

# Takács Quartet at Brock Hall

By Michael Huebner

The last time the Takács Quartet performed in Birmingham, they played in a hall deadened by thick curtains and better suited for the spoken voice. That was 2007 in the Alys Stephens Center's Sirote Theatre, a dry acoustical space designed for theater but unsuitable for Haydn, Janáček and Brahms chamber music.

On Tuesday, the Colorado-based ensemble returned for another engagement, this one also sponsored by the Birmingham Chamber Music Society together with the Davis Architects Guest Artist Series, but in the city's finest acoustical forum for small ensembles, Brock Recital Hall. Of course, this world-class quartet, included on numerous short lists for being among the finest in the world, has nothing to hide and everything to gain by playing in a hall that enhances its sound rather than starkly exposes it. Its impeccable ensemble is so well honed, its musical breadth so well defined, a warmly tuned chamber only takes the listening experience to another level.

Haydn's String Quartet in C Major, Op. 74, No. 1 (which also started the 2007 program), No. 57, resonated with warmth and joy, its ebbs and flows culled from years of familiarity yet infused with spontaneity and charm. The Menuetto had a sculptural quality, each player given a chance for solo emergence, with quick imitative passages in the Vivace finale executed to near perfection.

## Takács Quartet

Károly Schranz,  
Geraldine Walther,  
András Féjer,  
Edward Dusing



Takács' reading of Shostakovich's postwar (1946) String Quartet No. 3 brought out the composer's battles with Soviet censors (his Symphony No. 9 had just been censored by the Soviets), with touches of wit and optimism that somehow seemed less genuine than the passion and angst of the final movement. Such is the power of Shostakovich, whose output in chamber music, opera and symphonic scores seems still open for discovery.

The humor in the opening movement is disturbing, its naïve repetitious rhythms belying its underpinnings of unrest. The juxtaposition of major and minor keys toward the end of the Andante brought more uncertainty. Permeating the work is the cautious optimism of a tormented soul.

So how does a quartet go about transmitting this to an audience? Takács did it with deep knowledge of the composer's troubled times and staunch dedication to his genius. Juxtaposed with fearless, passionate playing that reflected Shostakovich's angst as he tread lightly with the authorities, the quartet seemed to be played with full understanding of subtitles for each movement, the authorship of which is up for debate.

Having recorded Schubert's String Quartet No. 14 in D minor ("Death and the Maiden") in 2006, the work has become a Takács staple. A bold and gritty opening movement and exaggerated dynamic swells in the second movement variations set the stage for the galloping rhythms and machine-like precision of the final movements. Engaging from beginning to end, the quartet's daring playing was a bit less than technically perfect, but its singularity of purpose was irresistible.

Co-presented by Birmingham Chamber Music Society and Davis Architects Guest Artist Series.