Takács Quartet

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Takács Quartet
Edward Dusinberre, violin; Harumi Rhodes, violins;
Richard O'Neill, viola; András Fejér, cello
2025-2026 Biography

In recognition of its fiftieth anniversary, the world-renowned **Takács Quartet** was recently the subject of an in-depth profile by the *New York Times* and featured on the cover of *Strad* magazine. The Takács released two anniversary season albums in 2025 for Hyperion Records to glowing reviews. 'Flow' by Ngwenyama, composed for the ensemble, was followed by an album of piano quintets by Dvořák and Price with Marc André Hamelin.

Edward Dusinberre, **Harumi Rhodes** (violins), **Richard O'Neill** (viola) and **András Fejér** (cello) are excited about upcoming projects including performances throughout the USA of Mozart viola quintets with Jordan Bak and a new string quartet written for them by Clarice Assad, co-commissioned by leading concert organizations throughout North America. The group's North American engagements include concerts in New York's Carnegie Hall and Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center, Vancouver, Philadelphia, Boston, Princeton, Ann Arbor, Washington DC, Duke University, Los Angeles, Berkeley, Cleveland, Phoenix and Portland.

The Takács enjoys a busy international touring schedule. As Associate Artists at London's Wigmore Hall, the group will present four concerts featuring works by Haydn, Assad, Debussy, Beethoven and two Mozart viola quintets with Timothy Ridout that will also be recorded for Hyperion. Other European appearances include the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, Konzerthaus Berlin, Florence, Bologna and Rome.

The members of the Takács Quartet are Christoffersen Fellows and have been Artists in Residence at the University of Colorado, Boulder since 1986. During the summer months the Takács join the faculty at the Music Academy of the West, running an intensive quartet seminar. This season the ensemble begins a new relationship as Visiting Artists at the University of Maryland.

The Takács has recorded for Hyperion since 2005 and all their other recordings are available to stream at https://www.hyperion-streaming.co.uk In 2021 the Takács won a Presto Music Recording of the Year Award for their recordings of string quartets by Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn, and a Gramophone Award with pianist Garrick Ohlsson for piano quintets by 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.

The Takács Quartet is known for its innovative programming. In July 2024 the ensemble gave the premiere of *Kachkaniraqmi* by Gabriela Lena Frank, a concerto for solo quartet and string orchestra. Since 2021-22 the ensemble has partnered regularly with bandoneon virtuoso Julien Labro in a program featuring 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 Muzsikas.

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.

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. Members of the Takács Quartet are the grateful beneficiaries of an instrument loan by the Drake Foundation. We are grateful to be Thomastik-Infeld Artists.

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Takács Quartet

Critical Acclaim

"Perhaps what struck most, though, was just how constantly and generously each of the players...was physically and aurally in dialogue with the others, and through them, the listener. It's that ability to communicate, among many other talents, that makes the Takacs the essential quartet of our time."

The New York Times

"When chamber musicians of this caliber are at their best, you can sense the thoughts whip around the ensemble, an extra bit of weight on an accent in the first violin prompting an answering push from the cello. Familiarity breeds excitement, and an old score feels suddenly spontaneous."

New York Magazine / Vulture

"Right from the start of this concert it was clear that we were in for more of the kind of superlative music-making we have come almost to take for granted from the Takács Quartet."

The Guardian

"The Takacs' ensemble skills were very much in evidence...clearly the result of painstaking preparation. The reading [of Beethoven's Op. 59 Razumovsky Quartet] exuded no less spontaneity, however, as if the ink was still wet on the page and making the two centuries since its writing seem to vanish."

Musical America

"The Takács are impressive on this album: every micro-phrase, every note is considered. Their sound draws you in from the first moment. The opening chords and sinuous lines vibrate and thrill on many levels; this is of course to do with their rich and subtle playing but also the fantastic recorded balance."

Gramophone

"One thing is certain about this new recording by the Takács Quartet: you will not hear better string quartet playing anywhere in the world today."

BBC Music Magazine

"Classical music doesn't get much more life-enhancing than this."

The Guardian

"They are a class act, if ever there was one, marrying aristocratic elegance and red-blooded energy to everything they play."

Seen and Heard International

Features

The New York Times

April 27, 2025

By David Allen

Recently, the Takacs Quartet gave a recital at the University of Colorado Boulder. In many ways, it could have been perfectly routine: some Bartok and Beethoven before an adoring audience at the college where the group has taught in residence since 1986.

But the Takacs simply does not do routine.

The Beethoven was a perfect example, an exceptional account of the Opus 135 Quartet that was astonishingly vivid even when watched on a livestream. You could have taken any of its four movements and written pages in their praise. Perhaps what struck most, though, was just how constantly and generously each of the players — Edward Dusinberre, first violin; Harumi Rhodes, second violin; Richard O'Neill, viola; and Andras Fejer, cello — was physically and aurally in dialogue with the others, and through them, the listener.

It's that ability to communicate, among many other talents, that makes the Takacs the essential quartet of our time. It's also one of the qualities that has kept the group so identifiably itself as time has passed: The quartet marks its 50th anniversary this year. As part of a season of celebrations, it appears with the pianist Jeremy Denk at the Frick Collection on Thursday.

The name Takacs has become a synonym for assured, collective excellence, but its story is one of evolution, not stasis. Read either of Dusinberre's eloquent memoirs relating the history of the quartet, and it becomes clear that it has been a personal drama, played out through the scores that its members rehearse and perform.

Time certainly has remade the Takacs. Only one of the four young Hungarians — Gabor Takacs-Nagy, Karoly Schranz, Gabor Ormai and Fejer — who stepped into their first lesson in communist Hungary, ready with a Mozart quartet, remains. Both Roger Tapping and Geraldine Walther, the violists who followed Ormai in turn, have come and gone.

"Changing a player in a string quartet is a trauma that must be played out under the watchful eye of an expectant public," Dusinberre has written. Some of those traumas have been more painful than others, above all the death of Ormai from cancer, in 1995. Change, though, has also brought the Takacs renewal, adaptation, promise — and even, for the two current violinists, marriage.

Along the way, the Takacs that once carried forward the great Hungarian tradition of string quartets has morphed into something else, entirely its own. "It's interesting," the Attacca Quartet violinist Amy Schroeder said admiringly, "because they have such a unique voice that I can't really pinpoint whether it's European, American, a combination of both or just the Takacs thing."

The Takacs thing. "They have always been one of the world's pre-eminent string quartets, and they have a unique approach to the repertoire," said John Gilhooly, the director of Wigmore Hall in London. "Whatever they have, they have it in abundance."

ORMAI AND FEJER were teenagers when they decided to form a quartet. In 1973, a year before they entered the fabled Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, they asked Takacs-Nagy to be their first violinist, but they had to content themselves playing trios for the two years it took them to find a second. Takacs-Nagy eventually found Schranz at a soccer match.

Hear Takacs-Nagy and Fejer talk about their education now, and it becomes obvious how lasting its imprint has been. Their teachers — Andras Mihaly, Ferenc Rados and, intriguingly, Gyorgy Kurtag — tried to instill a sense of musical morality in their students. "It was not aimed at chasing mistakes; they were looking for values," Takacs-Nagy said. "We knew that behind every bar, every note, there are gold mines, diamond fields."

Fejer recalled that they "thought we knew, if not everything, most things, and these three wonderful teachers made that confident feeling disappear in a matter of hours."

"That was the last time any one of us thought we knew anything," he added.

Despite the travel difficulties imposed by life behind the Iron Curtain, the Takacs rose quickly, winning a series of competitions. They studied Bartok with Zoltan Szekely, who had premiered the composer's Second Violin Concerto and still called his old friend Bela. They also found a mentor in Denes Koromzay, who, like Szekely, had played in the legendary Hungarian String Quartet. In time, Takacs-Nagy said, they became more aware of themselves as part of a distinguished national lineage.

"The Takacs offered all the virtues of Central Europe's string-playing tradition and only occasionally its defects," Bernard Holland of The New York Times wrote after hearing them on their first U.S. tour, in 1982. Other quartets might be more precise, he went on, but with the Takacs, "one felt always in the presence of music."

After a series of shorter stays in the United States, the Takacs members defected in 1986 and moved to Boulder, where Koromzay taught. The Hungarian String Quartet had once been in residence there, and the Takacs found a community proud to give personal and professional aid. One local philanthropist, Fay Shwayder, eventually bought it four new instruments; after Takacs-Nagy left the quartet with hand trouble in 1992,

another benefactor offered Dusinberre, fresh from his studies at the Juilliard School, a loan to buy a house.

The Takacs was already a fine quartet, with a lyrical, emotionally frank sensibility that rarely underplayed the character of a phrase. Soon after Dusinberre and Tapping joined Schranz and Fejer, though, critical admiration turned into critical adulation. In 1998, the Takacs released a set of visceral Bartok quartets on Decca that remains a reference today. Even more celebrated was a later Beethoven survey that the New Yorker critic Alex Ross judged "the most richly expressive modern account of this titanic cycle." Showered with awards, it showcased the kind of playing — daring yet secure, humane yet heaven-bound — that listeners could spend a lifetime with. Indeed, it shaped entire careers.

"I had their cycle, and I was just so amazed by it," recalled O'Neill, who first auditioned for the quartet while he was a student at Juilliard two decades ago, before eventually replacing Walther after her retirement 15 years later. "It started this lifelong obsession of wanting to play the entire cycle because of them."

HOW, THEN, HAS the Takacs so reliably stayed the Takacs?

There are small things, like the way that the players sit a little farther apart than the norm, or the means they have found to conclude arguments, including sending a player out into a hall to give a verdict on a phrase.

Perhaps more important is the Takacs's fundamentally inquisitive nature, a professed desire to stay humble in front of the music and one another. All great quartets have had a similar curiosity, but it remains remarkable that you can select almost any of the Takacs's recordings — especially those it has made since a savage Schubert "Death and the Maiden" announced the group's move to the Hyperion label in 2006 — and find playing that takes nothing for granted.

Stephen Hough, the English pianist and composer who wrote his first quartet for the group, recorded the Brahms Piano Quintet with the Takacs in 2007 and toured the piece again with the current foursome this year. "Each of them was injecting new ideas, night by night," Hough said of those concerts.

Dusinberre felt something similar from the earliest hours he spent in Boulder, rehearsing during his audition. "'Playing it safe' didn't seem to form any part of the Takacs's musical philosophy," he wrote of that experience. Rhodes cites the "good, healthy danger" of Schranz's playing as one of the main reasons she decided to become a second violinist at all. When she first heard the quartet, she said, "all the pieces had this feeling of exploration and adventure, and there was this overall feeling of mischief, like children having fun together."

Even if every new player subtly changes the character of the quartet, their predecessors are palpable through the scores they left behind. Still, that can work both ways. As a young, introspective player, Dusinberre found the thick markings on Takacs-Nagy's parts too intimidating to use, despite the respect he had for such a charismatic musician. O'Neill, however, has found the visual history of the quartet he has at his disposal more helpful, from the careful, almost mathematical precision of Ormai's red and blue pencil lines, to the creativity of Tapping's fingerings, to the single words with which Walther distilled hours of rehearsal debate.

