PROGRAM NOTES

By Marc Shulgold

Introduction

Beethoven didn't know it at the time, but he did a great favor to future musicologists by composing his 16 String Quartets in three easily separated “periods.” The first set of six, published in 1801, reflected the young composer’s influence of Mozart and Haydn. The next grouping came five years later with the three grown-up works of Opus 59—with two more, Opus 74 and 95, arriving just a few years later. Those five were easily attached to the composer’s so-called “Middle Period.” Finally, as deafness turned his world and his music inward, came the final five Quartets a few years before his death—all labeled “Late Period.” Now, ignore those designations, and view the works on this program sampling those periods as glimpses into the ever-changing life of a complex man living in an ever-changing world. Each Quartet is instantly recognized as Beethoven—original, clear in design, overflowing with melody and unforgettable.

String Quartet in G, Op. 18, No. 2

The printed score of a string quartet contains four lines of music—one for each instrument. But let’s go back to the early 19th Century and look at these lines in a different way—assigning one for each human element in the creation of that score. On the top, naturally, is the composer; in the case of the second of the six Opus 18 Quartets, it is Beethoven, publishing this set in 1801 when he was still making a name for himself in Vienna after moving from Bonn. On the next line, we see the musicians entrusted with playing this brand-new music. Here, we meet the overweight Ignaz Schuppanzigh, perhaps Vienna’s most prominent violinist, soon to become a lifelong friend of the composer. Schuppanzigh and his cohorts formed the first professional string quartet, giving their first public performance in 1804—expanding their music making from palaces into small theaters and playing for local ticketholders. This group delivered the premieres of Opus 18 and would continue to introduce many of Beethoven’s String Quartets.

Chamber music was no longer for the private entertainment of wealthy Viennese. And yet, those aristocratic lovers of new music were also crucial in its creation. Thus, here on the third line sit Beethoven’s patrons. They are now only names to us—Lobkowitz, Lichnovsky, Razumovsky, Galitzin—but their friendship, encouragement and financial support made it possible for Beethoven and other composers to ply their trade

TAKÁCS QUARTET

Jan. 11 | **12** 2026
Grusin Music Hall

PROGRAM

All pieces composed by
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet in G, Op. 18, No. 2

I. Allegro
II. Adagio cantabile
III. Scherzo. Allegro
IV. Allegro molto, quasi Presto

String Quartet in E-flat “Harp,” Op. 74

I. Poco adagio - Allegro
II. Adagio ma non troppo
III. Presto - Più presto quasi prestissimo
IV. Allegretto con variazioni

Intermission

String Quartet in C-sharp minor, Op. 131

I. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo
II. Allegro molto vivace
III. Allegro moderato
IV. Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile
V. Presto
VI. Adagio quasi un poco andante
VII. Allegro

(it was Prince Joesph Lobkowitz who commissioned Opus 18). Many of these Viennese patrons also provided performing spaces in their lavish homes, hiring performers and inviting an audience of discerning music-lovers.

On that final line of our imaginary score, then, are those listeners. Every composer had them in mind—since it was for those conservative ears, not ours, that their music was intended. No surprise that the Quartets of Opus 18 reveal none of the groundbreaking experimentation and otherworldly sounds that emerged in Beethoven's later Quartets. Not that he was playing things safe. There are delicious, unexpected touches in this G-Major Quartet, such as the brief, amusing *Allegro* section that pops up in the midst of the dreamy *Adagio cantabile*, and the occasional false endings that cleverly thumb their nose at predictability. Note, too, the inventive stretches in the opening *Allegro*'s middle section set in the "wrong" key. The Quartet (actually the third of the Opus 18 set to be completed) received numerous revisions before publication, since in these early days in Vienna, Beethoven was focused on making a good first impression on all those who played important roles in the creation of his music.

String Quartet in E-flat "Harp," Op. 74

It's always dangerous to brush aside anything by Beethoven, but somehow, Opus 74 often gets such a dismissal, sandwiched between the three giant Quartets of Opus 59 and the compact masterpiece that is the "Serioso" Quartet, Opus 95. But listen closely and discover (or rediscover) a remarkable work. Particularly remarkable, considering the time in which it emerged. In 1809, Vienna found Napoleon's army at its gates, with most of the city's wealthy fleeing as a siege began. Cannon fire commenced, forcing Beethoven to seek shelter in the basement of his brother Casper Carl's home. Somehow, he was able to continue composing, producing three important works, all in E-flat: completing the "Emperor" Piano Concerto and writing the "Les Adieux" Piano Sonata and this String Quartet. Five years earlier, it's worth noting, came the mighty Third Symphony, also in E-flat—a work aimed at Napoleon, who'd suddenly turned tyrant. While that Symphony explodes with triumph (it is subtitled "Heroic," after all), and the Concerto has its uplifting moments, this E-flat String Quartet does not offer any messages of nationalistic pride.

