

Review

Cleveland Chamber Music Society: Takács Quartet with Garrick Ohlsson at Plymouth Church (March 19)

by Daniel Hathaway



Referring in a recent [interview](#) to the Brahms-Haydn-Brahms program the Takács String Quartet cooked up for their March 19 Cleveland Chamber Music Society concert with Garrick Ohlsson (and repeated the following evening at Lincoln Center), violist Geraldine Walther exclaimed, “Who would have thunk it! But it actually does work and it’s a really satisfying concert to hear.”

The unusually large crowd in Plymouth Church last Tuesday evening agreed enthusiastically with that assessment as the Takács and their distinguished piano colleague dug deeply into the structure and substance of Brahms’s *Quartet in a, op. 51, no. 2*, *Piano Quintet in f, op. 34* and Haydn’s *Quartet in B-flat, op. 76, no. 4*, sculpting performances that rank among the most distinguished and compelling of the CCMS season to date.

The two Brahms works are fascinatingly dissimilar — the quartet lyrical but abstract, the quintet craggy and visceral. The Haydn — especially in the magical hands and bows of the Takács — provided a delicious *entremet* and made for just about as much fun as you could possibly have at a chamber music concert.

The Takács played the opening Brahms quartet with limpid physicality, perfect balance and impressive tonal blend. A highly kinetic group of musicians, they seem unable to sit still. So bodily invested are they in their music-making that it sometimes looked as though they might rise out of their chairs — or fall out of them — at big climaxes.

They invested Haydn’s “Sunrise” quartet with joyous energy, underlining all the composer’s flashes of wit and bursts of humor. High points were the folksy unisons in the lilt-ing minuet and the many charming details in the finale — including tiny motives brilliantly tossed back and forth even at warp speed.

Pianist Garrick Ohlsson, who sat in the audience for the first half, joined the quartet for the second, which created something of a tight fit on Plymouth’s altar platform: the Steinway took up so much room that the quartet were strung out in a line at the front. Though

there was a bit of micro-shifting to establish sight lines, once the music began everything lined up with mystical, eyes-in-the-back-of-the-head precision.

If the Takács Quartet had been deeply engaged in every detail of the music in the first half, they took things to an entirely new level of passionate commitment in the Brahms piano quintet. Though Ohlsson's performance demeanor is almost stoic, what came out of his fingers — on a dark-sounding piano with its lid all the way up — matched the strings' bravura playing perfectly. Balances were excellent and after the dramatic false ending in the finale, the five players brought the quintet and the concert to an end in a blaze of Brahmsian glory. The crowd rose to its feet for a warm ovation.

Earlier in the day, the chamber music society released its 2013-2014 season, an exciting lineup of artists that includes a return visit from the Takács Quartet, who will play all of Bartók's quartets on two adjacent evenings. Fans, mark your calendars for March 17 & 18, 2014.

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