

The Takács Quartet:
Edward Dusinberre,
left, Harumi Rhodes,
András Fejér, and
Richard O'Neill



CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN

The Takács Quartet records two (challenging) Schubert works

BY INGE KJEMTRUP

Franz Schubert was 31 when he died in 1828. In his short life, he composed some 600 songs, seven complete symphonies, and many instrumental chamber music works, including the popular Cello Quintet in C major and 15 string quartets. The last three quartets are jewels of the chamber music repertoire: the A minor “Rosamunde,” D. 804, the D minor “Death and the Maiden,” D. 810, and the G major, D. 887. It’s this last piece that features in a



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new recording by the Takács Quartet, paired with the lesser-known Quartet in B-flat major, D. 112.

In conversation with second violinist Harumi Rhodes and violist Richard O'Neill, I discover what they learned as they played these two Schubert quartets on the road and then brought them into the recording studio.

Founded at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest in 1975, the Takács is regarded as

one of the world's finest string quartets. Based in the US since 1983, the ensemble is quartet-in-residence at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Cellist András Fejér is the only original member, and current first violinist, Edward Dusing, joined in 1993. Rhodes and O'Neill came onboard in 2018 and 2020, respectively.

By the time Schubert composed the B-flat major quartet, D. 112, he was 17 and already had seven quartets under his belt, as well as

many songs, including *Erlikönig*, that terrifying Romantic nightmare-fantasy, published as his Opus 1. It's probable that the family quartet—Schubert on viola, two brothers on violin, his schoolteacher father on cello—was the first to play the D. 112 quartet.

This work was more accomplished than its predecessors and, says Rhodes, a worthy foil to the G major. "It's an incredibly beautiful piece. At first, I was thinking 'How are we going have this piece stand up to the G major?'

But it's quite substantial. I would say we spent maybe equal amounts of time working on the B flat as we did the G major."

As Rhodes and O'Neill see it, the role of the second violin and viola in this quartet is to set the stage for the first violin. "We have the responsibility of creating the mood," O'Neill says, "although we don't want to usurp the singer by any means."

In any case, opportunities for usurping the first violin are few. As Rhodes says, "Richard and I have our hands full with pianistic textures, where we're busy creating the suspense or really the drama inside of the music. I'm picturing all the inner fingers on the piano [she wiggles her fingers to illustrate], including the thumbs!"

"For me," says O'Neill, "one of the trickiest things is when Harumi and I have these *Erlkönig*-like triplet motives, but they're not *Erlkönig* at all. They're ebullient and energetic and full of life, but they can't become too much. The last movement is the opposite. Ed has this glorious line with intricate busywork in his right hand, while the three lower voices are a sort of angelic chorale in the background. But how do you get that chorale to be so angelic without covering Ed?"

"A lot of the world of Schubert is in the softer dynamics, the *piano* realm, and physically how that translates to being an inner voice. If everything feels like it's unsupported and soft, it's hard to support the texture. But at the same time, if the inner workings of the music are too thick or too loud, it creates something that you don't want either. So it's a lot of texture, a lot of filling in the harmony without being obtrusive."

"It's that combination of trying to create drama with lots of suspense and intensity, but also always keeping it kind of light, that *opera buffa* feeling and just knowing that we're that awkward thumb spot," says Rhodes with a laugh. "You know the joke about inner-voice players: You're either too loud or you're too soft!"

Compare and contrast: Beethoven and Schubert. Beethoven, the genius who defied the authorities, and Schubert, the cozy bespectacled schoolteacher who led a quiet life, insulated by a circle of admiring friends. Beethoven the extrovert; Schubert the introvert.



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Stereotypes, to be sure, but what does a performer see as differences in the music of these two masters of the quartet form? "There are questions in Beethoven, in notation, but a lot of it you can talk through," says O'Neill. "Sometimes you're trying to decipher the character. The tendency sometimes in Schubert is to be too forceful. A lot of times, those little accent markings aren't like what you think. It's the grace and the humility and the intimacy. It's his own little special world of expression, of vulnerability."

In Schubert's quartets, says Rhodes, "the treatment of melody is very different. Maybe this is blasphemous to say, but I don't think of Beethoven as a melodic composer. The melodies have a very different attitude. I think of Schubert as the master of the melody, but it's all about context. What we're doing is making the melodies luminous or more dramatic or glow in the way that they wouldn't if they were just by themselves. That might be the biggest personality difference in how I approach the music. Even when I look at a slur in Beethoven, or when I look at a slur in Schubert, somehow, it feels different because of that melodic attitude."

