

PERFORMANCES UP CLOSE

TAKÁCS STRING QUARTET

Edward Dusinberre, Violin

Harumi Rhodes, Violin

Geraldine Walther, Viola

András Fejér, Cello

with

David Requiro, Cello

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

STRING QUINTET IN C MAJOR, D. 956

Concert experience by

Michael Dean Morgan and Wesley Cornwell

Pre-concert readings:

Mein Traum ("My Dream") by Franz Schubert

Sonnet 29 by William Shakespeare

Adagio by Robert Pinsky*

"Heaven"—is what I cannot reach! by Emily Dickinson

Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven by William Butler Yeats

Otherwise by Jane Kenyon

On His Blindness by John Milton

Blackacre by Monica Youn

Thanatopsis by William Cullen Bryant

**commissioned by Princeton University Concerts*

A Winter Drive by Edward Dusinberre

It is unlikely that Schubert heard even a private performance of his String Quintet in C major. Schubert finished the quintet roughly two months before his death in November 1828 at the age of thirty-one. As early as March 1824 he had faced the probable outcome of the syphilis he first contracted in 1822: 'Imagine someone whose health is permanently injured... imagine someone to whom love and friendship are at most a source of bitterness, someone whose enthusiasm (whose creative inspiration at least) for all things beautiful threatens to fail...'¹ Over the next four years Schubert nonetheless composed some of his greatest music, including the three last Piano Sonatas, the song cycles 'Die schöne Müllerin' and 'Winterreise,' and the String Quintet.

Twenty two years after his death the Hellmesberger Quartet gave the first public performance on 17 November 1850 in Vienna with second cellist Josef Stransky. Publication followed in 1853. Violinist Andreas Moser attended the ensemble's concerts in the 1870s and 1880s, writing about the quintet: 'Never has this work presented itself to my ear with such ravishing beauty of sound and such captivating verve...'²

A low *pizzicato* note punctuates the opening chord of the Adagio, music that challenges my caffeinated frazzle on a frigid January

¹ Letter from Schubert to Kupelweiser, 31 March 1824; no. 34 in Otto Erich Deutsch (ed.), *Franz Schubert's Letters and other Writings* (New York, Vienna House, 1974): p. 78

² Quoted in Peter Clive, *Schubert and His World: A Biographical Dictionary* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 73

morning as I reverse out of my driveway, on the way to the Takács Quartet studio at the University of Colorado in Boulder to rehearse Schubert's String Quintet. I have not played the piece for several years. Before I become caught up in the musical and technical details that dominate the rehearsal process, returning to this extraordinary slow movement provides an opportunity to reconsider its distinctive characteristics as a listener as much as a player.

Admittedly, there would be more reverential ways to experience the Adagio than through a car stereo on my morning commute. Equipped with state-of-the-art earbuds, perched atop a scenic outlook as the sun disappears behind the snow-dusted peaks of the Continental Divide, I could perhaps create suitable conditions for an epiphany. But I am curious to experience the piece as it rubs up against more mundane conditions. The CD I listen to is our own Takács Quartet recording made in 2012 with second cellist Ralph Kirshbaum. Although the painting on its cover depicts a majestic snow-capped mountain viewed from afar by awestruck travelers, this morning the foothills west of Boulder are obscured by mist: if an otherworldly listening experience is improbable, perhaps other aspects of the Adagio will emerge.

A backhoe is blocking our street. Despite a sign to PROCEED SLOWLY, only a child on a scooter could find a way through the jumble of red cones that surround a small pit, dug to repair a gas leak or unleash the latest swathe of cable entertainment on our neighborhood. I rev my engine, drowning out Schubert and drawing the attention of a worker who glances indifferently in my direction before reversing the sign: STOP. A detour will add precious seconds to my journey time. I set off in the opposite direction while Schubert's chords proceed slowly, impervious to the profanities of a fractious driver.