Over time, there has also been a shift in the music that the Takacs has chosen to play. It has always been more than the Bartok-and-Beethoven foursome of lore; consult its discography and you will find Franck, Dutilleux, Britten, Shostakovich and Dohnanyi alongside Haydn and Brahms. But its increasing interest in music by contemporary composers like Clarice Assad and Nokuthula Ngwenyama has been a welcome surprise, as have its superb recordings of scores by Amy Beach, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and, on an album released last month with the pianist Marc-André Hamelin, Florence Price.

"If you look at our quartet, we're clearly a multigenerational group," Rhodes said. "We come from completely

different cultures and backgrounds. I guess from my point of view, it would be weird if we weren't representing that in some way."

Eventually, there will come a time when Fejer departs and the transformation of the Takacs will be complete. Although the quartet is careful to promise nothing, Fejer suggested that it would be an "extreme pity" if the Takacs did not endure, even without the last of its founding members.

"But luckily," he added, "we are not there yet."

GRAMOPHONE
THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

April 17, 2025

Takács Quartet at 50: a legacy of reinvention, artistic vitality, and expanding horizons

By Lindsay Kemp

When you join an established string quartet, you're living with all the spirits that have gone before you,' says Richard O'Neill. 'They hang over you, and gosh, the pressure!' But he is not talking about just any quartet here. Viola player O'Neill is the newest member of the one many consider to be the current world's finest, the Takács, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year.

Half a century is time enough for any ensemble to get set in its ways, start playing on autopilot, begin relaxing the intensity of its playing. You can hear quartets out there who seem to be doing just that; but listening to some live recordings of the Takács on BBC Radio 3 recently, I was struck not just by their keen energy, tightness of ensemble and vibrant sound, but also by the combination of concentration, in-the-moment flexibility, intensity of communication and incisive interpretative detail. At 50, the Takács is fit as a fiddle.

Like most quartets, the Takács has undergone a number of changes since it was founded in 1975 by four students at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, such that only one of those original members, cellist András Fejér, is still in the group. (The other originals were the violinists Gábor Takács-Nagy and Károly Schranz, and viola player Gábor Ormai.) 'We were determined to be serious about it,' Fejér recalls of those formative days in a crucible of string quartet greatness. 'We were very lucky because we got support and help from players in quartets from previous generations, like the Tátrai and the Bartók, and our professors were kind and affectionate and smiling, showering us with extra lessons and enjoying the way that we were charging ahead. We also learnt immeasurable things from the Amadeus Quartet, our idols. We got coaching from them, we attended seminars with them, got friendly with them. That was a heartwarming connection.'

Charge ahead they did. Within six years of its formation the Takács had won competitions in Evian, Portsmouth, Bordeaux, Budapest and Bratislava – current first violinist Edward Dusinberre recalls hearing a nice story from Roger Tapping (the group's viola player, 1995-2005), who as a teenager was in the audience when the Takács won in Portsmouth in 1979 and retained from the experience 'a vivid memory of wonderful risk-taking, no playing safe'. The quartet was also touring internationally already, and generally making the music world take notice: 'by far the finest young string quartet

around and set to be one of the finest anywhere', announced the *Financial Times*; 'technically perfect, unanimous in ensemble, blended and balanced to a degree that induces shudders of pleasure', reported the *Daily Telegraph*; 'magic with every note', purred the *Evening Post*.

Since that time the group has duly ascended to the heights predicted for it and produced a recorded legacy for the ages, fronted by the two great pillars of complete cycles on Decca of Bartók and Beethoven quartets but holding incisive accounts of much of the mainstream quartet repertory within. Nowadays, it records for Hyperion, with the most recent of its five *Gramophone* Awards coming in 2021, when its album of Elgar and Beach piano quintets (with pianist Garrick Ohlsson) was praised by Richard Bratby for its 'fierce intelligence and open-hearted emotional commitment … a performance that takes opposites and fuses them, at furnace heat, into an absolutely compelling whole'.

Original lineup, from left: Takács-Nagy, Schranz, Ormai and Fejér

As it happens, the first release of the quartet's anniversary year is also of piano quintets, this time by Dvořák and Price, with Marc-André Hamelin at the piano. Dusinberre admits that the 'real motivation' for the album was the quintet by the American Price, and that the coupling seemed a good idea 'given the rich story of Dvořák's time in New York, and how his mission as director of the city's National Conservatory of Music of America was to try to inspire American composers in various ways'.

Born in Arkansas in 1887, Price studied at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston before returning home to become a music teacher. After marriage, she and her husband moved away from the racially troubled South to Chicago, where Price went on to become the first African American woman to have a symphony performed by an American orchestra. Her works, covering a healthy range of genres, faded from view following her death in 1953 but in recent years have begun to make headway again.

Price's idiom is essentially a Romantic one, but finds a place for the kind of American folk influences Dvořák had used in works such as the *American* Quartet and the *New World* Symphony, and which can be heard in some of the melodic shapings and harmonic shadings of her Piano Quintet, written in the 1930s. For both composers, these folk influences have a common source in so-called plantation songs and Native American melodies, and so there are places where their music can sound similar. 'Dvořák's goal was not to have a lot of people sounding like him, it was to encourage American composers to explore their own roots and influences,' says Dusinberre, pointing to Price's third movement, Juba (a type of syncopated dance developed by plantation workers and not unlike a cakewalk), as an example of her going her own way. 'You can hear the influence of Dvořák to some extent, but also a very distinct musical voice. That's what's so interesting about this piece, and why we've really loved working on it.'

Second violinist Harumi Rhodes goes further. 'Personally, I don't really hear Dvořák in Price's music; it's more of a Romantic genre sentiment.' Rhodes cites the second movement, a beautifully rich and contemplative *Andante con moto*, as the highlight of the piece. 'That lullaby feel, the songlike quality of it! Ironically, one of my favourite parts is the extended piano solo, which I know is a weird thing to say as a string quartet member, but how exploratory it is, and how imaginative the music is in ways so different from Dvořák! And that last movement – so short, but fast and furious, super-lively. That's her own voice, for sure.'

The release is the latest in a run that has included music by once-marginalised composers alongside more familiar names. Beach's Piano Quintet is one of

these, as well as Fanny Mendelssohn's String Quartet and Coleridge-Taylor's *Fantasiestücke*. 'Our quartet has always been interested in a sparky conversation between contrasting pieces,' explains Dusinberre. 'Given the current political climate, we're really excited to be programming a wider range of voices.' Such inclusivity has also become part of the Takács's commissioning strategy. Last year alone they premiered a concerto grosso for string quartet and string orchestra by Gabriela Lena Frank entitled *Kachkaniraqmi* (Quechua for 'I still exist'), and issued a 'single' of *Flow* (2023) by Nokuthula Ngwenyama, an American composer of Zimbabwean (specifically Ndebele) and Japanese descent, after audiences kept asking for CDs of it after live performances. Rhodes, who plays a prominent role in the commissioning process, describes the quirky 22-minute piece as 'full of colour and excitement. Nokuthula has a million interests – she studied the viola at major conservatoires and theology at Harvard, and she's interested in the sciences and biology. She really understands what it's like to be on stage, and the idea of communication with the audience, and she's extremely open and fun and extrovert.'

All this may seem a long way from the firm European tradition into which the Takács Quartet was born, and which it still upholds so eloquently. But then the group has acquired a very different make-up and look since those first days. First to leave was Takács-Nagy in 1992, victim of a long-term hand injury; he was replaced by Dusinberre. Illness forced the departure two years later of viola player Ormai (he died in 1995), who was succeeded by Tapping (who died in 2022), who in turn was succeeded by Geraldine Walther in 2005; finally, O'Neill took the viola chair in 2020. When Schranz left in 2018, Rhodes replaced him. From being solidly Hungarian, the quartet has morphed into an ensemble comprising a British-American first violin, a Japanese-Russian-Romanian-American second violin, a Korean-American viola player and a Hungarian cellist. It also long ago moved away from Europe itself, accepting as far back as 1983 a teaching residency (which became a full-time engagement in 1986) that it still holds today at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Looked at from this chronological end of things, it may indeed appear that the Takács could now be called a classically American ensemble.

The Takács (from left: Dusinberre, Rhodes, Fejér, O'Neill) recording their latest album with pianist Marc-André Hamelin, Wyastone Concert Hall, Monmouth, May 2024 (photography: David Hinitt)

Dusinberre has written in his two fascinating and highly individual books on quartet playing and quartet life – *Beethoven for a Later Age: The Journey of a String Quartet* (2016) and *Distant Melodies: Music in Search of Home* (2022) – about the process of recruiting and assimilating new players for a full-time ensemble, including his own experiences as the quartet's first non-Hungarian. 'I was amazed when I joined the group how kind and adaptable they all were,' he says of it now. 'They gave me lots of chances to try things out, even if they were stupid ideas, and nobody said, "That's not going to work."' Fejér concurs: 'It was never a question of trying to stay in the same rut, of us making faces and saying, "Gábor wouldn't have played it like this." No, Ed had charisma and his own style, and we tried to mix and combine with his expressivity, adapting to the situation in a way that meant the music could still be convincing and true.'

Rhodes, too, felt nothing but support when she joined: 'I felt right away that whenever I tried to challenge myself personally to be creative about my second-violin role, it was celebrated by the three people around me. They liked that about me, and so I felt I could be myself. To celebrate someone and feel

like they're bringing in something new and imaginative, that's the way to encourage change. One thing that surprised me, though, was that I thought it was going to be more serious, but actually there was lots of laughing and jokes at the rehearsals. I feel like I've had a better sense of humour since I joined!'

For O'Neill, a self-confessed CD nerd who grew up in a rural part of America listening to the great quartet ensembles on record with his friends, joining the Takács was like a fan's dream. 'That Decca recording of the Bartók quartets was a game changer for us. Those early Juilliard recordings, they were mind-blowing! The Emerson's was a digital marvel of recording virtuosity! The Végh Quartet – colourful, amazing! But when the Takács recording came along it felt so *human*, the music just felt like it made sense. Earlier in my life, everything had to be about that pristine digital experience – blended, perfect, in tune. I remember early on with the quartet I was trying to get something to work, to fit in and blend, and Ed just asked, "Well, how do you feel about it?" I said, "I don't know how I feel because I don't know if I'm allowed to feel." And Ed just said, "Of course you are." I think that really embodies the feeling of being in this quartet – the humanity, the uniqueness of the individual and the music at the forefront. Yes, the DDD technology and the competence and perfection are important, but the delivery of the music in a characterful, meaningful manner, with five hundred per cent commitment, is paramount.'

It rather invites the question of what type of person you need to be to join a great string quartet. The players smile cautiously when I ask it, before Dusinberre jumps in. 'This may sound a little facetious, but *I* find I have to be a nicer person than I am. You have to be always empathetic with the others, able to take criticism and find nice ways to express your own comments. That's taxing on a personal level, but incredibly rewarding when it's going well.'

