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TAKÁCS QUARTET

JANUARY 25, 2023



Photo: Kiduck Kim

Takács Quartet

Edward Dusinberre, *violin*

Harumi Rhodes, *violin*

Richard O'Neill, *viola*

András Fejér, *cello*

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TAKÁCS QUARTET

Now entering its forty-eighth year, the world-renowned Takács Quartet is excited about their 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. 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 Edward Dusinberre's new book *Distant Melodies: Music in Search of Home*. The book was published by Faber and the University of Chicago Press in the Fall of 2022.

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.

Based in Boulder at the University of Colorado, 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.

AFCM welcomes the Takács Quartet for its eleventh appearance. Their first concert for us was in 1987 (see back cover) and the most recent was in 2019.

EVENING SERIES

TONIGHT’S PROGRAM

Distant Melodies: Music in Search of Home
(a project tied to first violinist Edward Dusingberre’s new book)

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913–1976)

String Quartet No. 1 in D Major, Op. 25

Andante sostenuto—Allegro vivo
Allegretto con slancio
Andante calmo
Molto vivace

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881–1945)

String Quartet No. 6, Sz. 114

Mesto—Più mosso, pesante—Vivace
Mesto—Marcia
Mesto—Burletta: Moderato
Mesto

INTERMISSION

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841–1904)

String Quartet in G Major, Op. 106

Allegro moderato
Adagio ma non troppo
Molto vivace
Finale: Andante sostenuto—Allegro con fuoco

This evening’s concert
is sponsored by the
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PROGRAM NOTES

Music has the power to bridge and accentuate distance. A fragment of melody triggers a memory, rekindling a connection to home or exposing a painful separation from a place left behind. The pieces on this program were written by composers during periods of their lives shaped by departures and homecomings, themes explored in my new book *Distant Melodies: Music in Search of Home*.

In May 1939, when the twenty-five-year-old Benjamin Britten crossed the Atlantic on the RMS *Ausonia*, he did not know how long he might stay in North America. The summer months that Britten and Peter Pears spent in California in 1941 proved to be pivotal. Britten composed his String Quartet, Op. 25, that summer while staying at a sunny orange ranch north of San Diego. At the same time, he read an article by E.M. Forster about the Suffolk poet George Crabbe (1754–1832). Forster linked the crashing waves of the North Sea and the bleak mudflats of the estuary near Aldeburgh to the troubled character of Peter Grimes, the protagonist in Crabbe's grim story of an ostracized fisherman. Forster's essay increased Britten's homesickness for the Suffolk seascape of his youth, sparked his interest in Crabbe, and provided the impetus for what would become Britten's most famous opera.

The String Quartet was first performed in September 1941 in Los Angeles by the Coolidge Quartet. In June 1945, three years after Britten and Pears returned to England, *Peter Grimes* received its premiere at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in London with Pears singing the title role. The undulating melodic lines and sense of uneasy calm in the earlier string quartet's slow movement surfaced again in *Moonlight*, one of the opera's orchestral interludes. Two years later, Britten and Pears moved to Crabbe Street in Aldeburgh, the town that would become their permanent home. As Britten later recalled, it was during the summer months of 1941 that he came to realize what was missing from his life in California and that he wished to make his home in England.

In August 1939, three months after Britten crossed the Atlantic, Béla Bartók was beginning to compose his Sixth Quartet at a peaceful Swiss chalet in Saanen. Bartók's initial concept for the piece consisted of an introductory *Mesto* (Sad) section for each of the four movements. Initially he intended the fourth movement to end with fast music. Bartók rushed back to Budapest shortly before 1 September when Hitler's invasion of Poland commenced. In November, as he contemplated the likelihood of having to leave his homeland, Bartók abandoned his ideas for a fast *finale*, instead allowing the *Mesto* mood to take over the whole movement. At the moment that Bartók had originally planned fast music, he added a brief setting of the *Mesto* melody as a kind of chorale, followed by the return of the two primary melodies from the first movement, devoid of vigor and momentum. When the second violin and viola recalled the second tune, Bartók's instruction to the players was: *Più dolce, lontano*—more sweetly, at a distance. By assigning the tune to the middle voices in the quartet, Bartók avoided the more extreme registers of first violin and cello, increasing the sense of remoteness. *Lontano*: the music to be experienced at a distance—an idea that Bartók imagined against a background of advancing chaos and horror.

In December his mother died following a long illness, shattering one tie to Budapest. Bartók and his second wife Ditta eventually left Hungary in October 1940. When he began the Sixth Quartet in Saanen, Bartók had doubtless imagined its first performance would take place in Budapest, but the Kolisch Quartet gave the premiere on 20 January 1941 in New York—the same day that Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated for his third term. Although Bartók had hoped to be able to return to Hungary, he gradually became resigned to remaining in the US. He died in September 1945 in New York due to complications from leukemia.

In October 1892, Antonín Dvořák had arrived in New York under happier circumstances than Bartók, to assume a prestigious and well-paid position as Director of the National Conservatory. Although Dvořák enjoyed the stimuli offered by a new environment and the rapturous reception of his *New World Symphony*, a part of his identity remained firmly rooted in Bohemia, particularly in the village of Vysoká, forty-two miles south-west of Prague.

A dedicated collector of pigeons, Dvořák stayed in touch with the caretaker of his country retreat there, asking if his pigeons were getting enough food and suggesting that if the young doves were well-behaved, they should be allowed to fly out of the coop. The longer Dvořák stayed in America the more his yearning for Bohemia intensified. He became fascinated by the steamers that transported his letters back to friends and family, sometimes travelling by overhead tram to Battery Park at the most southern tip of Manhattan to follow the progress of the ships, until he could see them no more.

Dvořák composed his Opus 106 late in the autumn of 1895, several months after he returned to Bohemia for good. Although this often ebullient music can be described as a celebration of homecoming, some of the most memorable moments occur when familiar melodies return transformed. The momentum of the bustling last movement is arrested when slower music from the first movement intrudes. The effect is ambiguous, the recognizable tune reassuring but also disruptive. Dvořák subjects the primary melody of the somber slow movement to extreme variations: dramatic outbursts and ethereal wanderings that seem to suggest absence and loss—both at times elements of homecoming. To pigeonhole this music as merely celebratory is to lessen its emotional charge.

As they composed the works on tonight's program, Britten, Bartók, and Dvořák's lives were shaped by ideas of home and the emotional impact of absence. Their music allows for the contemplation of contrary emotions, the uneasy balancing of past and present. Nostalgia may be defined as the yearning for a time or place that cannot be recovered but sometimes music offers a recovery of its own.

Edward Dusinberre, first violinist, Takács Quartet

“As they composed the works on tonight's program, Britten, Bartók, and Dvořák's lives were shaped by ideas of home and the emotional impact of absence.”

EDWARD DUSINBERRE

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