

In the Middle of It Together



For a half-century the Takács Quartet has epitomized string-quartet artistry, not to mention an ability to endure and evolve.

How do they pass this ethos on?

BY Emery Kerekes

Photos: Amanda Tipton (Maria); Courtesy András Fejér (group)

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This award is presented to an individual or organization who has made a significant and lasting contribution to the chamber music field and enriched our national culture by fostering a greater appreciation for chamber music.

IN 2025, THE TAKÁCS QUARTET celebrated fifty years since their formation at Budapest's Franz Liszt Academy of Music. Though only one member, cellist András Fejér, has kept his chair for the full half-century, the quartet's ubiquity remains staggering. They typically clock 80 concerts a year, often distributed over three or more continents; no major metropolis dweller need wait more than a few seasons for the Takács to come around. Their turn-of-the-millennium CD-boom recordings of Bartók, Beethoven, and Schubert remain authoritative, and their most recent albums are studded with world premieres, as well as collaborations that seem both likely (an ongoing quintet series with pianist Marc-André Hamelin) and unlikely (new works for string quartet and bandoneón, a concertina most commonly associated with tango music, featuring Julien Labro).

Most importantly, the Takács keep their signature sound alive. Their slow movements still swell with the old-school lyricism and lush, wide vibrato that made them a household name. Their fast movements are unpredictably explosive in an almost giddy way, full of pop and fizz, jabs and jokes. "They always sound like they're having so much fun," my father—a first-generation Hungarian-American, and one of my primary childhood string-quartet coaches—would always say with a sly smile, popping their luscious Brahms into his car's CD slot.

That gift for nuanced communication is one reason *The New York Times* declared the Takács "the essential quartet of our time" upon their golden jubilee. Indeed, as a young cellist I associated the Takács with the art of the

string quartet itself—a name of similar weight to the recently disbanded Emersons, whose performances I never found half as gripping.

The Takács' educational activities are often overshadowed by their performances and recordings, yet they've been equally vital to the quartet's history. The four original members of the quartet defected from communist Hungary to Boulder, Colorado, in 1986, where they took up residency and professorships at the University of Colorado Boulder. Eleven years and several personnel shifts later, in 1997, the Takács established a graduate residency for early-career quartets in Boulder, an opportunity for developing players to study and grow under their watchful eye. The program blossomed into a dedicated Artist Diploma in 2009, with the first resident quartet—the now-acclaimed Tesla Quartet—graduating in 2012.

I've encountered many musicians who have studied with Takács members—in Boulder, and at the Music Academy of the West, in Santa Barbara, California, the quartet's summer post. They all mention the quartet's warmth and kindness, as well as their diagnostic precision and tag-team effectiveness. "It feels like you're watching chefs in a kitchen," says Leah Pernick, second violinist of the Koa String Quartet, CU Boulder's current quartet in residence.



The original Takács Quartet (Gábor Takács-Nagy, Károly Schranz, Gábor Ormai, András Fejér) in Boulder, 1987.

"They're all doing different tasks and asking, 'Hey, can you taste this? Does it need more lemon? Let me add a little salt.' It feels very collaborative and so baked into the core of who they are as a group."

I spoke with the members of Takács, who were fresh off a whirlwind European tour, via Zoom. During my hour with cellist Fejér (who plans to retire this June, to be replaced by Mihai Marica), first violinist Edward Dusinberre (who joined the group in 1992), second violinist Harumi Rhodes, and violist Richard O'Neill (both



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joined the quartet within the last decade), we discussed the group's teaching philosophy, the future of the string quartet at large, and how best to help the string quartets of tomorrow prepare for an environment that has changed drastically during the last half-century.

Emery Kerekes: Tell me a bit about the philosophy behind the Takács graduate quartet program at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Why do you favor pre-formed groups?

