

Preview

Oberlin Artist Recital Series — a conversation With Takács Quartet violist Geraldine Walther

By Mike Telin



“I think it’s going to be a great experience playing this program, especially in Finney Chapel”, Takacs Quartet violist Geraldine Walther told us by telephone from Colorado. “It’s a gorgeous place and we love playing there.”

On Sunday, April 13 beginning at 4:00 pm. Walther and her Takács colleagues Edward Dusinberre and Károly Schrantz, violins and András Fejér, cello, will perform quartets by Shostakovich, Webern and Beethoven as part of Oberlin College’s Artist Recital Series.

The Takács were recently in the area for performances of the complete Bartók Quartet cycle, but looking at their concert schedule you discover that it’s not unusual for them to be back on the road with an equally intense program.

“Yes, we do kind of go for the gusto,” Walther said laughing. “But it’s great and we do enjoy it a lot. The string quartet repertoire is such that you can’t just let a piece sit, you’ve got to look at it again and refresh it. So it’s a constant process of revisiting pieces. Even if it’s something that we’ve played two weeks prior, we do sit down and rehearse it.”

Sunday’s concert begins with Shostakovich’s *Quartet No. 2*. “It’s relatively new to our repertoire,” Walther said, “but it’s just a fantastic piece. I was just reading a little bit about him because the more we play it I have become even more curious about him as a person. I did read his book *Testimony* but I find reading books about him to be very informative just to get a take on how other people have viewed him.

“This quartet dates from 1944, well into his career, and he wrote it very fast, in one month at an artist colony. People who were there said that he would be around and then disappear for forty or so minutes, then come back. They never knew when he was writing the piece except that he would disappear.”

One of Walther’s favorite parts of the quartet is the second movement. “It’s a fantastic and unusual movement. I can’t think of another one quite like it, where the three of us are holding chords while the solo violin is playing a meditation. The third movement waltz is kind of macabre and is amazing because of its ghostly character. And the tune in the last

movement theme with variations — that sounds like folk music but is actually not a folk tune but Shostakovich.”

Regarding Webern’s *Six Bagatelles* and *Five Movements*, Walther said, “the Bagatelles are so short, they’re over in four to five minutes, but they’re amazing because of how much Webern packs into them. The Five Movements are also under 10 minutes but it’s such evocative music.”

Walther said that when playing them she likes to imagine what it must have been like to be alive at the time Webern composed them. “To be at the cusp of change, going from the big huge romanticism of the late 1800’s to paring everything down to practically nothing. I find it fascinating that he was so intent and focused on what he was doing.

“He knew that this wasn’t going to be easily accessible to most audiences, but it didn’t stop him one bit. I certainly like playing these pieces, and now, audiences always react quite favorably. I think the key is just to experience them and not try to analyze it too much.”

Although Geraldine Walther doesn’t believe it’s a good thing to over-analyze a piece, she does enjoy learning as much as possible about composers and their music. “I was also reading a little bit about Beethoven’s Quartet op. 132, and Ed, our first violinist, is working on a book about playing the late Beethoven Quartets, so he’s been thinking a lot about it too.

“We were talking about the fact that the first performance of op. 132 was in an Inn in front of 14 or 15 people. And how Beethoven was sitting there beating time for the Schuppanzigh Quartet who premiered the quartet. It’s kind of hard to imagine that the premiere of one of the greatest pieces in the string quartet literature was played in some inn next to the bar.”

Although Walther wonders what kind of experience that first performance must have been for an audience, it does cause her to think about how far musicianship has come. “We now have all these wonderful players who can now sit down and play this piece without Beethoven beating time.”

A highlight of playing the quartet for Walther is the work’s third movement. “Beethoven wrote this piece after recovering from a serious illness and he titled the movement ‘A Convalescent’s Holy Song of Thanksgiving to the Divinity, in the Lydian Mode’. And there are places where he writes *Neue Kraft fühlend* — ‘with renewed strength’. Being a former orchestral player, I can’t help but remember hearing a string orchestra play it. So I always try to play it like that and when we get to the part marked ‘new strength,’ I think Yes, we made it!”

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