'I think as a string quartet player you're in the profession of bringing out the best in the others around you,' adds Rhodes. 'Maybe I'm saying this because I'm a second violin, but you have to make a musical atmosphere that allows other people to feel liberated and which also extends to the audience. You have to be someone who wants to share, to have that as part of your spirit of music-making. Not everyone's into that, I guess. A more boring answer would be that you have to be willing to do the work – really hard work. There are no quick fixes in quartet playing, nothing moves quickly.' O'Neill agrees: 'You have to really love this crazy gift of being in a quartet because it's kind of a special thing, right? – a life commitment that requires everything of anyone who takes the deep dive into it. You have to have a complete understanding of all the parts and how they work together, but also be very open to the limitless ways of coming to solutions and agreements. Sometimes these can be conflicting but still agreeing. There's nothing more transformative or meaningful than this venture.'

Fejér looks back to the early years, when the quartet was forging its identity. In his still-heavy, measured Hungarian accent he explains, 'You have to be convincing, and if you feel secure in your ideas, go from there. Your colleagues will have their own input and it's this wonderful and ever-changing amalgam which finally gives something that is convincing and enjoyable. When we were a start-up quartet, we didn't realise this; but finally we came to recognise that there's no one truth, no one valid solution to anything, and you can approach from different directions and arrive at different results, but many things can work. The moment you realise that you have to fight less, the quartet's economy is much better and it comes down to teamwork – and a reduced ego.'

Dusinberre ends *Beethoven for a Later Age* with an affectionate imagining of Takács founders stretching their legs by the roadside en route to a gig somewhere, playing keepy-uppy with a football, passing it from one to another 'like a musical phrase, buoyant, vital and expectant. Now they consult maps, arguing about the choice of route – a string quartet will always find something to debate – and squeeze instrument cases and players into cars. Luggage piled high, rear-view mirrors

obscured, they press forward, hoping to complete their long journey west before nightfall.' How far they and their successors have come!

the Strad

April 8, 2025

From Attic to album: Takács Quartet and Marc-André Hamelin shine light on Florence Price's Piano Quintet

Takács Quartet with Marc-André Hamelin

This year, the Takács Quartet celebrates its 50th anniversary with global tours, new commissions, and another opportunity to savour their artistry on disc. Their latest album — made in collaboration with a favourite partner, keyboard phenomenon Marc-André Hamelin — continues the ensemble's commitment to expanding the chamber music repertoire by championing female composers.

Florence Price takes the spotlight in a pairing of her Piano Quintet in A minor (1936) with Antonín Dvořák's ever-popular A major Piano Quintet. Price's score was among a trove of manuscripts discovered in an Illinois attic in 2009, more than 50 years after her death. The quintet reveals her singular voice: lyrical, structurally inventive and deeply rooted in African American musical traditions.

Early in his American residency as director of New York's National Conservatory — founded by the visionary philanthropist Jeannette Thurber — Dvořák championed the idea that Black spirituals and Indigenous

music held the key to an authentically American musical identity. Price's quintet now finds powerful new life alongside Dvořák's chamber masterwork — two pieces linked by a shared faith in the richness of American musical voices. Takács violist Richard O'Neill shared some thoughts on the album.

What are some of the unique challenges and rewards for a string quartet in playing Florence Price's Piano Quintet?

Richard O'Neill: The Price Quintet is a new discovery for us. We enjoyed very much the process of learning the work. From a string perspective, Price is often very tuneful which is always a positive. Transitional material and how things develop throughout each of the movements were perhaps the biggest challenge, making shape and sense of the first movement, and also getting the last movement to feel like the culmination of the piece even though it is the shortest movement in length. The inner movements have fun things for all the string parts.

How do the textures and colours of Price's writing compare to Dvořák's? Did anything about her string writing surprise you?

Richard O'Neill: As the violist of the quartet, I appreciate very much how Price gives quite a lot of the juicy material to the viola. The first violin writing is virtuosic and that is a delight. If it were a direct comparison to the Dvořák, Price does not take advantage of the cello as much as Dvořák – but it is hard to think of a piano quintet that gives such prominence to the cello as the Dvořák.

You've played Dvořák's Piano Quintet many, many times. Did revisiting it in the context of Price's work give you a fresh perspective on this familiar friend?

Richard O'Neill: Most definitely. There are interesting parallels – the Price and Dvořák both sharing slow and soulful slow movements (second), jubilant dance movements (third) and rambunctious finales (fourth). Price was a virtuoso pianist, and the piano writing was thrilling to hear (from a string player's perspective).

This is your fifth recording with Marc-André Hamelin. What makes this collaboration so special? How has your dynamic evolved over the years?

Richard O'Neill: Marc-André is a friend and we have enjoyed very much working with him over the years. Not only is he one of the most gifted pianists that we know, he is also a formidable composer, and this perspective – compositional – was extremely helpful with the recording process for this project. It has been a lot of fun to work with Marc-André on such diverse repertoire as Shostakovich, Franck, Schumann and Dohnányi!

Any interesting observations about the rehearsal process for this album? Were there any interpretative decisions that required extra discussion?

I must say that Marc-André's perspective as a composer was really meaningful during this process because he understood things that were incredibly helpful when we were learning the piece. His expert and facile playing also made easy work of many of the challenging piano licks.

What do you hope this recording brings to audiences – especially when it comes to shining a light on Florence Price's chamber music?

Richard O'Neill: During the performances that preceded this recording, there were so many friends and audience members who came up to us and said how much they enjoyed the Price Quintet. It is a work that deserves to be heard and it was a privilege to get to record it for Hyperion and Marc-André. Especially in the context of what Dvořák believed about the future of music in America, I feel that the pairing of the two works on this disc helps highlight and differentiate each piece's unique character.

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April 9, 2025

Video of the Day: Takács Quartet and Marc-André Hamelin perform Florence Price's 'Piano Quintet in A minor: III. Juba: Allegro'

By Holly Baker

Today's Video of the Day is a performance of Florence Price's 'Piano Quintet in A minor: III. Juba: Allegro' by the Takács Quartet and Marc-André Hamelin. As in her symphonies, the slow movement of Price's Piano Quintet is followed by a jazzy 'juba': a dance movement whose syncopated rhythms were accompanied, in the absence of any percussion instruments, by stomping and slapping. The recording can be found on the quartet and Hamelin's fifth Hyperion album together which couples Antonín Dvořák and Florence Price.

Boulder
MOUNTAIN LIVING IN COLORADO
Magazine

March 31, 2025

Four of a Kind

By Matt Maenpaa

What Grammy-winning musical group, residing at the University of Colorado at Boulder, is celebrating its 50th anniversary?

The answer may surprise you, especially if you are unfamiliar with the state of contemporary classical music in America. When not making award-winning recordings or touring the planet, the Takács Quartet, one of the most honored string quartets in the world, calls Boulder home.

"We always loved Boulder for its combination of many things. We adored that there was a huge, highly sophisticated audience base, the university has been supporting us from the very beginning and that support has only grown in these past decades," says Takács co-founder and cellist András Fejér. "And finally, this is just the place to return to in between tours all over the world. It's ideal, really."

Richard O'Neill, the group's violist and newest member, concurs. "I'll have to say, with the pandemic, the access to nature and all the trails saved my psyche. And it's such an amazing, beautiful place to live."

The Quartet was formed by four students at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, Hungary in 1975. The group's founders were Gábor Takács-Nagy, first violin; Károly Schranz, second violin; Gábor Ormai on viola, and Fejér on cello. In 1983, the group became the quartet-in-residence at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Today, Fejér is joined by Edward Dusinberre, first violin; Harumi Rhodes, second violin; and O'Neill on viola. Each player has achieved much individually

as well, bringing a diverse set of musical skills to their work together.

Dusinberre, originally from England, joined the Quartet in 1993. He is a published author who explored the challenge of playing Beethoven in "Beethoven for a Later Age: The Journey of a String Quartet." Rhodes, who joined the group in 2018, is originally from New Jersey, and notched an extensive solo career before joining Takács.

Fejér came from a musical family, playing cello by age seven—as his cellist and conductor father couldn't stand the idea of the noise of violin practice. And O'Neill hails from a small town near Seattle. He recalls listening to Takács as a child, dreaming of playing at that level, a dream that came true in in 2020, when he joined the group.

The group won a Grammy for its 2003 recording of Beethoven's string quartets and has garnered a slew of additional trophies for its work. Together, the players have explored the full spectrum of the string quartet repertoire, including the iconic compositions of Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert and Mozart. They are fully conversant with the modern quartet literature, recording an award-winning set of Bartok's quartets in 1998.

In addition, the Quartet commissions new pieces from contemporary composers. They recently debuted Clarice Assad's "Clash" for string quartet and bandoneon (an instrument akin to a button accordion), and they continue to premiere new work.

"I definitely think—at least in our programming—we have explored a lot of composers over time, especially in the last few seasons," O'Neill says. "We had some really exciting commissions from Gabriela Lena Frank, from Nokuthula Endo Ngwenyama, from Stephen Hough, and now this piece with Clarice Assad. We have been exploring a lot of pieces of our time, from people who are still living."

Clearly, not idle, they perform 90 concerts a year. In 2025 alone, the group travels to South Korea, Japan, Australia (premiering a new piece by Cathy Milliken for narrator and quartet), London, Barcelona, Budapest, Milan and the alliterative Basel, Bath and Bern. Back home, they travel North America from New York to Vancouver with stops in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., La Jolla, Berkeley, Ann Arbor, Chicago, Tucson, Portland and Princeton.

Throughout its existence, the Quartet's history is marked by a steady cycle of performers. How has the group maintained its identity through the personnel changes?

"One of the most compelling features when I was outside the group listening as a sort of a nerdy teenager, is that the quartet has such a liveliness and commitment to making music that's very human," O'Neill says. "What I really loved about all the Takács recordings was this commitment and almost risk-taking to the music-making—that the goal wasn't perfection, the goal was to be completely committed to make the music as vivid and alive as possible."

CLASSICAL MUSIC
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March 3, 2025

Death and the Maiden: Schubert's harrowing string quartet and most emotive recordings

By Erik Levi

Takács Quartet

Few quartets have enjoyed such a long and distinguished recording history as *Death and the Maiden*. Indeed, one of the earliest recorded versions, given by the Busch Quartet in the late 1930s (Warner Classics), still very much holds its own, particularly for the wonderfully moving way in which the players unfold the sequence of variations in the second movement, and for the sustained energy and tension of the Finale which is capped by a daring almost unhinged accelerando near the end.

Later performances from 1970s and '80s by the Amadeus (DG), the Alban Berg (Warner Classics) and Quartetto Italiano (Universal) also command enormous respect for the warmth and fluidity of their performances although they don't take as many risks as the Busch Quartet.

