened by those demons that haunted Brahms: a sense of history and his place in it. Haydn *was* that history, creating it as a member (along with Mozart and Beethoven) of the so-called First Viennese School. And while his work surely cost him struggles, they remain hidden behind his unobtrusively natural art.

You sense that in the spontaneity of Haydn's last quartet. He composed it in 1799, the first of a pair of quartets for Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz, the music-loving patron who proved so important a supporter of Beethoven. The opening Allegro is a march minus martial overtones, one ready-made for tin soldiers. You might imagine Prokofiev had it in mind when composing his march from *The Love for Three Oranges*. Although the first violin tends to carry the melody, the other members are equal partners in the music's texture, the cello especially engaging in some conspicuous dialogue with the leader.

In unison, all members proclaim the theme of the Adagio, after which the first violin is featured in a series of embellishments on the theme, which re-emerges in its original form throughout. The music grows serious and impassioned at points, but the prevailing mood is gravely dignified.

The minuet, bright, upbeat, and virtuosic, sounds more like a Beethoven scherzo than a stately dance, and a scherzo is essentially what it is.

The finale is based on a Croatian round dance and displays the tongue-in-cheek rustic humor Haydn was so fond of. Everyone takes part in the happy whirl, spinning in perpetual motion.

Benjamin Britten**String Quartet No. 3 in G major, Op. 94**

England may not have given the world many prime-time composers, but to make up for that it bred Benjamin Britten, one of those rare artists who gilded every genre he touched. Orchestral music, chamber music—Britten could do it all, but after *Peter Grimes* enraptured opera audiences in 1945 he focused almost entirely on the stage, in the following 30 years proving himself one of the greatest opera composers, ever.

By November 1975, when Britten completed his Third String Quartet, his always-fragile health was in decline, and while he could not know he had barely one more year to live—he died on December 4, 1976—mortality was much on his mind. A sense of limited and expiring time pervades the quartet, and even those who prefer to forgo biography as a means of understanding music can hardly deny that this work's power derives from its creator's circumstances.

The first movement (Duets) opens as the second violin and viola intone tremulous, sobbing figures. The hallucinatory music grows at once unsettling and dirge-like, agitated, as though embarked on a futile search. In the central section the violins seem to clash with viola and cello: a duet of registers, high voices against low. The lament returns as this short movement ends.

Ostinato, a recurring musical figure, lends its name to the second movement, which begins as a grim march. A more relaxed middle section is invaded by a hint of sweetness, over almost as soon as it starts, and the driving, repetitive rhythm returns.

Alone, the first violin opens the third movement (Solo) with a song of despair that penetrates ever more deeply into the essence of sadness. Echoed by the cello, the two players engage in a somber duet. As the viola enters, the cello falls silent and the first violin continues a keening song under which the second violin slips its own lament. Suddenly the pace quickens and the players seem determined to display the otherworldly sounds their instruments can produce—a section that Takács leader Edward



Dusinberre describes as a kind of oddly heard dawn chorus. The somber atmosphere returns, transfigured into a glowing song of acceptance.

The fourth movement (Burlesque) is the most aggressive music so far, a dance of death, frenzy that dials up when the instruments engage in a short canon. A strange calm intrudes, and then the dance resumes, pierced by what commentator Roger Parker describes as a “showcase of avant-garde string techniques.”

Recitative and Passacaglia (*La Serenissima*), the finale, is the most operatic movement, figuratively and literally. The Venetian label refers to quotations from Britten’s 1973 opera *Death in Venice*, whose aging protagonist yearns for his lost youth, and Britten in fact composed this movement in Venice. After an extended introduction, the first violin introduces a song that repeats over the constant thrum of the cello, who toward the end also intones the song before all members join in music increasingly poignant, at last fading, swelling, finally evaporating. In this quartet, said musicologist Hans Keller, to whom it is dedicated, Britten “writes his own passing.”

Johannes Brahms

String Quartet No. 3 in B-flat Major, Op. 67

As a northern German and a Lutheran, Johannes Brahms knew how to beat himself up. No matter that he eventually settled in Vienna and turned agnostic. Old habits die hard. Obsessively self-critical, he worked and reworked his music until it satisfied him. If it didn’t, it went into the stove. Some 20 string quartets ended in the flames before the pair of quartets he finally published. After those two only one more quartet followed, and then he bade the genre farewell. Given his reluctance to allow anything but his best into print, the wonder is that Brahms published as much as he did—the opus numbers reach 122—and produced so many masterpieces, fruits of self-criticism wed to relentless and methodical industry.

Of course genius played a role, too, and the right training. By age 10, having outgrown his first piano teacher, Brahms furthered his studies with Eduard Marxsen, who encouraged his pupil’s bent toward composition. Marxsen had studied with Ignaz Seyfried, a pupil of Mozart’s (and conductor of the first performance of

Beethoven's Ninth), and with Carl Maria von Bocklet, a friend of Beethoven and Schubert. Besides native talent and standards, Brahms was heir to a tradition, and he never worked without an awareness of the composing giants who preceded him, determined to earn his spot in their lineage.

