TAKÁCS QUARTET

Takács Quartet

Pärt and Schubert

4 p.m., Sunday, March 12, 2023
7:30 p.m., Monday, March 13, 2023
Grusin Music Hall

Streaming March 12-20.

Program

Summa
Arvo Pärt (b. 1935)

String Quartet No. 8 in B-flat Major, D112
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet No. 15 in G Major, D88
Franz Schubert

PLEASE NOTE

- Masks are optional in public indoor spaces on the CU Boulder campus.
- Latecomers will be seated at the discretion of the house manager.
- Photography and video recordings of any type are strictly prohibited during the performance.
- Smoking is not permitted anywhere. CU Boulder is a smoke-free campus.

Program notes

By Henry Michaels

To say that the string quartet is one of the great prestige genres of classical music would be a massive understatement. Though it originated within the *sometimes*-humble realm of domestic music—that is to say, music intended to be played informally within one's home (or, you know, palace)—it gradually became the public instrumental chamber music genre par excellence. For composers the string quartet could function as anything from a school to a proving ground, an opportunity to hone their craft or to display it. For critics, scholars, and members of the intelligentsia, the quartet became an antidote to so-called "low" music and a vehicle through which to venerate the great musical masters. And for audiences, the quartet came to represent a sort of holy ground, occupying along with the symphony a place of great reverence.

Arvo Pärt's ***Summa*** does precisely none of this. Or at least, not for any reasons related to its string quartet-ness. For starters, *Summa* wasn't originally written as a string quartet, and in fact, this version is just one of *many*. Pärt's original Summa was choral setting of the Nicene Creed dating from 1977. Starting in the early 1990s, he produced a series of arrangements—nine of them, to be precise—written for ensembles as varied as string orchestra, guitar quartet and trombone quartet. There's even an arrangement for a non-standard string quartet comprised of one violin, two violas and a cello!

Pärt's efforts to create multiple versions of a work—and by no means just *this* work; Pärt does this with some frequency—can be connected to his personal theories of music:

> For me, the highest value of music is outside its color. Special instrumental timbre is part of the music, yet it's not a primary quality. That would be my capitulation to the secret of music. Music has to exist by itself … two, three notes. The secret must be there, independent of any instrument. Music must derive from inside, and I have deliberately tried to write such music that can be played on a variety of instruments.

This focus on music "exist[ing] by itself" is connected to Pärt's distinctive compositional style, a deceptively simple approach he calls *tintinnabuli*. Tintinnabuli music, which Pärt developed originally in the 1970s, focuses on two "voices:" one a melodic line and the other a *tintinnabulation* line that features only the notes of a tonic triad (the main chord of a particular piece). Pärt named his new stylistic creation after the tintinnabulum, a type of church bell, because the tonic triad notes reminded him of bells.

Simple though this may sound, it seems almost incompatible with the "typical" approach to a string quartet. Here Pärt isn't putting the quartet on a generic pedestal, at all. Quite the opposite. Instead, he's arguing for the primacy of the notes and only the notes. Other considerations are secondary. In the case of the quartet, then, its history, its weightiness, its associated reverence and lofty expectations are seemingly swept to the side.

Yet *Summa* is clearly laden with a sense of reverence. As a piece originally conceived as a setting of the Nicene Creed, there is a certain religious reverence in Summa, as is the case in many works composed by the devoutly Orthodox Christian Pärt. There is also reverence toward the tintinnabuli style, which informs every musical decision in a way that is belied by the resulting simplicity of the music. (The composer has said that tintinnabuli music is based on a complex, but publicly undefined, mathematical relationship between the notes.)

It's just that this reverence doesn't stem from the long history and great expectations associated with the string quartet as a *genre*. With the notes themselves foregrounded and given primacy over their color, their timbre, their unique instrumental *sound*, the performing forces of a work like *Summa* become just that: performing forces. As far as Arvo Pärt is concerned, *Summa* could just as easily have been written for recorder quartet (and, in fact, it has been!).