For string players, Schubert's G major quartet is regarded as a major mountain to

scale, an intimidating challenge. Rhodes faced that fear as well. "Once you get over that, you look at the music, and you realize, this is really repetitive. It's amazing music, but this stuff repeats a lot, you know? One thing for me that was very liberating was thinking about the songs and the idea that, yes, the repetition has a different meaning here. The repetition is a feature of the music; it's not something that we should shy away from. It's something that can have new text, new meaning. In repetition, you can celebrate either this idea of dramatic motion or of stasis, and that sometimes stasis is okay."

Is the difficulty the reason that the G major is heard in concert less often than "Death and the Maiden"? Rhodes comments, "One of the reasons why it isn't played as much is because it is a very, very difficult piece to tour. [When] we run into another string quartet at the airport, and we say we're touring Schubert G major, they look at us like, 'You nuts?' There's an understanding amongst quartet folks that if you're touring Schubert G major, it takes up an incredible amount of the season. It's a huge commitment and just a very physical play. It's also difficult to mix with other programs because it's something that has to be maintained

very carefully on tour (the Takács programmed it with a Haydn quartet and the Fanny Mendelssohn String Quartet).

Rhodes recalls a conversation about Schubert's G major not long after O'Neill joined. "It was during the pandemic. I think we might've been just sitting around the table, eating snacks or drinking tea. Ed looked at András, and he said, 'András, I know you're going to think I'm crazy. You're going to be surprised, but . . . I would love to play Schubert G major again.' I didn't understand the weight of that comment, but András' eyebrows went up.

"We talked about it later, and I think Ed felt like he really surprised himself. He said, 'I really want to play it again with this configuration of the quartet.' András loves this piece, and Richard and I were over the moon. This isn't a piece you work on casually, you know?"

The recording took place in May 2023 at the Wyastone Estate concert hall in England. "It's a shift when you get into the recording studio because, frankly, one of the most unattractive things about recording is that it's permanent," says Rhodes. "We talk about being flexible, and we talk about listening in the moment. But then you think, that take is the one you choose, the one that's there forever. That's extremely different from how we prepare for live concerts.

"That shift can be a bit of a mind game, I have to say. So getting into the recording studio with someone like [producer] Andrew Keener is an amazing counterbalance to all of those thoughts. First of all, he's a genius—not just with the technical things that he does, but also how he talks to us and how he makes us feel comfortable but also gets results."

"The role of the producer is so vital," agrees O'Neill. "Andrew is such a gentleman and so witty and hilarious. He has that ability to sense what's happening, the momentum of the room, and when things are waning or getting strained, he's very good at moving on. Sometimes the process, if you can't capture that magic on it, can be very soul crushing. He's able to magically make it all feel like it's almost like you're performing in a way."

Rhodes says: "The two things we worked on a lot [in recording] were the extremely loud fortissimo moments and getting a whole symphony of colors in the pianissimo range."

O'Neill adds, "The Wyastone hall is so sensitive—a warm, amazing sound and ideal for all those very quiet dynamics." Loud scrubbing sounds presented their own challenges. "Of many things about the Schubert G major, it's a tremolo exercise. We don't really often

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think about tremolo or pizzicato a lot, but there are so many variations.”

Next year the Takács marks 50 years since its founding, and the newest members of the quartet have an appreciation for this legacy—and for the personal histories they bring to the group.

In an interview in *Strings* around the time he joined the Takács, O'Neill was deliberating about which instrument to play. He settled on his Gasparo da Salò, once owned by Alan Iglitzin, his chamber music coach and founding violist of the Philadelphia String Quartet. “There’s something about this viola. I think it remembers how to resonate.”

Harumi Rhodes’ violin also had a previous life in the spotlight, having been played for many years by her mother, Hiroko Yajima, second violinist of the Galimir String Quartet (Rhodes’ father, Samuel Rhodes, was

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the violist of the Juilliard Quartet). “Recently, playing in the Ravel Quartet—one of the second violin solos—there was a moment when I felt like my violin had done this, my violin knew this piece, and these notes were inside of its soul.”

Exploring the Schubert with Fejér and Dusinberre has been memorable for both Rhodes and O'Neill. “One of the amazing things about playing the piece so many times is that Ed is bulletproof,” says O'Neill. “He always is so relaxed, and he just sails through that last movement. While those arpeggios are really difficult, he just is nonplussed by them. I mean, I of course love doing all my little tremolos and stuff and playing all the really technical things in the viola part, but Ed really makes the piece possible.”

One can imagine that the Takács Quartet’s brand of joyful music making would have warmed Schubert’s heart. ■



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