Since then, almost every major quartet worth its salt has committed its interpretation of *Death and the Maiden* to disc, making the field not only extremely crowded but highly competitive. Of course, absolute technical mastery of Schubert's ferociously difficult writing, especially in the fast and furious unison passages of the finale, has to be taken for granted, and almost all the currently available versions fulfil this requirement more than admirably.

So the choice of the finest recording rests far more on the ways in which the players get to grips with sustaining the emotional anguish of Schubert's message without being over-bearing too much of the time. Equally vital is the extent to which interpreters resist the temptation to contrive sudden artificial shifts in gear to enable there to be sufficient contrasts in mood in such a long and expansive work.

To my mind, the Takács Quartet's 2006 recording trumps all rivals in delivering a performance that maintains an almost demonic forward momentum throughout the first, third and fourth movements. They have all the necessary power and variety of **timbre** to encapsulate every aspect of the music, from wildness and anger to tenderness, poignancy and even numbness of expression. But this is achieved without resorting to sentimentality or exaggerated mannerisms.

As a result of their incredibly subtle mastery of Schubert's textures, they perfectly convey the emotional ambiguity that lies behind the music's more lyrical episodes, a good example being the gentler second idea in the first movement where the menacing viola **ostinato** pattern casts a distinctly uneasy light on the sweet-toned melody in thirds in the violins.

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TAKÁCS QUARTET

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ISSN 0039-2049

THE FIFTH ELEMENT

As the Takács Quartet celebrates its 50th birthday, its members talk to **Pauline Harding** about the ensemble's legacy, the intangible 'fifth spirit' that has shaped its character even as its players have changed over the decades, and the importance of teaching and other projects and challenges

The Takács Quartet (*l-r*): Edward Dusinberre, Harumi Rhodes, András Fejér and Richard O'Neill

Four very different characters walk on to London's Wigmore Hall stage. They are the members of the Takács Quartet, and as they dive into Haydn's String Quartet in D minor op.42, Dvořák's String Quartet in E flat major op.51 and an encore of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's 'Humoresque' from *Fantasiestücke* op.5, their individual personas shine through in every phrase. First violinist Edward Dusinberre is a tall, upright Brit in his mid-fifties, with a warm smile and adventurously twinkling eyes. He plays with shimmering, effortless clarity. Petite by comparison is second violinist Harumi Rhodes, an American in her mid-forties, with Japanese, Russian and Romanian family heritage. Her empathetic demeanour glows through in the mellow timbre of her playing. Then there is Hungarian cellist András Fejér, who turns 70 next year and sits squat, square and content, with feet planted firmly on the ground, beneath an eccentric crown of frizzy hair that reverberates with the gorgeous sonority of his cello. Finally, 45-year-old Korean–American violist Richard O'Neill, on the quartet's outer edge, throws tantrums of notes and sweeping ethereal phrases towards the ensemble and the audience, along with petulant glares and daydreamy smiles. The four are like a chatting, bickering family, sometimes in sympathy with one another, sometimes in disagreement, but never straying from their cohesive musical unit. They make a captivating theatre of Wigmore's concert stage.

The Takács Quartet looks obviously at home at Wigmore, where its players have been associate artists since 2012. The hall is significant in the Takács's history: it was at the 1979 inaugural Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition – then in Portsmouth, without Wigmore Hall in its title – that the ensemble won an early first prize. That was four years after violinists Gábor Takács-Nagy and Károly Schranz, violist Gábor Ormai and cellist Fejér had established the group at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest. In the late 1980s, meanwhile, a Takács performance in Limerick started an Irish schoolboy's love affair with string quartets. That schoolboy was John Gilhooly, who became Wigmore Hall's executive director and artistic director in 2000 and 2005 respectively – something for which Fejér (jokes the cellist) takes responsibility. For its artistic contributions to the hall, ▷

IAN MALKIN

(*l–r*) András Fejér, Harumi Rhodes, Richard O'Neill and Edward Dusinberre

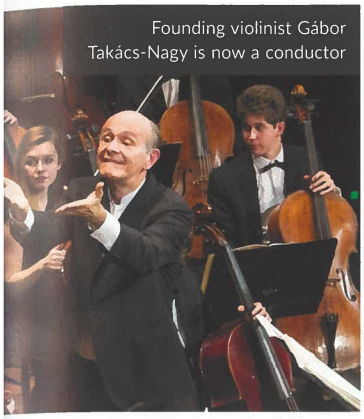
AMANDA TIPTON

the ensemble was the first string quartet to receive a Wigmore Hall Medal (in 2014).

Of course, the Takács's 50-year history extends far beyond Wigmore. Other early successes include first prizes at competitions in Evian (1977), Bordeaux (1979) and Bratislava (1981). Later came two Royal Philharmonic Society awards in 1992 and 2011, five *Gramophone* Awards between 1998 and 2021, a Grammy (2002), three awards from the Japanese Record Academy (2002, 2004, 2006), a *BBC Music Magazine* Disc of the Year in 2006 and a Presto Music Recording of the Year Award in 2021. The Takács was also the first string quartet to enter the *Gramophone* Hall of Fame in 2012. The ensemble's tens of recordings span the diverse string quartet, string quintet and piano quintet repertoire of the 18th to 21st centuries, from Haydn to Hough.

This concert season the ensemble celebrates its 50th anniversary. But with Fejér as the group's only remaining founder member, I ask, is the Takács Quartet *really* still the Takács Quartet? Dusinberre replaced Takács-Nagy as first violin in 1993. Rhodes replaced Schranz in 2018. The viola chair, meanwhile, saw Roger Tapping take over from Ormai in 1994; Geraldine Walther replace Tapping in 2005; and O'Neill assume the role in 2020. They answer my question with a resounding 'Yes!': they are the Takács Quartet through and through, bound by a decades-old legacy and a 'fifth element', the Takács spirit, that has persisted even as its players have changed. O'Neill first noticed that 'magical balance' as a student, when listening to the ensemble's 1998 Bartók cycle. 'Those recordings came out when I was at college, and they were mind-blowing,' he says. 'The technique wasn't for showing off – everything had musical meaning, and it was just so captivating. I've heard all the Takács Quartet recordings now, and it's amazing to me that whoever the voices are, somehow that magic fifth personality of the Takács Quartet is always there.' ▹

> 'I'VE HEARD ALL THE TAKÁCS QUARTET RECORDINGS, AND IT'S AMAZING THAT SOMEHOW THAT MAGIC FIFTH PERSONALITY IS ALWAYS THERE' – *RICHARD O'NEILL, VIOLA*


Founding violinist Gábor Takács-Nagy is now a conductor

That fifth element stems, it seems, from the ensemble's cultivation of individual ideas and voices. 'When I joined the quartet I was young and inexperienced,' says Dusinberre. 'But if I had an idea, the others always let me try it out. They never said, "We are much older than you, so trust us. You're wrong." I felt incredibly well supported.' O'Neill had a similar experience when he joined years later. Even before he was offered a bed in the quartet's home town of Boulder, Colorado, Fejér left him with 'crates and crates of viola parts from the previous members of the quartet, with all their hard-earned markings'. As the group's newest member and fourth violist, he found it fascinating to look back over those parts to see how the quartet's ideas had evolved over the years without sacrificing individual personalities. 'For me that was a major life change,' says O'Neill. 'It wasn't that I was kept from being myself before that; but for a quartet it is difficult, because you don't want four drastically different personalities that don't coalesce.'

The ability to have four distinct personalities that *do* coalesce, however, has been a hallmark of the Takács's success. 'I come into rehearsal knowing that everything's fair game, and that there's no such thing as a sacred bowing,' says O'Neill. Sometimes, he confesses, he hesitates before rubbing out earlier players' markings, which he feels represent the quartet's spirit and the years of hard work that preceded him. Yet the players also sometimes find it liberating to erase aspects of that past, rather than being chained to them. 'My predecessor, Gábor Takács-Nagy, is a conductor now, and he is a phenomenal musician,' says Dusinberre. 'The idea of trying to fill his shoes was daunting, and so I had to work out that, well, "I'm *not* going to fill his shoes. I'm going to have to do something different and be myself." For me, the past members are very much still in the room, in terms of the contributions they made: they gave their hearts and souls to the group, and that's why we're here today. But when there's a change of member in a quartet, you have to move forward.'

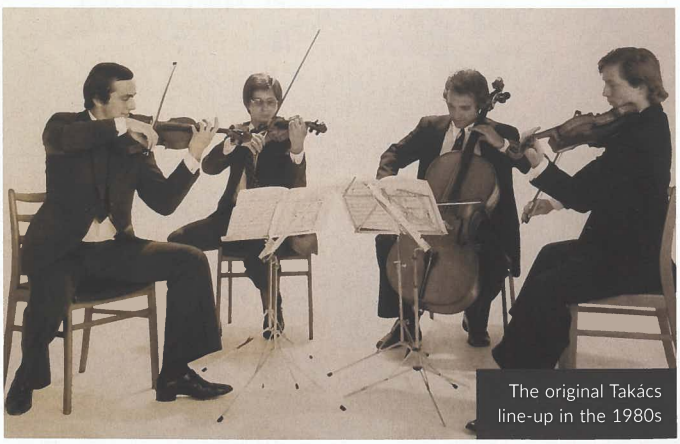
That sense of progress is also necessary, says Fejér, because the group's players and style have changed. 'We were not as free when we started as we are today,' he says. 'Back then the bowing might have been more careful, more thought out. Now the quartet is a vibrant living organism. We work, we keep working, we dig, we argue, we work more, and we hope that in the process we all improve.'

> 'THE QUARTET IS A VIBRANT LIVING ORGANISM. WE WORK, WE DIG, WE ARGUE, WE WORK MORE, AND WE HOPE THAT IN THE PROCESS WE ALL IMPROVE' – *ANDRÁS FEJÉR, CELLO*

Inevitably, some changes have been more affecting than others. When Dusinberre joined the group, it was more than some Takács fans could bear. 'People thought, "Who's this stiff, uptight Brit who's joined this Hungarian group?"' says Dusinberre. 'All of Hungary was in despair!' Fejér exclaims. 'They said, "My dear sons, what has happened to your Hungarian identity?" And we said, "What Hungarian identity?" We tried to be expressive, we tried to be in tune. It had nothing to do with being Hungarian.' The three older members were quick to protect Dusinberre from outside hostility. 'I was a bit insecure after reading the reviews,' says Dusinberre. 'And András said, "All that matters is that everything is fine between the four of us."' Fejér nods: 'That gives you resistance against what other people think,' he says. 'Your immune system grows because of this togetherness you have against everything else in the world. It's wonderful to be in our own cocoon and support system.' Nowadays, the players' mixed nationalities and ages only enrich the quartet's musical output and allow the ensemble to connect with more diverse audiences.

