



Takacs Quartet

Saturday, March 18, 2023 2 PM
Performance Insights 1 pm
Bethel United Methodist Church Hall
Lewes, Delaware

PROGRAM

String Quartet No. 1 in D Major, Op. 25
Andante sostenuto – Allegro vivo
Allegro con slancio
Andante calmo
Molto vivace

Benjamin Britten
(1913–1976)

String Quartet No. 6 in D Minor, Sz. 114
Mesto – Più mosso, pesante – Vivace
Mesto – Marcia
Mesto – Burletta – moderato
Mesto – Molto tranquillo

Béla Bartók
(1881 – 1945)

INTERMISSION

String Quartet No. 13 in G Major, Op.106
Allegro moderato
Adagio ma non troppo
Molto vivace
Finale. Andante sostenuto — Allegro con fuoco

Antonín Dvořák
(1841 – 1904)

-Program Subject to Change-

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 and are Associate Artists at Wigmore Hall, London

Web-site: www.takacsquartet.com

Program Notes

THE PROGRAM

All of these works feature composers thinking about home.

--- Britten composed his first quartet in California in the summer of 1941. During that time an article by E.M.Forster about Aldeburgh and the poetry of George Crabbe prompted him to return to England and make his home there.

--- In August 1939, Bartók began his sixth quartet in idyllic Alpine scenery in Switzerland but hurried home to Budapest following the outbreak of World War II. He finished the piece in November and shortly afterwards decided to leave Hungary for good. In exile in America he heard the first performance of his sixth quartet given in New York in January 1941.

--- Dvořák's Op. 106 by contrast celebrates a homecoming. In May 1895, Dvořák returned to Bohemia from New York. He composed Op. 106 later that year.

~ Ed Dusinger, Takács Quartet

BRITTEN

String Quartet No. 1 in D Major, Op. 25 (1941)

In April 1939, Benjamin Britten and his partner Peter Pears sailed to North America. They had several reasons for leaving England, including the difficult position of pacifists in an increasingly bellicose Europe; the success that English composer Frank Bridge had enjoyed in the US; the departures of poet W.H. Auden and writer Christopher Isherwood to the US from England three months previously; and the hostile or belittling reviews of Britten's music in the English press. When the Second World War began, Britten and Pears turned for advice to the British embassy in Washington, and were told that they should remain in the US as artistic ambassadors. Pears, a professional tenor, was inclined to disregard the advice and go back to England; Britten also felt the urge to return, but accepted the embassy's counsel and persuaded Pears to do the same.

This was Britten's first numbered string quartet, though he had written a few compositions for this instrumentation earlier in his life. The quartet is one of a number of works, which included *Paul Bunyan*, and the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, written during Britten's three war-time years in America. It was commissioned by Mrs. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who paid the composer a handsome \$400 (roughly equivalent to \$8,000 today).

Mrs. Coolidge, a passionate devotee of the string quartet genre, had already commissioned Bartók's Fifth Quartet (1934) and Schoenberg's Fourth (1936). Britten's contribution was composed in the humble surroundings of a garden shed, where he and Pears were staying in Escondido, California, as guests of Ethel Bartlett and Rae Robertson, the British husband-and-wife piano duo.

The finished quartet was premiered by the Coolidge Quartet in September 1941, at Occidental College in Los Angeles. The composer was present and wrote afterwards to Mrs. Coolidge that he was “delighted with the way that they played my quartet – really first class, both in musicianship and technique”. Further he told his benefactress that he rated the quartet as “my best piece so far”. The work earned its composer the Library of Congress Coolidge Medal for Eminent Services to Chamber Music.

The Quartet’s first movement begins with an extended opening, striking for its luminous sound. High-ranging violins and viola are underpinned by *pizzicato* cello. Following a brusque *Allegro vivo* passage it becomes clear that the movement is based on the juxtaposition of bold contrasts of tempo and mood, that alternately soothe and invigorate. It is almost as if memories of Britten’s native Suffolk coast and the vigor of California have become distilled in the composition’s oppositional landscape.

Incisive rhythms, *pizzicato* passages and a preponderance of triplets and trills characterize the short second *con slancio* (“with enthusiasm”) movement.