If you've deduced by now that Franz Schubert's treatment of the string quartet was likely different than Arvo Pärt's, you're correct—though the two Schubert quartets on this program are examples of varying approaches from distinct periods in his life. The **String Quartet No. 8 in B-flat Major, D112** was

written in blisteringly fast fashion over the course of nine days in September of 1814 (Schubert claimed in the autograph score that he composed the first movement in only four and half *hours*). In 1814, Schubert was still a mere boy of 17. He still lived in his childhood home, was still aching to free himself from the yoke of someone else's expectations (his father wanted him to follow in his footsteps as a schoolteacher). And he was still learning who he was as a composer.

Schubert learned by writing music. A *lot* of music. Starting in 1814, he composed almost 150 songs, two quartets, two symphonies and two masses over the span of a little more than a year—a perfect example of one of those astonishing facts that, no matter how many times you've heard it, never astonishes any less. But Schubert also learned by *playing* music, and here the D112 quartet is illustrative. This work, like his other early string quartets, was intended for an extremely specific setting and set of musicians: his home and his family. The Schubert family quartet was an important piece of his musical training and featured Franz on viola, his brothers Ferdinand and Ignaz on violin, and his father on the cello. This opportunity to play his own music and to receive immediate feedback would have certainly afforded the young Schubert a chance to workshop his quartets and discover firsthand what was successful and what wasn't. (In many ways, this could not be more dissimilar from Pärt: on the one hand a composer for whom the exact instrumentation wasn't of primary concert, on the other a composer for whom not only the exact instrumentation but the exact *players* were of paramount importance.)

With the D112 quartet, Schubert was beginning to move past the limitations of his performing venue and his performers, though. Yes, the work was still written with the skills—and, in the case of his father, limitations—of his family in mind, but he was also pushing himself and trying new things. In this quartet, for example, he makes less frequent use of unison passages than he had in his earlier youthful quartets.

The **String Quartet No. 15 in G Major, D887**, on the other hand, represents Schubert's music at the height of his compositional maturity. Although he may have begun working on it as early as 1824, the completed autograph score is dated June of 1826. It was also the then-29-year-old Schubert's final quartet before his untimely two years later death in 1828. Like all but one of his quartets, D887 was not published in Schubert's lifetime, nor did it ever receive a full public performance.

Schubert evidently viewed this quartet (or at least what historians have assumed to be this quartet) as a way of working his way toward a new symphony, writing to a friend that he wanted to compose "another quartet, and, by so doing, to prepare the way to the great symphony." The D887 quartet is ambitious, and Schubert's full compositional prowess is certainly on display. He explores a wide variety of key areas, dynamics, textures and techniques. Schubert the composer of Lieder, too, is plainly audible in this work, which is chock full of gorgeous, lyrical melodies.

Where the D112 quartet had been a young man's effort at learning and compositional exploration, the D887 quartet was an exceedingly confident and ambitious declaration from the same (still young!) man. The seriousness with which he approached the work is clear. It's clear in the music. It's clear in the idea that it would serve as "preparation" for a major symphonic work. And it *may* be clear in the way that Schubert presented the work publicly. It is known that a concert of Schubert's music was presented on March 26, 1828, just under two years after the completion of D887. It is also known that the proceedings began with the premiere of the first movement of a new string quartet. Nowhere did anyone record *precisely* from which quartet the movement was taken, but historians have generally assumed it to be the most recent: D887. And if that assumption is correct, its place of honor on the program certainly serves as evidence for Schubert's framing of D887, as does the conspicuous date of the event; March 26, 1887 was the one-year anniversary of the death that great titan of string quartets, Ludwig van Beethoven.

The works on this program in some ways illustrate two different approaches the string quartet: there's the capital-letters String Quartet, the prestige genre pregnant with great purpose and laden with as much historical baggage as any genre imaginable. Then there's the string quartet, a collection of instruments—two violins, a viola and a cello—that are used to make music. One approach embraces the idiosyncratic nature of the ensemble, engages with the weighty history and expectations

involved with the genre. The other sheds some of those associations, instead embracing the primacy of the notes themselves. And yet in their own ways, both approaches foreground the *music* above all else. So as seemingly contradictory as the processes of Pärt and Schubert may be, perhaps in the end they aren't as at odds with one another as they may seem.