Edward Dusinberre: There's a certain commitment involved in deciding, as young people, that you're going to throw in your lot together and move to Boulder, Colorado. And once you're in a program like this, you find out surprising things about each other—so a pre-formed group provides a certain glue and motivation. An extreme example: the Orava Quartet, who not only came pre-formed from Australia, but rented a house and lived together for two years. I wouldn't have necessarily recommended that course of action, but fifteen years later, they're one of Australia's most successful string quartets.

Kerekes: How do you help a group grow together over such an intense two-year period?

Harumi Rhodes: First, you hope that if the group is having a problem, that it's musical and not personal. But of course, these things are intertwined. One thing we try to work on with each group is finding common passions. If they're going to have heated discussions about something, it should be on a topic that they all care about deeply—like Ed was saying, that's a type of glue.

A lot of the quartets come in excited about putting together an outreach program, or commissioning new works—

sometimes, what they're excited about is something that we haven't explored. All the groups we've coached sound completely different, not like mini Takács Quartets, and there's something really beautiful in that.

Kerekes: Obviously, a quartet's sound morphs and refreshes and shifts over time. How do you, as teachers, guide a group toward their collective sound?

András Fejér: We are trying to lead them into a groove, where the utmost question is about the character of the ensemble. If they agree on a character, everyone will try to realize that with their individual sound. It might be a rough idea, a rough diamond, but with time, it will morph into something convincing. And one needs to be patient. I think of how the Takács Quartet started, and gauging how many years it took to get from point A to point B, and then to point C. It immediately makes us more patient and forgiving, as long as we feel their quest to get there eventually.

Dusinberre: One of the things we try to help students with is how to follow and lead at the same time. Sometimes, a group needs to mix up who's leading a rehearsal—maybe split the hour up, and have each person take control for fifteen minutes, and everyone else just responds to that one person. As a discipline, it's very hard to try to make an idea work that doesn't convince you, but in the process of doing that, you might become convinced.

Kerekes: How have you seen the string quartet world change over the course of



The original Takács Quartet in London, 1989.

Photo: Courtesy of András Fejér

your careers? What are some things you tell your young quartets that you might not have been told?

Richard O'Neill: Well, the circle spins very quickly. When I was young, the legacy quartets were all very active. I remember getting the Emerson Quartet's first discs, or the Takács' second cycle of Bartók quartets...Vermeers, Juilliards, Guarneris, Amadeus. As a young person, I felt that if they were here now, then they'd be here forever.

But as I've traveled around the circle, I've seen that it's much harder to keep a quartet going than it is to quit. A lot of these quartets shaped who I am as a human being, and for them to stop one by one has been a lot. And on the other side, there are so many young groups out there who have so much incredible potential. The art of string quartet playing has never been in better hands, and the groups are getting younger. My question is: Have we, as artists, created a system where these young groups will have opportunities to flourish and ride their potential?

Rhodes: When I was a young conservatory student finding my way in chamber music, I remember this strong message of needing to be unique—"Find your

niche!" one of my teachers said repeatedly. That hasn't changed much, but the emphasis these days is having a video camera in your face at all times to record and share everything you do on Instagram thirty seconds after you do it. So there's this element of broadcasting your process so everyone can see what you're doing, even in the practice room.

One of the things that young quartets often ask is: How do you slow down? How can you do this work without it being a public event? Occasionally, there are glamorous moments as a string quartet, but generally, it's not glamorous work. It's a commitment to a way of life. That's an odd thing to broadcast all the time. One of the things I love about our program at CU Boulder is that there isn't this fast-paced pressure. You can really roll up your sleeves and do the hard, unglamorous work, and enjoy life in a way that's nurturing to the quartet.

Photo: Courtesy of University of Colorado Boulder (Fejér, Dusinberre, Rhodes); Phil Channing, courtesy of Music Academy of the West (O'Neill)

Kerekes: Do you feel that the career prospects for a string quartet have changed over time? Have quartet careers necessarily become more multifaceted?

