

Aspen Festival Journal, Part II by Jackson Harmeyer

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For two weeks classical music and mountains surrounded me. For two weeks I was nowhere else but Aspen, Colorado for the Aspen Music Festival, one of the world's leading classical music festivals. Here is Part II in a continuing series recounting my stay in Aspen...

In my last entry, I discussed the first two evenings of concerts: Tuesday, July 1 featured concerts with the American Academy of Conducting at Aspen and with Wu Han and members of the Emerson String Quartet, while Wednesday, July 2 included an outstanding performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and a not-so-great piano recital by Stephen Hough.

Wednesday afternoon also featured something special, however. As part of the High Notes series directed by the festival's President and CEO Alan Fletcher, the members of the Takács String Quartet gathered to discuss their upcoming concerts. It was amazing just how personable these four renowned musicians were. It was also interesting to watch and compare the different personalities of the Quartet's two Hungarian founders – violinist Károly Schranz and cellist András Fejér – with the personalities of the British and American companions who had joined them along the way – violinist Edward Dusinberre and violist Geraldine Walther. That these four were not only insightful musicians but also real people made their concerts all the more enjoyable.

The two Takács concerts were Thursday, July 3 and Tuesday, July 8. At the first, they played Janáček's String Quartet No. 2 subtitled *Intimate Letters*, a moving rendition of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* (although more famous in its version for string orchestra, this work began as the second movement of a string quartet), and Beethoven's String Quartet No. 15 often identified by the words Beethoven appended to its third movement – "*Heiliger Dankgesang*" or "Sacred Song of Thanksgiving." Although this mostly slow, twenty-minute movement can sometimes grow lengthy, that was not the case that night, and certainly the other movements too were played just as tactfully.

The Takács' next recital, on July 8, was just as much a triumph. That night, they played Janáček's First Quartet subtitled *The Kreutzer Sonata* (based on the Tolstoy novella inspired by the Beethoven violin sonata), Smetana's First Quartet subtitled *From My Life*, and the *Second Razumovsky Quartet* by Beethoven. As was also the case the first night, the



Above: An incredible view from Independence Pass as it crosses the Continental Divide. **Photo credit:** Jackson Harmeyer.

Beethoven made the greatest impression on me, but none of the six works were weak links. There was a fuller sound in the Beethoven quartets that simply could not be achieved in the Janáček compositions where the musicians and their bows seemed to be constantly shooting-off in different directions, but that had more to do with Janáček's compositional style than the performances themselves. Both concerts and all six compositions played were highlights of the trip.

The afternoon of Thursday, July 3 had also included a trip across Independence Pass to Leadville. In the once booming mining town of Leadville, I found the historic Tabor Opera House built in the late 1800s when Leadville was such a thriving city it had been considered for Colorado's capital upon entering statehood. The Tabor Opera House had once hosted John Philip Sousa and his band, Harry Houdini, Oscar Wilde, and many other celebrity entertainers, but, now over a hundred years after the city's prosperous decades, the little theater seemed like more of a relic than a place suitable for the big productions of today. I enjoyed the historical aspect, however – the original theater seats, stage backdrops, and overall the archaic structure of the place. Unfortunately, the current owners of the theater no longer have the finances to maintain the Opera House, and plan to shut-down before the year ends. Unless someone steps-up soon with several million dollars for repairs, Leadville is about to lose a major part of its history and culture.

Friday, July 4 included many Independence Day festivities, including a patriotic wind band concert at the packed Benedict

Tent. The two Sousa marches and Morton Gould's *American Salute* were my favorites on this program. Although the concert's conductor Lawrence Isaacson was actually staying in my same bed and breakfast, I only had one brief chance to talk to him.

As I headed into the weekend, there was much more excitement and plenty great music still to come. I suppose those stories will have to wait until my next entry though. Check back soon for Part III of my Aspen Festival Journal.

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Jackson is one of TicketCentral's volunteer bloggers for the 2014-2015 season.



Above: The historic Tabor Opera House in Leadville, Colorado.

Right: View from the balcony of the Tabor House.

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Read more about Jackson's musical travels at www.JacksonHarmeyer.com.