One giant was especially intimidating. A symphony, Brahms believed, was the genre that defined a composer as a grown-up; and for any composer interested in growing up, Beethoven had set an impossibly high bar. But Beethoven owned the string quartet, too. During the 14 years that Brahms struggled shaping his first symphony, he also focused on the string quartet. In 1873, he at last produced the two quartets of his Opus 51—knotty, labored works, designed more to win a listener's respect than love. Opus 67, which followed two years later, is different. This is the music of a composer comfortable in his own skin, perhaps because work on the C minor Symphony was going so well. Brahms joked that he wrote the quartet almost as a distraction, to avoid “look[ing] into the stern face of a symphony”—the symphony he would complete a year later after so long a haul, and which the conductor Hans von Bülow would dub “Beethoven's Tenth,” suggesting that Brahms deserved favorable comparison with the giant.

Just as Brahms' second symphony is so much more relaxed than the first, the Opus 67 Quartet is a pleasure, produced by a master who has proven himself in his earlier quartets and can now just exult in his work. The Vivace opens with a bright, galloping figure that some have likened to music for a hunt, and with those hunting images in mind you might easily imagine the fox pursued on horseback. The second theme is a captivating folk dance, and after a repeat of the exposition it leads to a brief rumi-

native passage (based on the first theme). A leisurely development follows, then a reprise of the opening section and a brilliant coda.

In the Andante, Brahms reminds us of his gifts as a composer of songs. The gorgeous melody gives way to a middle section occupied by stern gestures. The song returns gently and searchingly, blooms into a reprise of the movement's opening, and fades quietly into a final “Amen.”

The third movement, with violins and cello muted to give the viola prominence, opens with a theme that seems the essence of the autumnal melancholy so often associated with Brahms. He described this movement as “the most amorous, affectionate thing I have ever written,” and in the middle section the viola stars in fluid passages of extraordinary dark beauty that might tell us something about Brahms' ideas of *amour*. A brief and delicate coda ends the movement.

The folk dance that opens the finale is fit for variations, and Brahms revels in sending his theme through a series of lovely permutations, gradually growing slower and quieter until interrupted by a sudden leap in dynamics and the bounding equestrian theme from the quartet's opening, joined soon by the ruminative music from that first movement. Finally Brahms weaves Vivace and finale themes together in an ending alternately reflective and sublimely happy.

—Larry Rothe

Larry Rothe writes about music for Cal Performances and the San Francisco Opera. His books include For the Love of Music and Music for a City, Music for the World. His fiction has appeared in StoryQuarterly and The Blue Mountain Review. Visit www.larryrothe.com.

The **Takács Quartet**, now in its forty-sixth season, is renowned for the vitality of its interpretations. The *Guardian* (London) recently commented: “What endures about the Takács Quartet, year after year, is how equally the four players carry the music.” *BBC Music Magazine* described the group’s recent Dohnányi recording with pianist Marc André Hamelin as “totally compelling, encapsulating a vast array of colors and textures.” Based in Boulder at the University of Colorado, violinists Edward Dusinger and Harumi Rhodes, violist Richard O’Neill, and cellist András Fejér perform 80 concerts a year worldwide.

In June 2020, the Takács Quartet was featured on the BBC television series *Being Beethoven*. The ensemble also released a CD for Hyperion of piano quintets by Amy Beach and Elgar, a fitting way to celebrate Geri Walther’s 15 years as the Takács’ violist before her retirement from the group. Also that month, the members of the quartet welcomed Richard O’Neill as their new violist. In November 2020 the group recorded a new disc for Hyperion, featuring quartets by Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel and Felix Mendelssohn. In May, the quartet will record Haydn’s last quartets. The members continue in their role as Associate Artists at London’s Wigmore Hall and in August 2021 will perform several concerts in South Korea.

In 2014, the Takács became the first string quartet to receive the Wigmore Hall Medal; the honor, inaugurated in 2007, recognizes major international artists who have a strong association with the hall. Recipients so far include András Schiff, Thomas Quasthoff, Menahem Pressler, and Dame Felicity Lott. In 2012, *Gramophone* announced that the Takács was the only string quartet to be inducted into its first Hall of Fame, along with such legendary artists 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.

Renowned for its innovative programming, the Takács Quartet performed Philip

Roth’s *Everyman* program with Meryl Streep at Princeton in 2014, and again with her at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto in 2015. The program was conceived in close collaboration with Roth. The ensemble first performed *Everyman* at Carnegie Hall in 2007 with Philip Seymour Hoffman. The Takács Quartet has toured 14 cities with the poet Robert Pinsky, collaborated regularly with the Hungarian Folk group Muzsikás, and in 2010 partnered with the Colorado Shakespeare Festival and David Lawrence Morse on a drama project that explored the composition of Beethoven’s last quartets. Aspects of the quartet’s interests and history are explored in Edward Dusinger’s *Beethoven for a Later Age: The Journey of a String Quartet*, which takes the reader inside the life of a professional string quartet, melding music history and memoir as it explores the circumstances surrounding the composition of Beethoven’s quartets.

The Takács records for Hyperion Records, and its 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), and viola quintets by Brahms (with Lawrence Power). For its 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.

The members of the Takács Quartet are Christoffersen Faculty Fellows at the University of Colorado Boulder. 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 Quartet are on the faculty at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara,

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

where they run an intensive summer string quartet seminar, and Visiting Fellows at the Guildhall School of Music.

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 ensemble made its North American debut tour in 1982. The members of the Takács Quartet were awarded the Order of Merit of the Knight's Cross of the Republic of Hungary in 2001, and the Order of Merit Commander's Cross by the President of the Republic of Hungary in 2011.

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