The Takács 'cocoon' is nowhere stronger than at the University of Colorado, Boulder, where its players have been full-time Christoffersen Fellows and Artists-in-Residence since 1986. There they spend a little over half the year rehearsing, performing and teaching. The residency gives ▹


The founding members of the quartet (*l–r*) András Fejér, Gábor Ormai, Károly Schranz and Gábor Takács-Nagy


The original Takács line-up in the 1980s

TAKÁCS-NAGY PHOTO ANDREA FELVEGI. QUARTET PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANDRÁS FEJÉR

them time, support and space to recharge, practise and explore music together. 'On the road, we're constantly changing, depending on the hall or the situation,' says Rhodes. 'In Colorado, we can work and cultivate a sound, without being pushed and pulled all the time. It's a musical home for us.' The residency has also allowed the quartet to structure its practice, says Fejér, so that 'at some point joy creeps in, and then it stays'. That joy, Rhodes says proudly, always stood out to her when she listened to the ensemble's recordings as a student, more than in any other quartet she'd ever heard. It is something she cherishes, in a career that was previously dominated by 'a lot of pressure to be perfect, or fierce, or intellectual, or wise'. For the whole ensemble, joy remains a priority, and one made all the easier by a revitalising Colorado fan base, some of which has been attending the Takács's university concert series for more than 30 years. 'It's a home crowd,' says Dusinberre. 'Sometimes they're so happy to see each other that I used to joke we could go home without performing and no one would even notice.' That joke, he says, died quickly during the pandemic, when the crowd's party-like chatter was replaced by the haunting silence of an empty concert hall. Only this year does he feel that the audience has finally regained its vigour.

Teaching – through the Colorado residency and, in the summer, at California's Music Academy of the West – is important to the Takács players because it keeps them well grounded and connected. 'It means that we don't become out of touch with music as it lives in the world,' says Rhodes. 'We get to know what the younger generation care about, what music they are listening to, how they hear it and what they really need.' This, agrees Dusinberre, helps to 'keep us real' – as when a student of his recently played a 'very surprising bowing' for Bartók's String Quartet no.3 in a masterclass, simply because he had seen Dusinberre play it another way in a concert the previous week. 'It was brilliant,' says Dusinberre. 'It shows that we're not brainwashing our students: they listen to us, they get ideas and sometimes they want to do something different. That's what I call education.'

The quartet has also reached out to the wider community, supporting disadvantaged children via Boulder Suzuki Strings and the Greater Boulder Youth Orchestras, and in 2023–4 in collaboration with El Sistema Colorado, in Denver. The hope is to nurture new audiences and performers, and to make excellent recordings available especially to those who struggle to access concert halls. 'It's about planting seeds,' says O'Neill. 'You never know how they're going to germinate.' Dusinberre particularly

> 'IN COLORADO, WE CAN WORK AND CULTIVATE A SOUND, WITHOUT BEING PUSHED AND PULLED ALL THE TIME. IT'S A MUSICAL HOME FOR US'
> *– HARUMI RHODES, VIOLIN*

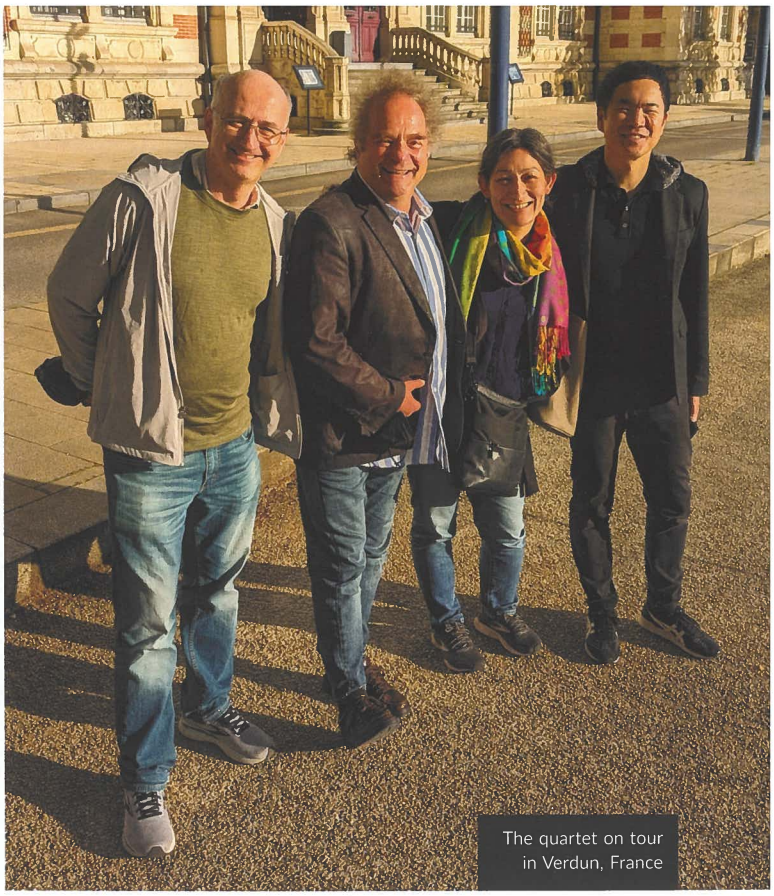
THOMAS HULL

Rehearsing with pianist Marc-André Hamelin at the Chipping Campden Festival, May 2024

enjoys answering these children's candid questions after concerts because, he says, 'It shows that they are engaging with the human aspects of playing. We've been asked, "Why did the first violinist have trouble with his page turn? Hasn't he played the piece before?"; "Why does the cellist shake his head?"; and "Why does the first violinist stamp his foot?" It's delightfully unfiltered.' Sometimes the children's words can be emotional too, Rhodes found during the El Sistema project. 'We were playing inside the group, side by side, so I asked my stand partner, "Are you looking forward to the concert coming up?" And she's a very shy person, but she said, "Yeah, it's nice to be actually proud of something." And I thought, "I need a tissue!" I'm not going to forget that.'

Going forward, the Takács players intend to maintain this balance of concert-giving and educational work, while scouting for interesting new projects and challenges. Past adventures have included performances with Muzsikás, a Hungarian folk group specialising in the folk tunes that inspired Bartók; and performances with narrations by Robert Pinsky (US Poet Laureate, 1997–2000). In 2007, 2014 and 2015 the quartet worked first with actor Philip Seymour Hoffman and later with actress Meryl Streep, playing music interspersed by readings from Philip Roth's 2006 novel *Everyman*. In 2021 they began a collaboration with bandoneonist Julien Labro, with a mixed programme of old and contemporary works. This continues as part of the 50th-anniversary celebrations. New commissions for the 2024–5 season include a work for string quartet and narrator by Cathy Milliken, about displacement and migration. This the ensemble plans to juxtapose with Beethoven's once similarly radical op.59 no.1 'Rasumovsky' Quartet, which Dusinberre is excited to explore for the first time with Rhodes and O'Neill.

Rhodes speaks enthusiastically about long-standing friendships with composers including Gabriela Lena Frank, Nokuthula Ngwenyama and Clarice Assad that have resulted in more recent commissions, too – works that the whole group is eager to play, partly because of the composers' shared love and understanding for string chamber music. Ngwenyama, for example, is an accomplished violist whose compositions, says Rhodes, are idiomatic and enriched by a highly intellectual interest in theology and science. In *Flow* (2023), a quartet co-commissioned by the Takács and premiered in the US in November 2023, she evokes 'sounds of the atmosphere, of atoms moving, of starling bird formations – all kinds of imaginative stuff', says Rhodes. 'And there are *pranayama* yogic breathing sounds, with written-out passages that sound like inhaling and exhaling. Parts of the piece are very lush and big, with stacked, open intervals to give this cosmic, larger-than-life sound.' All in all, *Flow* tackles what O'Neill calls some 'pretty heavy stuff, way above my science understanding'. It is, however, also a 'true string quartet': accessible, idiomatic, thought-provoking and overflowing with radiance and positive energy. The Takács Quartet recorded *Flow* in May, for digital release in November, in response to requests from audience members. They will also give its London premiere at Wigmore Hall on 14 November, following the European premiere in Edinburgh in August. It all serves as a reminder that this is an ensemble buoyed by its 50-year history, not weighed down by it. As put by Dusinberre, 'A good group, if it's going to be around a long time, can't be too nostalgic for the past. You can be very happy with things that you've done, but you need to keep evolving.' ●



The quartet on tour in Verdun, France

'OUR STUDENTS LISTEN TO US, THEY GET IDEAS AND SOMETIMES THEY WANT TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT. THAT'S WHAT I CALL EDUCATION' – *EDWARD DUSINBERRE, VIOLIN*

The Takács musicians at their home base in Colorado

TOP PHOTO IAN MALKIN, BOTTOM PHOTO AMANDA TIPTON

University of Colorado Boulder

College of Music

September 9, 2024

CU Boulder's Grammy Award-winning Takács Quartet celebrates 50 years

By Marc Shulgold + Sabine Kortals Stein

Harumi Rhodes has mixed feelings about observing The Milestone. As second violinist of the world-renowned, Grammy Award-winning Takács Quartet, she understands the significance of the group's founding a half-century ago.

"It's a monumental moment and we're approaching it with a sense of awe," she admits. "I feel humbled. Yet, in another sense, for us it's business as usual." Much of that business takes place right here in Boulder.

Joining Rhodes in conversation is first violinist Ed Dusinberre, who's also her husband. The English-born musician reflects on the group's remarkable musical journey filled with loss, personnel changes and—most of all—brilliant music making.

"I find myself thinking about all our former quartet members—we wouldn't be celebrating this milestone today except for them," says Dusinberre, recalling that the original quartet was formed by students at the Music Academy in Budapest, Hungary, in 1975.

"They were so young, living behind the Iron Curtain, wondering how they could fulfill their musical aspirations worldwide," he adds.

Hard work and winning prestigious awards in several European competitions led to an American tour in 1982 and—following several U.S.-based short-term residencies—the decision to permanently relocate their families to the United States in 1985-86. Soon after, the players accepted an invitation to become the resident quartet at the University of Colorado Boulder—and they've resided here ever since, though not without challenges. Gábor Takács-Nagy stepped down in 1993 and now enjoys a successful career as a conductor and teacher worldwide. The following year, violist Gábor Ormai was diagnosed with cancer and retired, passing away in 1995. The late Roger Tapping succeeded him, leaving to spend time with his family in 2005; in turn, he was succeeded by Geraldine Walther. Upon the retirement of founding second violinist Károly Schranz, Harumi Rhodes joined the quartet in 2018.

As the first new member in 1993, Dusinberre recalls the challenge of being a non-Hungarian. "It was a big adjustment for me, but I appreciated the welcoming, adventurous spirit of the

players and the warmth of their collective sound," he says. "The process was similar when Harumi and then Richard joined"—referring to current violist Richard O'Neill who succeeded Walther in 2020. Grammy-Award winner for Best Classical Instrumental Solo Performance in 2021, O'Neill is only the second person to receive an award for a viola performance in the history of this category.

Today, cellist András Fejér remains the sole original member of the Takács Quartet.

For Rhodes, becoming a member of the Takács was thrilling. "The College of Music is a musical home for us. We feel grateful to be embedded in this university and the community."

