



YING QUARTET

Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Three String Quartets / Sextet in D Minor, *Souvenir de Florence*

2007 Telarc

Contradiction pervades Tchaikovsky's life and work. His homosexuality he called both a "natural tendency" and a "vice." His nine-week marriage was loveless, but his attachment to his patroness Nadezhda von Meck was profound. That relationship, though they agreed never to meet, resulted in her financial support of him between 1876 and 1890 and a collection of 500 passionate love letters. Even his death – suicide or cholera – remains in question, although there is much to support suicide since that fate was assigned to him, according to 1970 scholarship, by a so-called "court of honor" when he was caught *en flagrante* with the nephew of a high-ranking Russian official.

He sought and received the musical favor of Europe but remained deeply rooted in his native Russia. Despite this attachment to his homeland, the famous Mighty Five (Balakirev, Mussorgsky, Borodin, Cui, and Rimsky-Korskov) eschewed his academic associations as an insult to their interest in Russian folk traditions. Yet in the West he was viewed as one of the prominent "young Russians."

In his chamber music Tchaikovsky is his least "Russian," or, that is to say, his most "German" in the sense of his indebtedness to Brahms and the great Classical tradition that sprang out of Germany, a notion that in itself is confusing in light of the "Russianness" that we still associate with his music. Like other nationalistic composers when they turn to chamber music, Tchaikovsky was, in that genre, his most intimate and universal. At the same time, an identifiable Russian spirit remains in his three string quartets and his sextet, "*Souvenir de Florence*." As Stravinsky said of him, "Tchaikovsky understood the art of wearing a top hat and at the same time, of wearing a Russian shirt and belt."

String Quartet No. 1 in D Major, Op. 11, "Accordion"

Moderato e semplice

Andante cantabile

Scherzo: Allegro non tanto

Finale: Allegro giusto

Tchaikovsky's D major quartet of 1871 came through an invitation from Nikolai Rubenstein of the Moscow Conservatory for a performance for the Assembly of Nobles. It seems that not enough funds were available for a full orchestra concert, so Rubenstein asked Tchaikovsky to write a chamber work. In the spirit of "less is more," Tchaikovsky produced his first string quartet, which was both an artistic and financial success. It was performed by the official string quartet of the Russian Musical Society.

The nickname "Accordion" stems from the opening theme of the first movement with its dynamically rising and falling chords. The second theme introduces a lyrical melody for the viola and the third a poignant song for the first violin. Then all join in for a wonderful balance of instruments in a spirited conclusion.

The fame of the first quartet rests mainly with the Andante Cantabile of the second movement. Its dirge-like first theme is based on a Russian folk song that Tchaikovsky apparently heard while visiting the family estate in the Ukraine. Its title is "Sidel Vanya," and has to do with a man sitting on a divan and smoking a pipe, but to many of us it is reminiscent of the over-popular "Volga Boat Song." The song is interspersed with a second theme played by the first violin over a pizzicato accompaniment from the other instruments.

The third movement Scherzo continues in the folk music vein with a lively Russian peasant dance. An elaborate trio section is handed to the violins and viola with the cello offering a drone accompaniment before the dance returns.

The Russian flavor pervades the Finale, also, with another lively dance in the first theme and a sad Slavic song in the second one. Everything stops for a moment before a mad dash to the end.

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Quartet No. 2 in E-Flat Major, Op. 22

Adagio

Scherzo: allegro giusto

Andante ma non tanto

Finale: allegro con moto

The second of his three string quartets came in 1874. Although he was pleased with the work, its first performance in the apartment of Nikolai Rubenstein was the occasion of the disintegration of his friendship with the famous composer and pianist Anton Rubenstein who found it confusing and "not at all in the chamber style."

Indeed, Tchaikovsky pushed the envelope with his chromaticism, irregular rhythms, orchestral-like development, and fugal writing. But then again, so did Brahms. Fortunately the other members of the audience were “in ecstasy” over the work, and it has since become the most popular of his three quartets.

