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Tchaikovsky

Quartet No. 2 in F, Op. 22

Sextet in D minor, Op. 70 "Souvenir de Florence"



Vermeer Quartet

with Rami Solomonow, viola John Sharp, cello

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-93)**String Quartet No. 2, in F major, Op. 22 (36:00)**

- 1 I. Adagio — Moderato assai, quasi andantino (7:00)
- 2 II. Scherzo: Allegro giusto(5:00)
- 3 III. Andante ma non tanto (12:00)
- 4 IV. Finale: Allegro con moto (12:00)

String Sextet in D minor, Op. 70 “Souvenir de Florence” (36:00)*

- 5 I. Allegro con spirito (7:00)
- 6 II. Adagio cantabile e con moto (11:00)
- 7 III. Allegretto moderato(11:00)
- 8 IV. Allegro vivace (7:00)

Vermeer Quartet Shmuel Ashkenasi & Mathias Tacke, violins
Richard Young, viola Marc Johnson, cello
*with Rami Solomonow, viola John Sharp, cello

TT: (72:00)

Recorded May & October, 1993 at the Great Hall,
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**Tchaikovsky: String Quartet No. 2 and
“Souvenir de Florence” for String Sextet**

Although Tchaikovsky's orchestral works are much performed and recorded, his chamber and solo piano music remain comparatively obscure. Tchaikovsky's three string quartets are all relatively early works stemming from a transitional period in his turbulent life. The Second Quartet, composed between December 1873 and January 1874, has become the Cinderella of the three. A month after its completion, the quartet was performed privately at the apartment of pianist and pedagogue Nicolai Rubinstein. The work was well received by all present except for the host's brother, composer and pianist Anton Rubinstein. As Tchaikovsky's friend Nicolai Kashkin reported: "All the while the music continued, Anton Grigoryevich listened

with a dark, dissatisfied air, and soon as it was over, said with his usual ruthless candor, that this was not at all in the chamber style, and that he did not understand the composition at all. All the other listeners were, on the contrary, in ecstasy.” The Second Quartet’s public premiere the following month at the Imperial Music Society was an unqualified success, with even the usually critical composer César Cui hailing the work as Tchaikovsky’s “most distinctive and original to date.”

There is little sunshine to be found in the Quartet’s first movement despite its F major tonality. The work’s Adagio introduction is in the form of a fantasia full of chromaticism and tonal obfuscation undoubtedly inspired by the mysterious opening bars of Mozart’s “Dissonance” Quartet in C major, K. 465. Tchaikovsky’s introduction is tempestuous and doleful — a kind of musical groping that could represent the composer’s growing dissatisfaction with his own personal life. A genial and folk-like Moderato assai follows. The first theme presents passages of contrary motion between the viola and first violin. The second theme is syncopated over its accompaniment of staccato sixteenth notes, which gradually become more prominent than the theme itself. The music grows in density throughout the development and builds to a frenzied climax of awesome power. The pressure then abates and gives way to the tranquil coda that concludes this almost neoclassical movement.

The second movement, a nimble, dance-like Scherzo in D-flat major, presents the Tchaikovsky we know so well as a master of ballet and theater music. Phrases constructed from irregular meters -- two bars of 6/8 plus one of 9/8 -- have the feel of seven beats (twenty-one beats over three bars). These seven-beat phrases give this movement a resemblance to the “waltz-with-a-limp” movement from the popular “Pathétique” Symphony, which is constructed from units of five beats. The Trio section, in A major, has a melodic shape similar to the Scherzo’s, but its more sentimental character provides contrast with the fleet-footed Scherzo, which is repeated along with a teasing coda.

The jewel of this Quartet, the Andante ma non tanto third movement is one of Tchaikovsky’s sweetest lyrical inspirations. It is based on the repeated interval of a

descending fourth (a musical motto Mahler employed in almost every work he wrote). There is a deep sense of nostalgic recollection here, as though Tchaikovsky were mulling over some childhood memory. The middle section, marked *Pochissimo più mosso*, pushes players to the limits of depth and discipline of ensemble. The opening returns, upholstered by plush harmonies as the movement builds to a heartrending climax. After a wistful echo of the middle section, the movement ends with poignant *pianississimo* (*ppp*) quotations of the falling figures heard at the beginning.

The finale is mock fugal, with a short, martial snare drum figure forming its basis. Tchaikovsky biographer Edward Evans sees this movement as “abound[ing] in evidence of Tchaikovsky’s contrapuntal facility . . . the simple themes are literally juggled with, with a fascinating dexterity, and the vivacity with which the interest becomes more excited is irresistible.” Well into the movement, the second violin begins a fugue proper in which the movement’s initial motive is expanded to provide a self-sufficient counter-subject. Always one to generate a good head of steam, Tchaikovsky ends the Quartet with a final flourish and a dash to the finish line.

Florence was one of Tchaikovsky’s favorite vacation spots. For many of his pleasant Florentine sojourns, Tchaikovsky stayed at a small villa owned by Nadezhda von Meck, his generous benefactress and confidante whom Tchaikovsky, as a condition of their unusual relationship, was never to meet. Tchaikovsky used his peaceful escapes to Florence to sketch, orchestrate, or just relax away from music.

