

Oberlin Artist Recital Series: Takács Quartet with Julien Labro (Sept. 28)

by Daniel Hathaway



The Oberlin Artist Recital Series opened its new season in Finney Chapel on September 28 with a late afternoon concert that brought a celebrated string quartet together with a virtuoso on a fascinating instrument.

The wonderfully constructed program, performed in a single 70-minute set without intermission,

was created for the Takács Quartet's 50th anniversary and features Julien Labro both as soloist and ensemble player on the bandoneon and accordina.

Bryce Dessner's *Circles*, a work that lives up to its title, made for a great opening. The bandoneon introduced its striking, reedy voice at the beginning, and when the strings entered, the blend of the five instruments was beautiful.

Like a ticking clock, the piece is replete with captivating noodling, and fades into the distance at the end.

Labro's own *Meditation No. 1*, which has just been nominated for a Latin Grammy in the category of Best Contemporary Composition, is a lyrical, mesmerizing piece. It passes its melodies around from player to player, creating a wonderful arc amid typical tango riffs from the bandoneon.

The Takács Quartet moved to the side of the stage while Labro played a set of three solo works. Dino Saluzzi's *Minguito* takes the listener on a historical tour of the bandoneon's evolution, from its beginnings as a German church instrument to an essential voice in tango music. Labro's playing turned Saluzzi's arrangement of a simple folk tune into a masterpiece.

Labro's arrangement of J.S. Bach's organ chorale prelude on *Wachet auf, ruft und die Stimme* — itself a reworking of the tenor aria from the Cantata BWV 140 — was

anything but simple to pull off. The organ version is a trio with a coloratura melody in the right hand, the chorale tune in the left hand, and the bass in the pedal, adapted here for an instrument with different buttons in each hand that summon different pitches when the bellows is extended or compressed. Labro's nuanced performance allowed the counterpoint to come through clearly.

The spirit of Astor Piazzolla, whose music Labro said "changed his life," shined in Labro's *Astoración*. The piece weaves together the history of the bandoneon's beginnings in church music with its evolution into dance music and its later role in the Tango Nuevo that Piazzolla popularized — to the chagrin of traditionalists. The performance included audio of Piazzolla's voice, whose rhythm Labro's music mimicked. Quickly switching to the accordina, Labro introduced snippets of his idol's music, including his *Libertango*.

At this point, the Takács and the bandoneonist switched places onstage as the quartet brought Maurice Ravel's evocative *String Quartet* to life.

Although Finney's great space somewhat dwarfed the Takács' sound, the opening Allegro moderato featured clean playing and transparent textures, followed by sudden bursts of color in the *Assez vif*.

After a gorgeous viola opening, the players brought lush timbres to the *Très lent* movement, and brilliant, powerful playing to the *Vif et agité finale*.

The concert ended with a striking work by Clarice Assad, aptly titled *Clash* for its collisions of sounds and rhythms. A big, full-bodied opening led to fast technical passages from Labro, an impressive cello solo, sudden starts and stops, strong rhythms, and short, angular pizzicatos.

Julien Labro returned to the accordina as he and the Quartet sent the enthusiastic audience home with a pretty bonus piece, Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Melodia Sentimental*.

Photo: [recording session](#) for Yarlung Records' CD *Takács Assad Labro* (Dessner's *Circles*).

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