A slow opening reminiscent of Mozart’s “Dissonance” Quartet gives way to a cheerier Moderato that grows intense again and builds to a dramatic climax before a quiet ending. The second movement brings a waltz-like Scherzo except that here the waltz surprises us with its strange rhythmic irregularity similar to the waltz movement of Tchaikovsky’s popular *Pathétique* Symphony. A slower Trio section brings us back to earth. The third movement is Tchaikovsky at his most lyrical and nostalgic, and that is considerable in light of his abilities to evoke emotions in his music. Here he uses the device of the falling fourth, a musical motto we often associate with Mahler. The Finale is an impressive fugue that leads to a spectacular ending.

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Quartet No. 3

Andante sostenuto – Allegro moderato

Allegretto vivo e scherzando

Andante funebre e doloroso ma con moto

Finale: Allegro non troppo e risoluto

The Quartet No. 3 of 1876 was dedicated to Ferdinand Laub, who had championed Tchaikovsky’s chamber music as the first violinist of the Russian Music Society’s quartet. Both Laub’s untimely death at the age of 43 and Bizet’s at 37 the year before had shaken Tchaikovsky, but the fact remains that the third quartet was conceived before those events, making it more of an elegy on Tchaikovsky’s life than on anyone else’s. Despite its triumphant reception, Tchaikovsky had said to his brother Modest: “...I am not completely satisfied [with the third quartet]. It seems to me I have written myself out and am beginning to repeat myself...Is my song really already sung and I won’t come upon anything else?” Although there was much to come, including *The Nutcracker* and the Symphony *Pathétique*, Tchaikovsky was already experiencing the disillusion that would haunt his life.

The expressive first movement, with its slow opening, heralds the elegiac quality that persists throughout the work despite happier moments. Even the second movement with its lively scherzo full of virtuosic leaps from one instrument to another, contains a middle section with a poignant melody for the dark-voiced viola. But it is in the funeral march of the third movement that Tchaikovsky reaches the profound despair with his quotation from the Russian Orthodox liturgy for the dead. Life returns in the spirited Finale with its slightly altered version of the second movement leaps. Here Tchaikovsky dons his Russian shirt and belt for a folk dance. Suddenly the dance stops. There is a moment of contemplation before the spirited race to the end. Still, this is not the Tchaikovsky of *The Nutcracker*.

Sextet in D Minor, Op. 70 “Souvenir de Florence”

Allegro con spirito

Adagio cantabile e con moto

Allegretto moderato

Allegro vivace

The *Souvenir de Florence* was inspired by Tchaikovsky’s love of Florence where he had spent time in the fall of 1878 working on his opera *The Maid of Orleans*. His legendary patroness Nadezhda von Meck had been in the city at the same time but, honoring their mutual agreement, they never met. Tchaikovsky complained that her presence disturbed him, but when she left he suffered a major depression. Memories of that situation produced the String Sextet in D Minor, Op. 70 “*Souvenir de Florence*.” The work was first performed in 1890 but revised in 1891 and again in 1892 by a dissatisfied Tchaikovsky. He seemed to struggle with the work but spoke of his ultimate satisfaction with it in a letter to his brother Modest: “What a Sextet— what a fugue at the end— it’s a pleasure! It is awful how pleased I am with myself; I am embarrassed not by any lack of ideas but by the novelty of the form.”

Like Mendelssohn’s famous Octet, the Sextet opens boldly but is followed, in the second movement Adagio, by a moving duet for violin and cello suggestive of the somber quality of Tchaikovsky’s late works. The third movement Allegretto is an elegy but with sharp dynamic contrasts. The final movement is an energetic fugue well deserving the composer’s own description. These last two movements, with their folk themes, reflect a “Russianness” that we might also associate with Borodin.

As scholar Alice Dampman Humel said in her contribution to the recent Bard Festival’s impressive treatment of Tchaikovsky: “This is the music of paradox – the looming specter of death and the uplifting abandon of dance, the constraints of counterpoint and fugue and the wild flights of imagination.”