About the performers

The world-renowned **Takács Quartet** is now entering its 48th season. **Edward Dusinberre**, **Harumi Rhodes** (violins), **Richard O'Neill** (viola) and **András Fejér** (cello) are excited about the 2022-2023 season that begins with a tour of Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea, and includes the release of two new CDs for Hyperion Records. A disc of Haydn's opp. 42, 77 and 103 is followed by the first recording of an extraordinary new work written for the Takács by Stephen Hough, *Les Six Rencontres*, presented with quartets by Ravel and Dutilleux. As Associate Artists at London's Wigmore Hall, the Takács will perform four concerts there. In addition to programs featuring Beethoven, Schubert and Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, one concert consists of works by Britten, Bartók and Dvořák that highlight the same themes of displacement and return explored in Edward Dusinberre's new book *Distant Melodies: Music in Search of Home*. The book is published by Faber and the University of Chicago Press in the Fall of 2022. The quartet will perform the same program at several venues in the U.S., complemented by book talks. During this season the quartet will continue its fruitful partnership with pianist Jeremy Denk, performing on several North American series.

Throughout 2022 and 2023 the ensemble will play at prestigious European venues including the Edinburgh and Schwetzingen Festivals, Madrid's Auditorio de Música, Bilbao's Philharmonic Society, Amsterdam's Concertgebouw and the Bath Mozartfest. The group's North American engagements include concerts in New York, Toronto, Vancouver, Philadelphia, Ann Arbor, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Tucson, Portland and the Beethoven Center at San Jose State University.

The Takács Quartet is known for innovative programming. In 2021-22 the ensemble partnered with bandoneon virtuoso Julien Labro to premiere new works by Clarice Assad and Bryce Dessner, commissioned by Music Accord. In 2014 the Takács performed a program inspired by Philip Roth's novel *Everyman* with Meryl Streep at Princeton, and again with her at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto in 2015. They first performed *Everyman* at Carnegie Hall in 2007 with Philip Seymour Hoffman. They have toured 14 cities with the poet Robert Pinsky, and played regularly with the Hungarian Folk group Muzsikas.

The Takács records for Hyperion Records, recently winning awards for their recordings of string quartets by Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn, and—with pianist Garrick Ohlsson—piano quintets by Amy Beach and Elgar. Other releases for Hyperion feature works by Haydn, Schubert, Janáček, Smetana, Debussy and Britten, as well as piano quintets by César Franck and Shostakovich (with Marc-André Hamelin), and viola quintets by Brahms and Dvorák (with Lawrence Power). For their CDs on the Decca/London label, the Quartet has won three Gramophone Awards, a Grammy Award, three Japanese Record Academy Awards, Disc of the Year at the inaugural BBC Music Magazine Awards, and Ensemble Album of the Year at the Classical Brits. Full details of all recordings can be found in the Recordings section of the Quartet's website.

In 2014 the Takács became the first string quartet to be awarded the Wigmore Hall Medal. In 2012, Gramophone announced that the Takács was the first string quartet to be inducted into its Hall of Fame. The ensemble also won the 2011 Award for Chamber Music and Song presented by the Royal Philharmonic Society in London.

Based in Boulder at the University of Colorado Boulder, the members of the Takács Quartet are Christoffersen Faculty Fellows, and the grateful beneficiaries of an instrument loan by the Drake Foundation. The members of the Takács are on the faculty at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, where they run a summer string quartet seminar, and Visiting Fellows at the Guildhall School of Music, London.

The Takács Quartet was formed in 1975 at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest by Gabor Takács-Nagy, Károly Schranz, Gabor Ormai and András Fejér, while all four were students. The group received international attention in 1977, winning First Prize and the Critics' Prize at the International String Quartet Competition in Evian, France. The Quartet also won the Gold Medal at the 1978 Portsmouth and Bordeaux Competitions and First Prizes at the Budapest International String Quartet Competition in 1978 and the Bratislava Competition in 1981. The Quartet made its North American debut tour in 1982.