Ralph Kirshbaum continues his *pizzicati* in the form of a two (or occasionally three) note rhythm that lands with mesmerizing regularity on the first and third beats of every bar for the first five minutes of the movement. Karóly, Geri and András (second violin, viola and first cello on this recording) finesse their bows in a pianissimo dynamic as they spin a slow-moving chordal backdrop to a dialogue between the second cello and first violin. *Really, a backdrop??* I hear my colleagues protesting. Well might they bridle at a first violinist's glib characterization of their parts, marked *espressivo*. Sigmund Nissel, second violinist of the Amadeus Quartet, once offered a tongue-in-cheek description of a string quartet as a fine wine: the cellist may be the bottle, the first violin the label, but it is the inner voices that provide the actual wine. The idea is a good counter to any talk of a 'backdrop' and appropriate with minor adaptation for this opening of the Quintet's Adagio. The *pizzicati* of the second cello provide a frame while the first cello joins the second violin and viola to become another inner voice. In rehearsal the inner voices work at unifying bow speeds and width of vibrato to create a balanced blend of sound.

But what about that first violinist? I have more often thought of myself as the cork than the label - culpable when the wine smells off. Throughout his chamber music Schubert writes exposed and treacherous passagework for the first violin that can exude a pungent odor. However, his unreasonable demands are all forgiven for my assignment in this one Adagio. The first violin adds an element of fantasy to the opening: notes seemingly improvised on the spur of the moment that question and speculate. While the second cello continues its pizzicato frame and the inner voices journey through their chord changes, I am propelled to the second and fourth beats of each bar by a simple dotted rhythm. When grace notes are added they provide

the impetus to reach upwards - a fourth, a second, an octave, a third or a sixth before the higher note gives way to the starting pitch. As the distance of the intervallic leaps increases and the dynamic develops from *pianissimo* to *forte*, these gestures plead with the chords and the more objective downbeat pizzicati of the second cello, encouraging a heightened expressivity. At the end of cadences my role is more reactive, acquiescing to the chord changes as I fall downwards through the same notes laid out beneath me.

The hypnotic repetition of the second cello's rhythm contrasts with the commonplace actions I observe around me. In the rear view mirror a woman contorts her head up and to the left as she fastens a determined jaw around a large breakfast sandwich, her other hand juggling steering wheel and iPhone. Meanwhile a shocking bumper sticker has just overtaken me on the left. *Jesus loves you but everyone else thinks you're an asshole*. A salutary reminder before a string quartet rehearsal: after working together with the same four people for many decades one's tics are more irksome for being predictable: the thinly veiled criticism framed as an innocuous question *Do you think that maybe...* or that habit I have of repeating a self-evident statement in a slightly different way, as if it were too complex to be fully appreciated first time around - indeed too sophisticated to be instantly comprehended.

In just a few weeks water will cascade down the gulley adjacent to the road but today the creek is covered by a thin crust of ice. Commuters advance in slow motion on gritted snow, exhibiting varying degrees of impatience and resignation. At an intersection a postman hoots his horn at the hapless driver whose wheels spin in the slush. The chords of the opening phrase return and the first violin abandons its lyrical fantasy, now responding to

the second cello's *pizzicati* in kind. When the second cello is seated opposite the first violin onstage, their *pizzicati* answer each other across chords that emerge from the middle of the group. The austere effect is reinforced by a further drop in dynamic in the chords: now *pp* becomes *ppp* and there is no *espressivo* instruction to encourage bowing arms. The change is of both dynamic and timbre of sound. By using no vibrato the inner voices can produce a bleaker sound, a sense of the music being stripped down, individual impulses minimized. In concert the slow repetitive arm motion necessary to execute the *pizzicati* causes a strange, trance-like sensation as if from afar Schubert were operating my arms with invisible puppet strings.

After just a few bars I can no longer sustain the restrictive symmetry of the *pizzicati*, and reintroduce my dotted rhythm and intervallic leaps upward, alternating these with increasingly desperate *pizzicati*. Desperate because as the music grows in volume and the second cellist pulls a cavernous sound from his instrument, I am incapable of matching his resonance in this higher register. When we performed this piece with cellist Lynn Harrell, he sat opposite me in the pause between the first and second movements sucking his thumb - a discreet way to soften his skin in preparation for these *pizzicati*: dry skin would produce an unsuitably brittle sound. During concert performances I hope the exaggerated follow through of my arm will launch my bony-fingered plinking further into the hall. On this recording I benefit from close microphones and the generous acoustic of the venue.