It is in the halting rhythms of the atmospheric third movement that Britten expresses his true musical personality. After a slow first section each instrument seems to want to break free from the melancholy, which is transformed to a quiet but inconclusive rapture in the final bars.

The work concludes with an exuberant and witty *finale*. Tensions are never quite resolved, however, and perhaps reflect Britten’s own feelings as he confessed in a letter of June 1941: “I am homesick, and really only enjoy scenery that reminds me of England.”

According to Britten's biographer Humphrey Carpenter, the tense and restless character of the Quartet may reflect an emotional turmoil in the composer. Or perhaps it may partly derive from his working conditions – he had had to turn on a fan to drown out the sound of his hosts' piano practice!

BARTÓK

String Quartet No. 6 in D minor, Sz. 114 (1939)

Béla Bartók – pianist, composer and Hungarian patriot – watched the rise of Nazism with undisguised revulsion. When Hitler’s forces occupied Austria in March of 1938, he suspected that it was only a matter of time before Hungary was occupied as well. He began composing his *String Quartet No. 6* in Saanen, Switzerland in August, 1939, and completed it in Budapest in November. It was thus his last work in Europe, and reflected his depression and growing sense of personal alienation in the disintegrating political situation.

When his mother died in December, the composer left for the United States almost immediately. Braving wartime travel, Bartók and his wife arrived in New York in 1940. His years there were not easy ones; at the age of 59 he had to learn a new language, accustom himself to an entirely new culture, and watch from afar while Europe went up in flames. His health was bad, and in 1943 he fell ill with what turned

out to be leukemia. Through it all, his creative spirit never flagged. He stayed in New York – in “comfortable exile”, as he would say – where he died in 1945 at the age of 64. He was buried in suburban Hartsdale, though in the late 1980s his remains were transferred to Budapest for a state funeral.

String Quartet No. 6 is one of Bartók’s most deeply expressive and personal works. Each of its four movements begins with the same theme and the same expressive designation: *Mesto*, meaning “sad and pensive”. For the first three movements, the *Mesto* serves only as an introduction and is separate from the material that follows. For the fourth movement, the *Mesto* continues and becomes the movement itself. These four introductory passages, all based on the same lyrical but melancholy theme, inform this quartet with a restraint and sadness that frame the rest of the music.

Of particular interest are the inner movements. Following the *Mesto* introduction, the second movement – labeled *Marcia* (march) – opens and closes with a strange, out-of-step, almost comical little military march. Given when this music was composed, the message here is hard to miss. The cartoon-like “goose-stepping” of would-be conquerors is well and acidly depicted. At the center of the movement is a truly bizarre section of music. On its surface, this appears to be a bit of Hungarian folk-music: the cello plays a folk-like tune, accompanied by dulcimer-like violins and a strumming, zither-like viola. But things are not right. For example, the cello – playing at the very top of its range – is awkward and out-of-tune with the harmonies around it; and the strumming viola doesn’t quite line up with the other instruments. The juxtaposition of the comic march with the caricatured Hungarian music reflects Bartók’s revulsion with both Nazi militarism and his country’s acquiescence to that militarism.

The third movement of the quartet is even weirder than the second. Entitled *Burletta* (burlesque), the *Mesto* is followed by clownish, almost joking music, in which the violins are asked to purposely play a quarter tone flat. Within the context of the entire quartet, and following on the heels of the *Mesto* introduction, this grotesque becomes quite ominous. Bartók seems to portray his fellow Hungarians going about their lives, eating, dancing and singing while Hitler and Stalin reduce Poland to ruins.

Like its predecessors, *String Quartet No. 6* features Bartók’s highly individualistic blend of expressive dissonance, folk elements, bursting energy and percussive rhythms. But there is more. The work has an undercurrent of melancholy, nostalgia and tragedy, reflecting the composer’s emotional response to Nazi aggression and to the growing ties of his native Hungary to nazism and fascism.

It can be seen from Bartók’s sketches that he had intended the last movement to contain a folk dance with an *aksak* (irregular Turkish folk rhythm) character, but he abandoned this plan, whether motivated by pure compositional logic, or by despair at the death of his mother and the unfolding catastrophe of the war.

