

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) String Quartet No.1 in D Op. 11 (1871)

Moderato e semplice – Allegro non troppo ma con fuoco

Andante cantabile

Scherzo & Trio: Allegro non tanto e con fuoco

Finale: Allegro giusto

Though better known as a master orchestral writer of symphonies and ballet music, Tchaikovsky also published successful chamber music: three string quartets (1871, 1874, 1876), a piano trio (1882) and a string sextet (*Souvenir de Florence*, 1892).

Although verbally precocious – he read in French and German aged six, and at seven wrote in French on metaphysical topics – Tchaikovsky had only above average musical ability as a child. His unusual musical talent only emerged in his twenties. Denied promotion as a qualified lawyer in the Department of Justice, in 1862 he joined Anton Rubinstein's new 'music school', the St Petersburg Conservatory. There Rubinstein taught him good classical composing habits and he absorbed the craftsmanship of Western music: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. One of his classmates prophesied '*You are the greatest musical talent in present-day Russia ... I see in you the greatest, or, better said, the sole hope of our musical future*'.

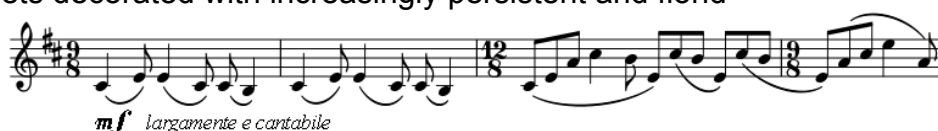
He moved to Moscow at the invitation of Anton's brother Nikolai, to teach harmony at the Moscow Conservatoire, and in 1868 was introduced to "The Five" (aka "The Mighty Handful"): Mily Balakirev (the leader), César Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Borodin. The group aimed to produce a specifically Russian kind of art music, rather than one based on the Western European style taught in the conservatories. As a pupil of Anton Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky was initially a target for their antagonism. But Balakirev, who had had no formal musical training, crucially helped Tchaikovsky with his *Romeo and Juliet* overture, forcing numerous re-writings. Arguably Balakirev was responsible for the emergence of Tchaikovsky's unique voice, incorporating some of the distinctively Russian musical elements promoted by The Five into forms grounded in his conservatory training.

By the time of Tchaikovsky's first quartet, 1871, The Five had dispersed: Cui to fortifications engineering, Borodin to a chair of chemistry, Moussorgsky to the bottle, and the influential Balakirev to a nervous breakdown. Tchaikovsky was still teaching at the Moscow Conservatory, but was short of funds. Nikolai Rubinstein suggested he prepare a benefit concert of his own music. An orchestra would have been too

expensive, so Tchaikovsky composed this D major string quartet to go with some solo piano items.

The long opening section of smooth syncopated chords inspired a Moscow reviewer to give the piece its apparently derogatory nickname of “Accordion”, but accordions are taken more seriously in Eastern than in Western Europe. A rapid semiquaver figure is introduced in contrast to this slow-moving passage, which it decorates as the music becomes more exciting. The second subject is expansive, *largamente e cantabile*, and also gets decorated with increasingly persistent and florid

semiquavers. The tempo increases to a fiery Allegro and accelerates to an exciting ending.



The success of the quartet both at its first performance, and ever since, is substantially due to its famous *Andante Cantabile*. Tolstoy heard it in 1876 at a



musical evening organised by the Moscow Conservatoire in his honour and was moved to tears. The theme is an old Russian folk song that

Tchaikovsky had heard two years earlier from a carpenter on his sister’s Ukrainian estate and it contrasts with a minor section that uses a theme of Tchaikovsky’s own composition accompanied *pizzicato*. The *Scherzo* is a heavily accented peasant dance and the *Finale* a combination of Russian vigour and soulfulness, generously decorated with energetic semiquavers, but within an overall reworking of classical rondo and sonata forms.