Fejér: When we started the quartet, we gave our all to that unit—as did our peers and competition. But there were also major chamber music-loving sponsors, so we could really concentrate. When I look at some of the prominent quartets these days, many members take teaching jobs apart from their ensembles, locally and afield. I hope that sooner or later, there will be a younger generation of sponsors growing up or coming forward who could help a worthy group so they wouldn't need to do that.

Dusinberre: The main advice we give to quartets is that there will be opportunities for groups that stay together. It's interesting that sometimes the wonderful-sounding groups with four brilliant players can win a competition, but when life intervenes

they go in different directions for many good reasons. But if a quartet can carve out time to rehearse and learn repertoire—even if they're making ends meet by different jobs—ten years from now, they're a group that's still together and can land a residency somewhere. There are many different ways to make a quartet work. It's a wonderful realm of possibility.

Rhodes: Being a string quartet used to mean a very specific thing with regard to repertoire, and now, it's a bit larger than that. It can be a vehicle to create new works, or a bridge between an institution and a local community. Or it could even be a group that enjoys a genre of music that you don't associate with string quartets, but they transcribe it into a new, magical sound world.

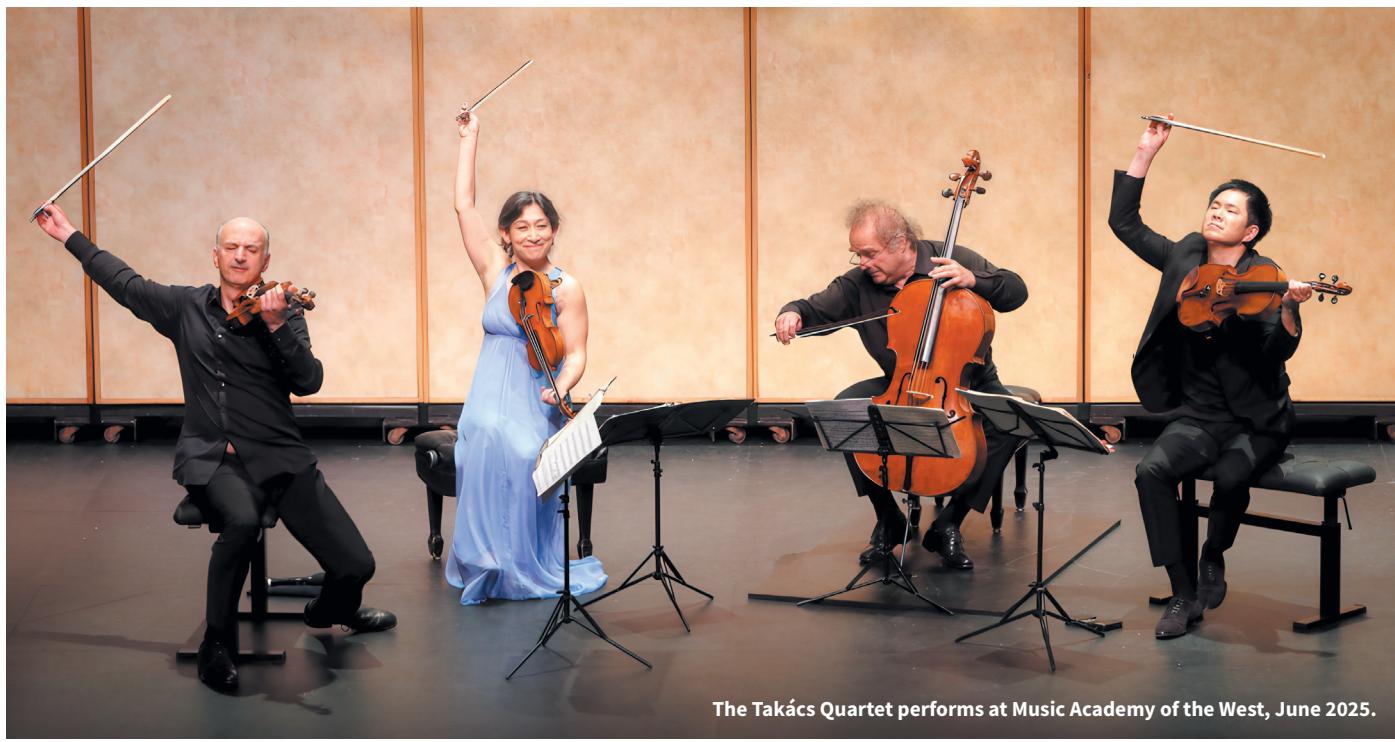
Kerekes: How does teaching enhance your own playing as a quartet? Are there things you learn about each other through the experience of teaching together that translates to the practice room or the concert hall?