The quartet was premiered in 1941 in New York City. In the last year or so of his life, Bartók made some sketches hypothesized to be the slow movement of a never completed seventh quartet.

DVOŘÁK

String Quartet No. 13 in G Major, Op.106 (1895)

Antonín Dvořák's life was in many ways strikingly different from those of the contemporaneous composers who influenced him, in that none of them came from "peasant" families. Antonín's father was an innkeeper, professional zither player, and butcher who tried hard to pass the family business on to his eldest son. However, he also ensured his son's training as a "fiddler" and singer.

Most of Dvořák's composing peers, having received a far more intensive childhood musical and cultural education, usually attained favorable responses to their early compositions. However, Dvořák's earliest efforts were rejected by almost everyone; he made his living as a violist, organist and music teacher. He nonetheless composed morning, noon, and night. He was extremely critical of his own work and, like Brahms - who later became not only a mentor, but also a close friend - Dvořák deliberately tore up many of his earliest "completed" works. Those that he preserved were all intensely revised as he matured.

Only when reaching his early thirties did signs of success begin to emerge. In his forties he experienced an astonishing rise to international acclaim. At the age of fifty, in 1891, Dvořák's European fame led to an invitation from the National Conservatory of Music in New York City to become its Director, teach composition, and conduct six concerts of his work.

Dvořák endured three homesick years in New York, with one blissful sojourn in his beloved Bohemian homeland for the summer of 1894. When he returned home a second time for the summer of 1895, nothing could persuade him to return to America. However, despite feeling "inexpressibly happy," he was unable to compose anything new for several months. Then, amidst a great composing rush in November and December, he completed his *String Quartet No. 13 in G Major*. The Bohemian Quartet gave its first performance in Prague on October 9, 1896.

This is an extraordinary work by any measure. With its endearing lyricism, exciting rhythmic vitality, ingenious transparent textures and vibrant color, the quartet displays a wonderful amalgam of Dvořák's stylistic traits. In terms of his famous evocation of folk music, it is not as overtly nationalistic as either his "Bohemian" works or his recent "American" compositions.

The work opens with a series of contrasting motives — rising leaps, trills, and descending *arpeggios*— said by some to echo birdsongs. These are then developed with amazing energy. Only after the treatment of the opening figures subsides does the composer introduce the central melody, first in fragments, then fully.

The slow movement is one of chamber music's most beautiful. Dvořák treats his poetic main theme - which shows a remnant of American influence - in a series of rich, free variations, alternating major and minor modes as he loved to do. It might best be described as a double set of variations, as it alternates between two themes, one warm, bright, simple and unified like a choir, the other dark and complex. As the music oscillates between hope and despair, the variations become more grand and emphatic,

with emotions more intense and dramatic. Rarely does any composer produce a theme-and-variations movement as profoundly moving.

In the galloping *scherzo*, Dvořák delights in certain unexpected features, such as a crazy duet between viola and cello that serves as accompaniment to a new statement of the main theme. This characteristically vital *scherzo* inverts the previous movement's dark-within-light with an outer driven, *furioso* dance giving way to a softer, more relaxed trio within. There are two trio sections. The first trio's pastoral mode is pure Dvořák, with a melody that is serene, sweet, and touched with nostalgia.

As if mirroring the first movement's introduction, the last movement begins with a long sigh. The *Finale* is a rondo with a slow, hymn-like introduction and a movingly syncopated main subject. This plunges headlong into a scintillating perpetual motion that sustains its high energy. A return of the hymn-like introduction in the middle of the movement leads to tender recollections of the first movement. These recollections are again and again placed in dialogue with darker material. Each idea attempts to seize control of the music, but all give way to the main subject, and the quartet ends with triumphant exuberance.

Program Essay for Takacs Performance

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 ostracised 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 Op. 25 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, 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 vigour 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 USA. 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 recognisable tune reassuring but also disruptive. Dvořák subjects the primary melody of the sombre slow movement to extreme variations: dramatic outbursts and ethereal wanderings that seem to suggest absence and loss - both at times elements of homecoming. To pigeon hole 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.