Although the Takács maintain an international touring schedule that takes up about half of their time, the foursome prioritizes time with their students, working in partnership with Meta Weiss, the College of Music's chamber music coordinator.

It may surprise some audience members who've been regulars at sold-out Takács Quartet concerts to learn that the group's campus connection extends beyond Grusin Music Hall. As Dusinberre notes, their decades-long residency is centered around daily hands-on work with College of Music students.

"Our relationship with the college is the glue that keeps us together," he stresses. "Our graduate string quartet program inspires us to think about future generations." This two-year program consists of intense work with a promising ensemble, preparing and guiding the young artists into the demanding world of quartet playing.

"The newest quartet we're working with is the Michigan-based Koa Quartet," adds Rhodes. "We'll listen to their interests and help them to develop a unique musical voice."

The College of Music's chamber music program has a long track record of success. The Brisbane, Australia-based Orava Quartet is a good example: Via email, first violinist Daniel Kowalik shared that his group met the Takács at a music festival in Sydney in 2011—at that time, the Orava had been together for five years. They soon came to CU Boulder to study with the Takács.

"We always worked with one member at a time," wrote Kowalik. "They rotated, so we had time with each member. I asked lots of questions, from general well-being to dealing with the pressures of performing."

Today, the Orava Quartet enjoys an active schedule and has been signed by Deutsche Grammophon. Their Boulder experience "really helped launch us into having a career," Kowalik noted. "Our coachings were invaluable and absolutely essential to learning the craft. Being mentored by the Takács forever changed how I think about and approach music making."

For many students at the College of Music, a career as a performer isn't their only goal—and the Takács Quartet is sensitive to that, too. "It's only partly about making music," Rhodes emphasizes. "Much of what we focus on when we're talking with students has to do with how to make a life in music."

Dusinberre treasures those conversations. "I ask students to identify individual favorite moments in a piece and we explore different ways to heighten those moments. Hopefully they learn about each others' musical tastes and how to use their individual ideas to shape a unified interpretation."

When touring and recording sessions wind down, these beloved artists find a special joy in coming home to Boulder, visiting with faculty colleagues, and sharing their knowledge and experience with students. As Rhodes says, "The gritty and beautiful work of a string quartet happens offstage in the rehearsal room. We feel so grateful that—after many decades—this process continues in our home at CU Boulder."

Reviews

The New York Times

May 12, 2025

The Frick's Gift to New York: A Superb New Concert Hall

There's a crackling aliveness to music in the 220-seat, subterranean yet airy auditorium, which was put through its paces in a burst of six concerts.

By Zachary Woolfe

Most everything at the Frick Collection, which reopened last month after a nearly five-year renovation, is the same as it was, but better.

Hand-loomed velvet wall coverings have been replaced, making Vermeers and Rembrandts pop with fresh vibrancy. Chandeliers and skylights have been cleaned. It's the museum we knew, with the grime wiped away.

What a relief. For almost a century, the jewel-box Frick has held a special place in the city's heart. Why mess with perfection?

But sometimes messing around is worthwhile. The public can now enter the Frick family's upstairs living quarters, turned into intimate galleries. And the museum has returned bearing another gift: a superb space for music, which has swiftly become one of the best places to hear chamber performances in New York City.

The Frick's well-loved concert series has moved from an ovoid room off the garden court, where performances took place since the 1930s, to a new, roughly 220-seat, curved-amphitheater

auditorium two stories underground. In a debut burst of six concerts over two weeks, the theater was put through its paces.

Youthful Baroque ensembles blazed through early music. A long, spare piano solo by Tyshawn Sorey had its New York premiere. The Takacs Quartet and Jeremy Denk played memorably volatile Brahms. There were pieces from Tudor England as well as a just-written song for the countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo.

If you went to all six performances, you heard two Steinway pianos — one from the late 19th century, one recent — as well as a fortepiano, a harpsichord, a synthesizer, a violin fitted with old-style gut strings and another with modern metal ones.

Through the very different programs, instruments and textures, the sound was clear, vividly present and resonant. There's a crackling aliveness to music in the hall.

Every slowly decaying tone in Sorey's "For Julius Eastman" registered. The acoustics encourage both transparency and blending — each of the Takacs players had a defined voice, but those voices also melded — which is difficult to achieve in a relatively small room like this one.

It's also tough to make a subterranean space feel airy and bright. But the new Stephen A. Schwarzman Auditorium — designed by Selldorf Architects, which led the Frick renovation, with acoustical consulting by Arup — avoids claustrophobia.

With pale walls, stylish brown leather seating and a gently wavy proscenium framing the performers, the hall is spacious yet cozy, with frisky touches. (Those zigzag banisters!)

Even in a cultural center like New York, ideal homes for chamber music — gatherings of just a few players, historically in domestic salons — are rarer than you might think. Alice Tully Hall, where the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center resides, sounds good, but with nearly 1,100 seats, lacks the immediacy this repertory lives on. Weill Recital Hall, a staid shoe box at Carnegie Hall, holds fewer than 300, but if seated at the back, you can feel far from the action.

The Morgan Library's Gilder Lehrman Hall benefits from partnerships with Young Concert Artists and the Boston Early Music Festival, but the space is precipitously raked and feels stifling, with flinty acoustics. The Board of Officers Room at the Park Avenue Armory is an ornate delight, but its limited season concentrates on vocal recitals. In this company, the Frick's auditorium stands out.

Concerts at the museum began in 1938, just a few years after the former home of the industrialist Henry Clay Frick opened to the public. The artists presented in that early period were a who's-who of legends like Claudio Arrau, Andrés Segovia and Gregor Piatigorsky. Seating 175, the damask-lined, amber-glowing music room encapsulated the Frick's gentility; until 2005, by which time the focus had shifted from stars to rising artists, tickets were free and had to be requested by mail.

Some devotees were furious when it was announced that the room would be given over to exhibition space in the renovation. "Destroying the Frick's music room — a chamber concert venue beloved for generations — is an erasure of New York City's cultural and civic memory," one resident testified at a Landmarks Preservation Commission hearing in 2018.

But while the music room had old-school charm, its acoustics were inert compared to the zestiness of the new auditorium. In the opening concert, on April 26, Lea Desandre's mezzo-soprano floated atop the sparkling Jupiter Ensemble in Handel arias. The next weekend, Alexi Kenney, whose violin sported those gut strings, joined Amy Yang on fortepiano in scorching Schumann sonatas. The dazzling flutist Emi Ferguson combined with the vivacious group Ruckus for a playfully conceived but seriously virtuosic program interweaving miniatures by Telemann and Ligeti.

Even if the space no longer resembles a 19th-century salon, it is, if anything, more intimate. At the Takacs concert, a tall young man in the front row leaned forward at one point, listening intently, and his face was just a couple of feet from the first violinist.

While the fortepiano was characterful in the Schumann, and Denk's 1880s piano blended well with the Takacs in the Brahms, one acoustical issue concerns the modern concert grand. The Steinway used during Sarah Rothenberg's Sorey premiere and Mishka Rushdie Momen's juxtaposition of Tudor works and contemporary pieces tended to sound stony and blaring in the new hall, even in softer passages.

After spending the first few performances in the center near the front, I sat in a back corner for Rushdie Momen's recital, and the piano sound bounced off the wall so strongly that it almost made my ear ring. Some kind of dampening panels or other intervention might help with the trouble.

But it's hardly unusual for new halls to need acoustical tweaks. Jeremy Ney, appointed the Frick's head of music and performance a year ago — a blink of an eye in the long-planned world of classical music — has hit the ground running with this richly varied, brilliantly played festival. Hopefully he is given the resources to continue to organize robust seasons, not a mere scattering.

And hopefully, in a landscape of museum performance programs increasingly dominated by wan site-specific productions and strained exhibition tie-ins, the series will retain the commitment of these opening weeks: great music, passionately performed. It's as simple as that.

VULTURE

May 2, 2025

The Frick's New Hall Makes Small Ensembles Sound Huge

By Justin Davison

My new favorite mini concert hall is a chamber-music cellar, slipped two floors beneath the Frick. When the architect Annabelle Selldorf renovated and expanded the museum upstairs, honoring its Beaux-Arts sensibility, she reserved this clubby underground room as an expression of her own. (It's the Stephen A. Schwarzman Auditorium, according to the words projected on the wall; perhaps if someone else comes up with a bigger donation, they can simply swap out the slide.) An audience of 218 semi-encircles the stage on tiers fitted out with comfortable leather armchairs; the musicians perform against a convex wall that tosses sound across the same wide arc. The hall is a rarity, an egglike vault gracefully designed to make a concert feel special, and a chamber intimate enough to make listeners feel like they've been drawn deep inside the music rather than receiving it from the stage.

The Takács Quartet, with the pianist Jeremy Denk, helped inaugurate this little space, instantly filling it with spirit. It's not only that we were just about all close enough to the musicians to notice the sparkles on violist Richard O'Neill's

shoes or the way violinist Harumi Rhodes dances in her seat (and sometimes right up out of it); it's that the notes landed on the ear with all their subtlety and force intact. Ampler rooms, even good ones, tend to smooth out detail. Here, thanks to the acoustic engineers at Arup, you could make out the slight thump of a finger on a violin neck, the hiss of the bow, the quiver of a tremolo, the way a note leaves a soft trail as it leaps to the next. And because all that graininess is fundamental to unamplified music, the way a brushstroke is to painting, a trio of dead composers sounded very much alive.

Beethoven kicked open the door to the 19th century with his first string quartet, which opens with one of his characteristic *hey, you!* motives. The Takács used those two simple measures to serve notice, too: Warning, high voltage. For the next two hours, I kept looking for sparks every time a bow hit a string. When chamber musicians of this caliber are at their best, you can sense the thoughts whip around the ensemble, an extra bit of weight on an accent in the first violin prompting an answering push from the cello. Familiarity breeds excitement, and an old score feels suddenly spontaneous.

In Janáček's Quartet No. 1, the Takács ratcheted up the genre's conversational quality into high drama, widening the expressive gulf between the opening lamentation and the skittering response. The piece has a literary cast — Janáček based it on Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* — and the players kept the characters sharp, veering between tender romance and gnashing outbursts in the third movement, or indulging in the full-throated melancholy of the fourth.

Denk joined the quartet for the second half, a rip-roaring performance of Brahms's F-minor Piano Quintet. Adding that one keyboard instrument made the hall seem almost too small to contain so much boiling music. That's a virtue. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, venues kept getting bigger to keep pace with composers who kept pushing their physical limits, and they wound up making the music sound smaller. Brahms, especially, can grow sedate if it sits too comfortably in a hall. Here, you could feel the score's gallop and growl, and sensed the danger in its muscular lines. Great musicians can produce that crackle at will, but not always. A hall like this helps it happen with an atmosphere so electric and intimate it borders on the indecent.