As I continue my drive toward campus, one of many commuters isolated in cars with our early morning preoccupations, I savor the relationships between the five instruments in the quintet: the way in which second violin, viola and cello function almost

as a Greek chorus, seeming both to react to and shape the more individually distinct actions of second cello and first violin. Towards the end of the first section I play longer and more pleading melodic phrases, my most individualistic foray so far. When I drop down a scale into the same register as the ongoing chords, the first cello takes the opportunity to emerge briefly as a descant at the top of the ensemble, a moment of lyrical independence that foreshadows a dramatic change of role in the middle section of this A-B-A structured movement. To conclude the dialogue of rhythm and mood between second cello and first violin there occurs a moment of agreement: just once we play the *pizzicato* rhythm together. Then, emerging from a trill and crescendo played by all five players comes a violent transformation.

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Between 1879 and 1882 the violinist Franz Kneisel studied at the Conservatory in Vienna with Josef Hellmesberger junior, second violinist in his father's string quartet, the Hellmesberger Quartet, an experience that probably influenced Kneisel's subsequent musical interests. Appointed concertmaster of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1885 when he was only twenty years old, Kneisel also formed the Kneisel Quartet from musicians in the orchestra. Beginning in 1894 the ensemble gave three to five afternoon concerts each year at Princeton. On February 15th 1916 the ensemble performed Schubert's String Quintet with second cellist Marie Roemaet, 'The Daily Princetonian' noting the 'unusual opportunity to hear this beautiful composition, never before given in Princeton.' The instrumentation makes it more difficult to program this work than Schubert's string quartets: to date it has been performed only twice in the one hundred and twenty-five year history of Princeton University Concerts.

A young man bent against the wind and laden with a bulky backpack makes dogged progress against the wind, ears enveloped by large headphones as snowflakes melt in his long dark hair. The light turns green as he reaches the sidewalk and I pull forward into the intersection, failing to notice a car that slides toward me from the left. Swerving at the last moment I barely manage even the last two directives from my son's Driver Education course: Scan Identify Predict Decide Execute.

No amount of scanning would help to predict the sudden change of mood in the middle section of the Adagio. Keening high in the instrument's range, András' first cello melody withstands frantic *fortissimo* syncopations in the second violin and viola, insistent second beat jabs in the second cello, and vehement triplets exchanged back and forth. Above the first cello, I play the same melody one octave higher. An upper octave assignment can be treacherous: if one of my notes is just a fraction sharp or flat the melody is soured (that suspicious cork again). But here I love my role in the drama, clinging to the first cello as we careen through breathless gestures before playing longer notes whose fragility is emphasized by the driving rhythms underneath.

After the extended control required to play the previous music I find it cathartic to launch myself at this passage where violence shatters serenity, the dark key of F minor displacing E major. But however brutal the rhythms or desperate the melodies, as a player I must maintain sufficient motor skills and awareness of my surroundings to play together and in tune with András. Traveling to the Takács studio this morning I am made more aware of the derailing power of such wild music, the potential for anguish to subvert everyday routines. Perhaps driving under the influence of Schubert should be a ticketable offense.

Whereas the instability of this section depends in part on the way in which the musical lines fight with one another, once the outburst has exhausted itself all five players must come together to play fractured gestures that emerge from and return to silence. During rehearsals reconciling the views of five strong-minded musicians can be a challenge:

The rests are too long—there’s no tension in them—they’re too short—we sound impatient—we should shape a phrase over the rests—that’s too explicit a shape—I can’t follow your sign—I don’t want to be too obvious—it’s so passive it sounds like we’ve died—that’s how it should sound.