O'Neill: In Santa Barbara, Harumi and I are linked as coaches—because there are three groups, we teach together for three weeks. It's one of my favorite parts of the year. It's fascinating to sit next to somebody that you play with all the time, to hear their perspective and try your best to listen with a group in front



Takács members instruct students at CU Boulder and the Music Academy of the West, 2025.

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The Takács Quartet performs at Music Academy of the West, June 2025.

of you. I find those three weeks very enlightening, and I wish in some ways that we as a group could team-teach more in general.

Rhodes: Actually, we've never talked about this, but I really like teaching together, because it's kind of fascinating. We try not to interrupt each other and do silly things like that. We take turns, and then we sort of join forces, and then we back off. It's a little bit of a dance. That process is really interesting for me because Richard and I have known each other for a very long time—we went to school together, and summer festivals, and, of course, now the quartet. We're both inner voices, but when it's just the two of us teaching, we also address many issues that are more outer-voice topics. It's so cool to see Richard with a different hat on.

Dusinberre: We just taught this summer for the first time at the wonderful chamber music festival called Madeline Island, out in Wisconsin. I certainly felt at the end of that week, after teaching for hours each day about character and communication, there was a particular sense of being under a microscope onstage—am I actually doing what I said the students should do? There's a vibrancy when the students are sitting

there, listening to you in that way.

You can think that because you're a professional chamber musician, you're collaborative and listen to people—it's a little bit of a trap. That's not something one should ever take for granted. It's like any other relationship: you have to constantly refresh the listening process. András and I, for example, have played some of the same phrases together for 32 years. So we have to be careful: am I really listening to what he's doing now, rather than reacting to what I'm used to hearing?

Kerekes: We think of the mentorship as teaching how to *play* in a string quartet. But what proportion of your teaching is about how to *be* in a string quartet, how to shoulder that load?

Rhodes: One of the things with young quartets is mentoring them in how to communicate. In my life, some of the most painful moments in chamber music have been where I've said something that didn't really represent how I felt, or I said something that miscommunicated what was in my heart. It's hard to find the right words, and harder to take words back. A big part of our mentorship is making the quartets feel like they can come to us and talk things out, because there's not any one answer.

O'Neill: One of my best friends is a radio-oncologist and violinist—he trains generations of residents with whom people are trusting their lives. But he said that these residents, when they're looking at you and they're learning from you, they're not just listening to what you're saying in the lesson. They're looking at everything: your attitude, the way you treat other people. So in some ways, I feel like it holds you to a higher standard. You really have to live the life, talk the talk, and walk the walk, even when you're not onstage. You can't just bloat and pretend.

In the traditional conservatory setting, a lot of times you're trying to teach someone from the outside, so they can enter into a new situation—so they can win an orchestra job, or solo in front of an orchestra. But I think that's the joy of a quartet: you're in the middle of it. You have to learn constantly, because you're living it, and it's the four people on the inside, floating on this ocean together, who really need to do the hard work.

Emery Kerekes is a journalist, arts administrator, and singer based in New York City. He has written for Chamber Music and The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Perspectives series, and is the founder of All Ears.