

Preview

Cellist Daniel McDonough and violist/coach Michael Strauss share insights about Bartók's string quartets

by Mike Telin



For the fourth part of our preview of the Takács Quartet's complete cycle of Bartók string quartets on the Cleveland Chamber Music Society series at Plymouth Church on March 17 and 18, we spoke with Jupiter Quartet cellist Daniel McDonough and Oberlin's Associate Professor of Viola and Chamber Music Michael Strauss about performing and coaching the Bartók quartets, and come back full circle to musicologist Peter Laki for final reflections about the Takács Quartet. We spoke with all three by telephone.

Performing the Bartók Quartets. Cellist Daniel McDonough said, "The wonderful thing about the Bartók quartets is that they are so carefully constructed. Like Beethoven, there is so much attention to detail so the challenge is finding clarity in the texture and making sure the evolution of the musical motives are really clear to the audience without ever becoming too cerebral-sounding. We are always looking for an emotional way to bring clarity to the music. Again, like Beethoven, I think the combination of head and heart is what makes his quartets so great, but also so difficult."

Coaching Bartók. How do you convey that combination of head and heart to young students? Oberlin's Michael Strauss thinks that while the music of Bartók used to be a foreign language, today it is a very common language. "As a coach," Strauss said, "the hardest thing about approaching the Bartók quartets is to convince students that his music, in every way shape and form, has the same kind of aesthetics as Mozart, Schubert and Brahms so that they do not approach it in a mechanical way. Unfortunately, at first people did approach his music in kind of a weird avant-garde way that Bartók never intended. This is why it is going to be an extreme pleasure to hear a group like the Takács play the cycle and present it in the way that I know that they will."



Touring the cycle. Strauss pointed out that during the 1940s, 50s and 60s, you didn't have agents and presenters who were trying to sell Bartók cycles. "The first quartet that I know of that really did a Bartók cycle on tour was the Juilliard Quartet in the mid 1970s."

Certainly the Hungarian String Quartet performed them and I believe the Végh Quartet did tour them as a cycle in the early 1950's. But it was a very esoteric thing to do."

Strauss also believes that the great Hungarian movie composers helped make Bartók's harmonic language more acceptable to the public. "The funny thing is that if you listen to the movie music of Miklós Rózsa, the harmonic language is the same as what Bartók was using. And because of the great influence of some of the Hungarian movie composers, by the time you get to the 1970s it was easier to mount a Bartók cycle.



The Takács: a quartet with a very rich history. Peter Laki said, "I have been following them since their inception back in the 1975. I was in School with the original Takács so we do go back a long time." What is special about the way they perform the music of Bartók? "It's the unbroken chain of tradition because they worked with people who personally knew him — like Zoltan Székely, for whom he wrote his second violin concerto. They also worked with a lot of Hungarian musicians from the old generation. This gives them a special connection. It's not that you can't play Bartók well without that, but they have been playing these quartets for many years."



Passing on their knowledge. Again, Jupiter String Quartet cellist Daniel McDonough: “When we first started out as an ensemble we attended the Takács Quartet’s seminar in Boulder, Colorado, and that experience was very important to our development. They understand Bartók better than anyone in the States. Although we had come from the great Cleveland Quartet school training, to have the Takács’s influence widened our interpretive perspective. Later when we were in Boston, we had the great pleasure of working regularly with Roger Tapping, who was the violist in the Takács for ten years. We learned a lot from him after he had retired from his touring career. So yes, the Takács have been a very big influence on us. And they still are.”

Photo of Bartók's hands by Geoffrey Landesman courtesy Cleveland Orchestra Archives.

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