Seen and Heard International
SINCE 1999 A LIVE REVIEW SITE FOR OPERA, BALLET, CONCERTS, BROADCASTS, AND THEATRE

May 4, 2025

The Takács Quartet at the reopened Frick: lines of continuity

By Edward Sava-Segal

The reopening of the Frick Collection this spring marks both a physical transformation and a reaffirmation of its founding vision. Housed in the former Fifth Avenue mansion of industrialist Henry Clay Frick, the museum has long offered a rare fusion of intimacy and grandeur: Old Master paintings, Renaissance bronzes and eighteenth-century decorative arts displayed not in sterile galleries but in richly appointed domestic settings. Designed in 1914 by Carrère and Hastings – the Beaux-Arts architects also responsible for the New York Public Library – the mansion was later expanded in 1935 by John Russell Pope to accommodate its new role as a public museum.

The three-year renovation and expansion, led by Selldorf Architects, preserved the essential character of the mansion while discreetly modernizing its infrastructure and repurposing its internal layout. The upstairs private quarters where the Frick family once lived have been transformed into additional galleries, and the conservation studios have been relocated. Among the most significant additions is a new, state-of-the-art auditorium – built below ground and named for donor Stephen A. Schwarzman – intended for concerts, lectures and other public programs. Its debut signals a renewed commitment to the Frick's tradition of chamber music and intellectual exchange, reimagined for the twenty-first century.

Since its inaugural concert in 1938, the museum has cultivated a distinguished chamber music tradition. From Artur Schnabel to Mitsuko Uchida, from the Budapest Quartet to the Guarneri, many luminaries have contributed to the Frick's reputation as one of New York's premier venues for chamber music. Now, to mark the reopening of the museum and the debut of its new auditorium, the Frick has launched a Spring Music Festival that reflects both historical depth and stylistic range, with offerings spanning Baroque to contemporary. Among the featured programs are a Handel recital with Lea Desandre and Anthony Roth Costanzo alongside the Jupiter Ensemble; the New York premieres of works by Tyshawn Sorey and Vijay Iyer performed by Sarah Rothenberg; and an evening of Robert Schumann violin sonatas with Alexi Kenney and Amy Yang.

The Takács Quartet first performed at the Frick in 1984, early in their international career and just a decade after the ensemble's founding in Budapest. Of the original lineup, only cellist András Fejér remains, yet the group has consistently renewed itself

without compromising its artistic identity. Celebrating its fiftieth anniversary this year, the quartet continues to exemplify clarity, precision and expressive depth. For their return to the Frick as part of the reopening celebrations, they were joined by pianist Jeremy Denk in a program that moved between restraint, turbulence and grandeur – an ideal vehicle for exploring the acoustic character of the Frick's elegant and discreet new auditorium.

From the first attack of Beethoven's String Quartet No.1 in F major, the ensemble's coordination was striking – each entrance crisp, each phrase paced with quiet authority. There was no need for rhetorical underlining: articulation and balance did the work. The first movement unfolded with a kind of structural patience, revealing not just thematic logic but the give-and-take of four players deeply attuned to one another. The *Adagio* was marked by restraint – affective, not sentimental – with silences that felt like held breaths. The *Scherzo* had bite without overstatement, and the final movement's rhythmic edge emerged more from tension than volume. The room's acoustic clarity undoubtedly supported the group's ensemble precision, but the absence of wood paneling gave the sound a certain neutrality – at times a coolness – that seemed to drain some warmth from the inner voices. The Takács's reading recalled Haydn, not only in its elegance and motivic economy but in its quiet refusal of grandiosity. Their Beethoven was neither nostalgic nor monumental. Instead, it was alive to detail and shaped by long-line thinking, the kind of performance where motivic connections – rather than tonal peaks – provide the contour.

One of the most distinctive string quartets of the early twentieth century, Janáček's 'Kreutzer Sonata' remains surprisingly underperformed. Written in 1923 and inspired by Tolstoy's novella of the same name, the work was also shaped by Janáček's obsessive, unreciprocated attachment to Kamila Stösslová, the young married woman who served as muse to many of his late compositions. Emotionally volatile and structurally unorthodox, the quartet bypasses conventional development in favor of obsessive fragments, abrupt contrasts and compressed lyricism.

The Takács players did not try to unify the music's torn edges but leaned into its jagged lyricism – its abrupt emotional pivots, fierce whispers and wounded outbursts. Where Beethoven hinted at Haydn's motivic logic, here Janáček's repetitions and fragmentary gestures seemed to circle memory and rupture. The ensemble's control remained firm, but the emotional energy was far less contained: sudden swells broke through whispered pianissimos, phrases ended in silence or dissolution, and the players allowed dissonance to hang in the air unresolved. Dusinberre's first violin lines pushed toward the operatic, almost vocal in their anguish; Fejér, with his grainy, dark-hued tone, reinforced the work's psychological weight from below; and O'Neill, with a mellow but resonant tone, gave shape to the quartet's turbulent interior, maintaining expressive tension within even the most fragmented material. His phrasing created connective tissue between violent outbursts and moments of stasis, lending coherence to a score that can easily feel episodic. In this more exposed and unstable musical terrain, the auditorium's clarity served the music's intensity, though again without lending it much warmth. If anything, the space heightened the sense of emotional rawness – a kind of clean brutality, sharpened by contrast with the understated intimacy of the Beethoven that preceded it.

The second half was devoted to Brahms's Piano Quintet in F minor, a work whose stormy grandeur and structural density presented yet another expressive challenge. Jeremy Denk joined the quartet, not as soloist but as equal partner – alert to texture and especially sensitive to the interplay between piano and strings. The Frick lent an 1883 Steinway & Sons concert grand named Palisandra for the occasion – an instrument built during

Brahms's lifetime, whose resonance and tonal palette evoked the very soundworld in which the quintet was conceived. Yet in this intimate space, the piano's projection occasionally tipped the balance and overwhelmed the ensemble's carefully blended dynamic. To their credit, Denk and the Takács responded with sensitivity – adjusting touch and articulation where possible, though the instrument's power was always just at the edge of containment.

Edward Dusinberre shaped the first violin's surging lines with lyrical urgency; Harumi Rhodes, in the second violin seat, responded with clarity and poise. Under the attentive and proud gaze of her father, the great violist Samuel Rhodes – a longtime member of the Juilliard String Quartet – she played as she had throughout the evening: with quiet authority and a finely judged sense of ensemble. The *Andante* unfolded with a kind of searching lyricism, gently unsettled by harmonic shifts. The *Scherzo* moved with dark energy, but never rushed; and in the *Finale*, Denk and the quartet held a tight focus on pacing and cohesion, resisting the temptation to let the closing material sprawl. There was grandeur, certainly – but always shaped from within, not imposed from outside.

What lingered most after the final chord was not just the refinement of the playing, but the sheer vitality the Takács Quartet continues to bring to the stage. They play not like a group looking back, but like musicians still in love with the act of discovery. That sense of urgency, of collective listening and risk-taking, was present in every phrase. Nothing in their performance felt settled or habitual. If anything, it offered a sense of renewal – of chamber music as a living art, and of the quartet's evolving bond with it.

musical america
WORLDWIDE

March 18, 2025

The Takács Quartet's Fresh Approach to Masters Old & New

By Fred Cohn

On paper, the program for the Takács Quartet's recent 92nd Street Y appearance was unremarkable: standard works by Haydn and Beethoven sandwiching a piece of new music. But the March 13 concert carried no trace of routine, reinforcing the quartet's reputation for exemplary music-making. With cellist András Fejér the only original member, the current cohort––which also includes violinists Edward Dusinberre and Harumi Rhodes and violist Richard O'Neill––demonstrated that, a near half-century after its 1975 founding, the Takács thrives.

The program was labeled "The Natural World," with all three of its selections shaped in some fashion by nature. It began, bracingly, with Haydn's *Sunrise* Quartet. The work's opening measures depict the daybreak of its title as a first-violin figure rises from the mist of sustained chords. Marked Allego con spirito, the second movement proceeded at a fast clip, as if expelled in a single breath, taut but never tense. The ensuing Adagio unfolded like a *bel canto* melody; its "singer" being the four musicians, playing and breathing as an integral organism. Haydn sets the two violins playing in thirds through significant stretches of the finale; as executed by Dusinberre and Rhodes, the sound seemed to emerge from a single instrument.

The general unanimity of ensemble by no means inhibited interpretive freedom. The *Sunrise* was marked by an extraordinary command of rubato, the players offering finely controlled tempo modifications throughout while keeping the basic pulse steady and viscerally present. The inflections served to heighten the drama of Haydn's writing; my companion remarked that the players gave the piece "the Beethoven treatment." But it never felt like the Takács was imposing the conventions of a later tradition on Haydn; instead, the sense of interpretive freedom only accentuated the work's classical underpinnings.

The new work was a Takács commission receiving its New York premiere: *Flow*, by Nokuthula Ngwenyama, an American composer of Zimbabwean-Japanese parentage. This, too, begins with a "natural" component; as Rhodes explained in a short introduction, the work's opening depicts "the beginning of the universe." Rhodes went on to tell us that *Flow* reflects the composer's interest in the intersections of "physics, chemistry, biology, and spirituality." At first hearing, it was hard to discern such a purpose in the piece. But the opening measures, characterized by spectral violin harmonics, clearly depict primordial miasma; the rest of the four-movement work seems to represent the emergence of order from chaos.

A happy synergy

Coming on the heels of the "Sunrise," the *Flow*'s ordered elements called to mind Haydn's classicism. But the work also has a strong element of Neo-romanticism, as when the third-movement Scherzo coheres into an exuberant, R. Strauss-ian waltz. Throughout, Ngwenyama offers opportunities for solo display, perhaps a characteristic derived from Romantic concertos. She is herself a violist, which may explain why she gave the juiciest of these to O'Neill, who played with impeccable beauty and panache. Matching of composer and ensemble seemed like the happiest kind of synergy: *Flow* succeeded both as a showpiece for its commissioners and as an engaging 22 minutes of music in its own right.

The program cocluded with the second of Beethoven's Op. 59 Razumovsky quartets. The "natural" tie-in here was not immediately perceptible, but a press release pointed to testimony from Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny that the composer conceived its slow second movement while looking at the stars and imagining "the music of the spheres." Considering the quality of the performance, the Czerny anecdote was hardly necessary to divine the work's celestial essence.

Once again, Takács' ensemble skills were very much in evidence, with uniform dynamic and rhythmic emphases that were clearly the result of painstaking preparation. The reading exuded no less spontaneity, however, sounding as if the ink was still wet on the page and making the two centuries since its writing seem to vanish.