Tchaikovsky’s last visit to Florence came early in 1890. He was then primarily occupied with the completion of his opera *Pique Dame* (The Queen of Spades). In Paris later that year, Tchaikovsky had the idea for and began to sketch a work inspired by his beloved Florence. Tchaikovsky’s conception took the fairly uncommon shape of a string sextet, which he completed in Russia that summer. The Sextet has come to be known by its artful subtitle, *Souvenir de Florence* (reminiscence of Florence). A private performance of *Souvenir* was given in December 1890, but Tchaikovsky was unsatisfied and withdrew the piece for a bout of revisions and structural alterations.

A trip to America for the opening of Carnegie Hall slowed the revising process, so *Souvenir* did not attain its final form until December 1891. A contented Tchaikovsky then wrote to his brother Modest, “What a Sextet — and 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.” *Souvenir* received its public premiere on December 6, 1892 at a concert presented by the St. Petersburg Chamber Music Society, to which Tchaikovsky dedicated the piece.

The opening *Allegro con spirito* bursts forth full of D minor fervor, the minor-ninth in the first bar delivering a strange and unceremonious kick to the first theme. The texture is robust with highly active musical lines generating a passionate momentum. The serenade-like second theme is appropriately Italianate. The first theme’s restless energy returns in the fugal development while the second theme reveals more *cantabile* richness in the recapitulation as it is surrounded by new imitations and a myriad of telling details. The coda employs cross-rhythms reminiscent of Dvorak as it builds to heady levels of excitement.

The *Andante cantabile*, D major second movement begins with an opulent, chordal introduction. The melancholy theme that follows has the character of a guitar accompanied lament. The chords return before the movement’s curious *Moderato* central section in which the players are instructed to play *a punto d’arco* (with the point of the bow), an effect that adds a frosty glazing to the music’s countenance. English music critic, Colin Mason describes this passage as “an essay in sheer sound effect, without the least musical content whatever, which is probably unique in the whole realm of [pre-twentieth century] chamber music.” After this unusual episode, the opening theme returns with garlanding embellishments; the cello’s lavish outpourings of *bel canto* beauty serve to remind us that this work was inspired by the homeland of Giuseppe Verdi.

The third movement, a swaying and energetic *Scherzo* in A minor, sounds more Russian than Italian. The violas playing in unison open the brilliant Trio section filled with fanfare-like exclamations and irradiating accompaniment. The *Allegro vivace* finale is in an abridged sonata form. It starts in D minor, but the theme’s pentatonic overtones are

redolent of Gypsy music. As with the Scherzo, a Slavonic tang flavors the Finale's soaring second theme. The first theme returns to form the basis of the "fugue at the end" about which Tchaikovsky justifiably boasted to his brother. The frenetic, headlong rush that concludes this Tchaikovsky opus has an especially airy feeling of melodic freedom, making the *Souvenir de Florence*'s ending a genuine *al fresco* delight.

— Huw Edwards

About the Performers

With performances in every major city in North America, Europe, and Australia, the **Vermeer Quartet** has achieved international stature as one of the world's finest ensembles. Formed in 1969 at the Marlboro Festival, the Vermeer has performed at all the most prestigious festivals including Tanglewood, Aldeburgh, Mostly Mozart, Aspen, Bath, Lucerne, Berlin, Edinburgh, Spoleto, Ravinia, and the Casals Festival, and has been the featured ensemble for Maine's Bay Chamber Concerts for over two decades. The Vermeer Quartet makes its permanent home in Chicago, where it has been the resident quartet for Performing Arts Chicago since 1985. The Vermeer's members — originally from Israel, Germany, New York, and Nebraska — provide a unique blend of musical and cultural backgrounds. "Out of this alchemy is born a thing of beauty which one can define, without hesitation, as perfection," writes Switzerland's *Suisse*. The Vermeer Quartet's many recordings on the Teldec label include the complete Beethoven cycle, as well as works by Brahms, Dvorak, Mendelssohn, Schubert, and Verdi.

Born in Israel, violinist **Shmuel Ashkenasi** studied with Ilona Feher, and later with Efreim Zimbalist at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. A prize winner at the Tchaikovsky Competition and finalist at the Queen Elizabeth Competition in Brussels, Mr. Ashkenasi has given concerts and performed with leading orchestras throughout the U.S., Europe, former Soviet Union, and Japan.

Originally from Bremen, Germany, violinist **Mathias Tacke** won first prize at the Jugend Musiziert national competition and graduated with honors from the Nordwestdeutsche Musikakademie. From 1983-92 Mr. Tacke was a member of Ensemble Modern, an important group specializing in 20th century music.

Violist, **Richard Young**, studied with Josef Gingold, Aaron Rosand, and William Primrose. He has given recitals and performed with important orchestras throughout the U.S., and has also appeared at many festivals including the Library of Congress, Wolf Trap, and the Cassals Festival.

Nebraska native, cellist **Marc Johnson** studied at the Eastman School of Music and with Janos Starker and Josef Gingold at the University of Indiana. First Prize winner at the prestigious Washington International Competition,

Mr. Johnson has given recitals and made solo appearances throughout the U.S. and Europe.

Rami Solomonow is principal violist of the Chicago Lyric Opera Orchestra.

John Sharp is principal cellist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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