It is no coincidence that Schubert demands unanimity at those pivotal transitions between contrasting music: the crescendo and trill that shatter the serene mood before plunging us into the middle section or the transition here that turns from unhinged anguish to a transformed final section. These are the crises where jolting changes of emotion, texture and rhythm must be balanced by the greatest cooperation between the players. While pulses still race from the previous frenzy, the passage at the end of the middle section imposes a kind of physical and emotional discipline - the jarring individual manifestations of grief are merged, the distinctive characteristics of each player subsumed. Again Schubert pulls the puppet strings.

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The Stuyvesant Quartet was formed by the cellist Alan Shulman and his brother Sylvan in New York City in 1938. From 1945 they were joined by violinist Bernard Robbins and violist Ralph Hersh. All four players were at one time or another members of Toscanini’s NBC

Symphony Orchestra. The ensemble gave the second performance of Schubert's Quintet for Princeton University Concerts with second cellist Benar Heifetz on March 8, 1949. This was the last time that the piece was performed for the series.

I turn off the main road into the campus and scan the icy bike path as a cyclist whizzes by, unperturbed by wind and snow. Unsettled by the previous music I am relieved to park underneath a towering blue spruce tree. I can see only as far as the intersection where the lights and road signs guide the journeys of those commuters heading toward the downtown. Lumps of snow fall periodically onto my windshield while I listen, already several minutes late to rehearsal.

The third section of the Adagio may return to the opening harmonies but there is nothing repetitive or self-evident in the extraordinary transformation Schubert renders here. While the three inner voices return to their serene chords, the most startling invention is the rumbling of the second cello, ignoring the prior duties of a rhythm section, and instead producing a weird combination of fast upward forays and contrasting gestures that revolve insistently around one or two lower notes. With no rhythmic frame to resist or obey, the first violin takes its cue from the second cello, at first answering in contrary motion but then climbing upwards - a more expansive, explicit version of its upward gestures in the opening section. Separated by the chords in between, the second cello and first violin are nonetheless entangled, an upward run answered by a downward swoop, the two players sometimes coming together to play the same rhythms and dynamic gestures - an entwining of voices and sentiment both sensual and ethereal.

Such arabesques cannot last. Now the second cello and first violin play the unyielding *pizzicati* together. Later the first violin tries to escape with more individual expressive gestures, its last attempt at independence realized in the form of two elaborate ornaments, expressive sighs and downward scales. Near the end of the Adagio the most emphatic pizzicato of all accentuates a moment of outburst that recalls the fury of the middle section - a final protest before a last E major chord that glows and then recedes into silence.

Schubert's extreme juxtaposition of serenity and tumult may expose the insignificant preoccupations of commuters as we grapple with the winter weather, traffic lights and uncooperative signs but my perspective this morning has been biased. Failing to notice the companionable car poolers or the excited high schoolers piling out of the SKIP bus to attend a guided campus tour, I have been drawn to more isolated travelers and the obstructions they face - an irate postman, a self-absorbed student fighting against the wind, a construction worker and his unyielding STOP sign. But perhaps I only imagine their isolation in contrast to the intricate relationships I hear within the Adagio: relationships that are themselves a response to Schubert's own despair as 'someone whose enthusiasm (whose creative inspiration at least) for all things beautiful threatens to fail', someone like the lonely traveler in the twentieth song of his song cycle *Winterreise*, *Der Wegweiser*, who wonders what leads him to ignore the signposts that guide others, wandering restlessly, craving peace, until he comes across a sign that he cannot avoid: 'I must travel a road / from which no-one has returned.'

After listening to this last section of the Adagio I experience a surprising sense of detachment from our recording. Removed from the physical, collaborative experience of playing with my colleagues it is harder to comprehend that I once contributed to this CD. I am aware instead of the transitory nature of chamber music ensembles and their performances -whether given by the Hellmesberger, Kneisel, Stuyvesant or Takács Quartets. Feeling strangely unmoored by my journey I hoist my violin case onto my back, walking briskly towards the companionship of the Takács studio, eager to explore once again the duets, trios, individual flights of fancy and moments of consensus that Schubert has created; relationships that exist on a printed page, always awaiting new players and audiences.

—By Edward Dusingberre, ©2018