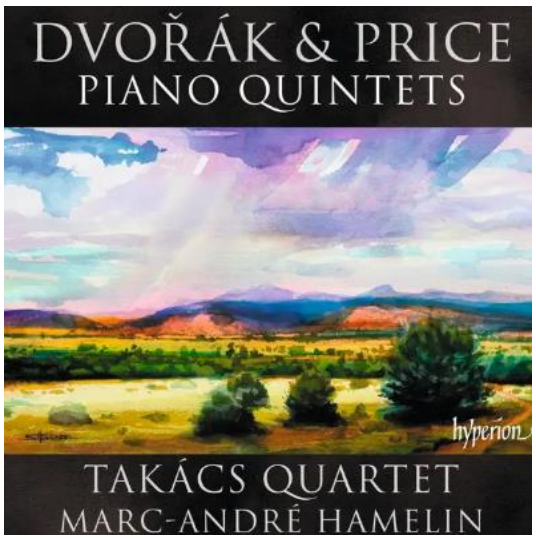
Looking at the sea of white hair in the audience, one might well have wondered about the future of chamber music performance. But the freshness, energy, and sheer mastery of the Takács's playing demonstrated that the great tradition is very much alive.

BBC music MAGAZINE

April 17, 2025

Dvořák & Price – Piano Quintets

By Professor Jan Smaczny



Florence Price's music is coming increasingly to the fore and all credit to the Takács Quartet and Marc-André Hamelin for recording her eminently rewarding piano quintet. Composed in the 1930s, the quintet – apparently discovered by accident in an attic – inhabits a late-Romantic world, more than a little tinged by **Dvořák**'s 'American' style, though skilfully put together and melodically attractive.

But for all its undoubted qualities, the work is out of kilter with a large-scale opening movement outbalancing the remaining three, a pity since the brief finale is in many ways the most imaginative part of the work. Hamelin and the Takács are committed advocates shaping the first movement with finesse and clearly relishing the syncopations and occasionally Blues-influenced melody in the catchy 'juba' third movement.

Their performance of Dvořák's magical second piano quintet is magnificent. The verve and sheer beauty of the string playing is immediately apparent in the glorious **cello** solo at the opening, but such exquisite moments never get in the way of a strong feeling for overall structure which pays huge dividends in the outer movements.

Care over shaping is also apparent in the *Dumka* slow movement in which the *Vivace* central section is exhilarating and perfectly judged without turning, as it often does, into an undignified scramble.

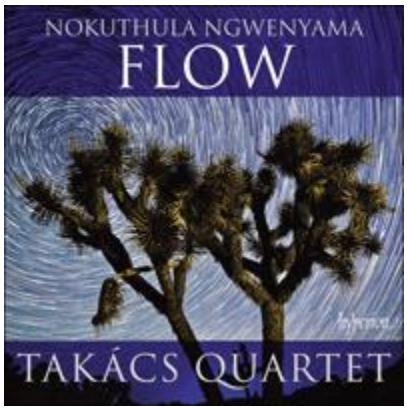
A well-balanced recorded sound allows each of the strings to shine where necessary, most notably the viola in the radiant central section of the ***scherzo***, but the lasting impression is of Marc-André Hamelin's beautifully-shaped accompaniment.

GRAMOPHONE
THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

January 1, 2025

NGWENYAMA Flow

By Pwyll ap Siôn



Born in Los Angeles in 1976 of Zimbabwean and Japanese descent, Nokuthula Ngwenyama first came to prominence as a talented viola player, but her career has branched out more recently into composition. Unsurprisingly, a large portion of Ngwenyama's output has been for string instruments, and it therefore seems fitting that her most significant work to date – the 21-minute *Flow* – is written for string quartet.

Critics have often drawn attention to the direct and immediate qualities belonging to Ngwenyama's music, evidence of which can be found in the finale of *Flow* (subtitled 'Enjoy and go with the flow'), which ends jubilantly on a striking D major chord. Nevertheless, up to that moment the musical direction of the piece is anything but clear. Drawing inspiration from a range of spiritual and scientific concepts and ideas, *Flow* begins atmospherically with trembling tremolandos and glassy glissandos alongside a halo of harmonic overtones. This sense of uncertainty and unease is also captured in the second part of the Prelude, with its spiralling whole-tone lines, and later during the middle section of the *Lento* second movement, which features an eerie-sounding 'wrong-note' melody. Such moments of dramatic tension are offset by assertive tonal and lyrical passages, which during the third-movement Scherzo give rise to a pastiche 19th-century Viennese waltz. A brief return to the unsettling mood of the opening movement finally gives way to a powerful and radiant ending.

The range of references is much wider than in other pieces I've heard by Ngwenyama – testament to her ability to harness these multiple stylistic strands to convincing creative ends. The Takács Quartet, for whom *Flow* was written, offer an energetic and engaging account of the work, aided by solo cameo roles for viola player Richard O'Neill and cellist András Fejér, and assisted in no small measure by Ngwenyama's own personal understanding of the medium itself. Worth exploring.

The Guardian

November 13, 2024

Takács Quartet review – a superlative performance in which the music never sits still

By Erica Jeal

Right from the start of this concert it was clear that we were in for more of the kind of superlative music-making we have come almost to take for granted from the Takács Quartet. They began with Haydn's Quartet in C, Op. 54 No.2, and there was something in the way that all four players seized tenaciously upon the opening chord, then again on the next one, and the next – but each time subtly different. Other groups might have given us short sentences; the Takács gave us a whole paragraph, and the start of a story. None of the music on the programme ever sat still.

Two unconventional, forward-looking classical quartets framed Britten's No. 2, written in 1945 – which in its final movement nods the other way, back to the baroque era and even earlier. The first movement of the Haydn was ebullient, but it was in the second that the spell-weaving really began, the music quickly reaching a high level of intensity as first violinist Edward Dusinberre traced skittish, rhapsodic lines over the others. The fourth movement continued this rapt atmosphere, now with cellist András Fejér tracing slow arpeggios upwards with almost impossible sweetness.

The players found a new sound for the start of the Britten, drier and almost gauzy, but this filled out to red-blooded warmth by the time the first movement hit its peak point, the two violins and viola soaring above the motor of the cello. In the second movement Britten makes a feature of pairs of instruments playing in unison, handled here with rewarding precision. And in the third, it was the impossibly quiet, grainy trills that grabbed the ear – one of several points when time seemed to be stretched.

That feeling returned in the slow movement Beethoven's F major Quartet, Op. 135, before a powerful forward momentum returned in the finale, in which the players revelled in the recurring chords – Beethoven's strange, sonorous klaxons. The Takács play late Beethoven as if they have simultaneously known it all their lives and are coming to it for the first time – which is as it should be, but no less remarkable for that.

THE TIMES

November 13, 2024

Takacs Quartet review — sweat, comedy and blazing brilliance

By Daniel Lewis

Founded in Budapest in 1975 and on the cusp of its 50th anniversary, the Takacs Quartet has very little to prove. But these players are clearly not content to rest on their (many) laurels. This was a demanding programme of three quartets written to impress, and each was an exacting, engaging, rewarding labour.

The first violinist Edward Dusinberre worked particularly hard in the first item, Haydn's String Quartet in C Op 54 No 2, originally written for a (fittingly) Hungarian virtuoso. Dusinberre is not the most forthright — after 31 years in the group, he's a thorough team player — but he did play to the crowd, occasionally raising an eyebrow or two to make sure we were all in on Haydn's gentle jokes. After the proto-Chopin-esque abandon of the slow movement, he urged despair in the middle of the minuet before shedding sweetness and light in the final movement. Although there, the cellist András Fejer, the quartet's last remaining original member, ran a close beauty contest with Dusinberre with some tenderly placed accompanying arpeggios.

It was very much a team effort in Britten's String Quartet No 2, written in part to work his way back into British hearts after having fled to America at the start of the Second World War. Though inspired by Purcell, and premiered at the Wigmore on the baroque composer's 250th anniversary, it is not a polite petition for re-entry into Blighty but more of a volatile demand. The group let loose. The second violinist Harumi Rhodes and the violist Richard O'Neill, both brilliantly full-blooded, lurched at each other like fighting fowl. The other two mopped their brows after the second movement's technical frenzy. But their real triumph was in the stretches of serenity that relieve the nearly 20-minute final movement, a set of 21 variations on a spiky theme. The movement is a test of concentration for audience and performer alike but the

Takacs players held it throughout so that the final blaze of C major felt entirely earned.

It was a test of co-ordination after the interval in Beethoven's final string quartet, No 16 Op 135, which lays many Haydn-like tripwires. But the Takacs is a tight unit. Once, when a particularly sinuous melody was passed around it was hard to tell the instruments apart. They returned to well-organised rowdiness in the riotous second movement. The only letdown of the evening was the following glacial movement, where tuning issues surprisingly crept in. But they immediately, miraculously picked up the slack in the final which was pure chiaroscuro. You could almost see Beethoven looking out on the vineyard where he wrote the work, frowning at the sun.

the Strad

October 11, 2024

Festival round-up: Edinburgh International Festival 2024

By David Kettle

The Takács Quartet offered a far soberer, almost aristocratic approach to Haydn and Schubert in its morning recital at the Queen's Hall. Its account of the former's 'Sunrise' Quartet (op.76 no.4) was impeccably crafted, deeply considered and exquisitely delivered, with abundant glances and cues between players adding to a sense of warm, assured ensemble. And the Schubert G major Quartet D887, assumed a noble, stiff-upper-lip perspective on the composer's final work for the medium, one that revelled in the piece's expansiveness while never seeming ponderous, but also conveying the composer's more desperate outbursts with a sense of grace and acceptance.

In between, however, *Flow* by US violinist–composer Nokuthula Ngwenyama brought out the Takács's colourful, groovy side, with the players conjuring 1970s-style pop and glittering sound worlds, all with complete conviction and no lack of persuasiveness. It's no surprise that Ngwenyama wrote it specifically for the group: the musicians clearly adore the piece, and know its intricate corners and its esoteric textures intimately. If there was a sense that Flow was more a catalogue of ideas (even something of a live concept album) than a fully formed, rigorously structured unity, that was swept aside by the joy of this performance.

the Strad

August 30, 2024

Takács Quartet: Schubert

By David Threasher

Consummate musicianship is a given in any new recording by the Takács Quartet, and it approaches Schubert's final string quartet of 1826 – one of the peaks of the early Romantic repertoire – with its customary seriousness of intent. It responds as if instinctively to the myriad colours of this large-scale, endlessly challenging work, which lurches from near-violence to sweet consolation as abruptly as it does from major to minor and back.

In the Andante the players pay heed to Schubert's un poco moto instruction, and its discontinuities and non sequiturs needle as they should. The Scherzo has an uncommon Mendelssohnian lightness, contrasting vividly with the Trio's lilting Ländler. Only in the finale's dance of death does the forward thrust feel a little unvarying, certainly when compared to the more nuanced Brandis Quartet (Nimbus).

Of course, it's all too easy to read biography into a composer's music. A decade or so earlier, the teenage Schubert was clearly in a happier place, composing prolifically and turning out a procession of more or less experimental quartets for performance by his schoolfriends or his family quartet. His Eighth Quartet (of 1814) boasts Mozartian melodiousness and Haydnesque rusticity, although Schubert's mature voice is already evident. Top marks to the Takács for offering this comparative rarity, and – especially – for playing the long exposition repeat in D887's opening movement. The recording was made, like the Brandis's, with stunning clarity at the Nimbus Concert Hall in Monmouth.