

**Thinking Outside the Box:  
Takács Quartet and Julien Labro  
bring their collaborative program to the Artist Recital Series**

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by Stephanie Manning



Twirling tango music, or maybe the composer Astor Piazzolla, might come to mind when you think of the word “bandoneon.” Or maybe nothing does. After all, the accordion-like instrument often flies under the radar within the classical and jazz scenes.

“It’s going to take some time until my instruments are household names of either genre,” says Julien Labro, who plays both the bandoneon and its musical cousin, the accordion. “I don’t necessarily think it’s going to happen, but at the same time, I’m very optimistic about the trajectory that they’ve taken in the last 50 years—it’s amazing to witness.”

As an ambassador for his instruments, Labro writes, arranges, and commissions new music, both as a soloist and for small ensembles. And on September 28, Oberlin audiences will get a taste of all of the above when Labro performs with the Takács Quartet in Finney Chapel as part of the Artist Recital Series. Tickets are available [online](#).

Bookending the program will be Bryce Dessner’s *Circles* and Clarice Assad’s *Clash*, two works for string quartet and bandoneon commissioned by the consortium Music Accord. Labro and Takács premiered them both in 2021 and have continued to take the program on the road ever since.

As the group enters its third season of touring, Labro says he relishes the opportunity to keep exploring the works beyond their first performance. “Having this consistency brings even more excitement to the music and even more depth to it from our perspective.”

Dessner's *Circles* opens the program with a meditative, minimalist journey where each of its five voices drift in and out of different patterns. Assad's *Clash*, by contrast, is fiery and discordant, ending the concert with a musical embodiment of conflict between two people.

There was never any question of where those two would fall in the program order. "It's kind of like a menu," Labro says. "We didn't have a hard time figuring out what the dessert course is and what the appetizer is." The real challenge, he notes, was in organizing the rest of the meal.

After Labro's *Meditation No. 1*, a piece for string quartet and bandoneon, he gets a section of the program to himself. This mini set includes *Minguito*, written by Argentine bandoneon player Dino Saluzzi, alongside Labro's arrangement of J.S. Bach's *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* ("Sleepers Awake").

Though the choice of Bach may seem surprising, it makes sense when considering the bandoneon's roots in German sacred music—the instrument was originally designed as a portable organ for churches that couldn't afford one. Paying homage to this history, Labro selected a piece by Bach because the composer is "so monumental—in German music and in sacred music," he explains.

Another monumental figure makes an appearance in Piazzolla, a pioneering Argentine composer and bandoneon player. In Labro's piece *Astoración*, he pays tribute by performing along to recordings of Piazzolla's playing and his voice. "I've taken some of his speech patterns and used them as rhythm, and the pitches of his speech are also incorporated," he says, adding that the work also involves distortion, reverb, and panoramic effects.

Throughout Labro's solo set, the Takács Quartet members choose not to disappear backstage, standing along the sides instead. "We're active listeners," violist Richard O'Neill explains. During the first live performance three years ago, "I just remember hearing Julian play some of the sets, and it brought tears to my eyes," he says. "It was so beautiful to hear that sound and the way he just lets go."

Takács then takes center stage for Maurice Ravel's *String Quartet*, which O'Neill says feels recontextualized thanks to the music that surrounds it. "Because you've heard all these new things, it highlights how innovative Ravel was and all the textures and emotions that come from the piece."

O'Neill has nothing but praise for Labro, whom he describes as "one of my favorite people and favorite musicians." He muses that Labro is a hard person to define, given

how he straddles many metaphorical “boxes” of the classical, jazz, performing, and composing worlds.

“If we need to make a box for Julien, I think it has to be a very large box. He’s just an amazing musician.”

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