The opening *Allegro* begins with an introspective introduction (poco adagio) that subtly slides into the gentle main theme, accented by an unexpected ascending pizzicato passage begun in the lower strings and ending up top with the violins. This delightful, plucked touch gives this work its "Harp" nickname. Beethoven didn't employ pizzicato very much—his Violin Concerto contains exactly two such notes. In this movement, the effect shows up frequently and always at just the right moments. Notice how that ascending phrase appears quietly at the very end, but this time played *arco*, with the bows, not the fingers.

It's hard to describe the *Adagio* without the words "achingly beautiful." The score reveals the care which Beethoven gave to every note, every measure. There are numerous markings of *espressivo*, passages of dramatic crescendos and decrescendos each meticulously mapped out, pauses at key moments, instructions to play *cantabile* (singing) and, yes, more pizzicato touches. It all adds up to a timeless journey that is, well, achingly beautiful.

Quite a contrast to the dizzying scherzo that follows, a *Presto* that challenges the players and rewards listeners with a rollercoaster ride that is Beethoven at his virtuosic best. Just for fun, perhaps, there's no break before the last movement. Here, he calls for a form rarely used for a finale: Theme and Variations. He called for that structure in the more famous Third Symphony's finale, yet this theme is not a naive little dance ditty, but a drawn-out melody not as easily traced through its six variations. No matter. Each appears in alternating lively or gentle versions, unfolding with increasing energy, finally ending with a crash—then a whisper.

String Quartet in C-sharp minor, Op. 131

The world of Beethoven's "Late Quartets" is one undreamed of in his time—but even among those final autumnal masterpieces, Opus 131 stands alone. Written between November 1825 and July the following year, this work brazenly discards the established four-movement structure designed and perfected by his predecessors. Yes, he'd already broken the mold in the five movements of Opus 130 and 132 (the latter completed in the summer of 1825). But this was something different: a quartet of *seven* linked movements, resulting in one uninterrupted musical journey. In his typical self-deprecating wit, when Beethoven sent the work to his publisher he described Opus 131 as "put together from stolen this and that." He had already completed the three Quartets commissioned by the Russian prince Nikolas Galitzin (Opus 127, 130 and 132) but seemed inspired here as he dove back into the genre that would occupy him almost exclusively for the rest of his life.

Opus 131 is dedicated to Baron Joseph von Stutterheim, a lieutenant field marshal, perhaps as a show of gratitude to Stutterheim for admitting the composer's troubled nephew Karl into his regiment. This Quartet seemed to be a favorite of Beethoven's, who, though deaf, was said to be intently engaged during a private read-through by his dedicated colleagues in the Schuppanzigh Quartet. And he was not alone in his admiration. Schubert requested that the work be played as he lay on his deathbed. A friend who was present wrote that "The King of Harmony was sent the King of Song a friendly bidding to the crossing." Years later, Wagner wrote of the Quartet, "This is the fury of the world's dance … and above the tumult the indomitable fiddler whirls us on to the abyss."

It might be better to rely on Beethoven's self-mocking description, since Opus 131 does seem at first hearing to be a collection of separate ideas "of this and that." A deeper examination, however, reveals an abundance of extraordinary original thoughts and a masterful ability to organize those ideas into a comprehensible whole. There are scherzos that bubble with energy and humor, slow sections of heartbreaking profundity and endless moments of technical brilliance that test the musicians' individual skills and ensemble discipline.

And it begins with a slowly unfolding fugue, of all things. At the Quartet's center, we hear a masterful set of variations on a theme introduced by the two violins, featuring several changes in tempo and time signature. But that's nothing unusual in Opus 131: There are no fewer than 31 tempo shifts and six principal changes in key. This is music of celestial complexity. Takács Quartet violinist Ed Dusinberre addresses the richness of this work in his wonderful book, *Beethoven for a Later Age* (University of Chicago Press). "Of all the Beethoven quartets," he writes, "Opus 131 is the most ambitious: how seven such contrasting movements manage to complement each other and be so convincingly bound together is a miracle no amount of musical analysis can explain." For us, we need only travel blissfully through this magical world, a place previously unknown until Beethoven opened the door.

TAKÁCS QUARTET

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. In August 2025 for Musica Viva in Australia, the ensemble played a new work *Sonnet of an Emigrant* for quartet and narrator by Cathy Milliken with texts by Bertolt Brecht.

Edward Dusinberre, **Harumi Rhodes** (violins), **Richard O'Neill** (viola) and **András Fejér** (cello) are excited about upcoming projects including performances throughout the U.S. of Mozart viola quintets with Jordan Bak and a new string quartet, NEXUS, 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, Vancouver, Philadelphia, Boston, Princeton, Ann Arbor, Washington D.C., 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 ath 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.