

Programme Notes by Chris Darwin – use freely for non-commercial purposes

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) String Quartet No 2, Op 22 (1874)

Adagio – Moderato assai (quasi andantino)

Scherzo: Allegro giusto

Andante ma non tanto

Finale: Allegro con moto

Although he is 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). As a child, he was verbally precocious – aged 6 he read in French and German, at 7 he wrote in French on metaphysical topics – but curiously he had only above average musical ability. 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 his first, D major, string quartet to go with some solo piano items. It contains the well-known *Andante Cantabile* that famously moved Tolstoy to tears.

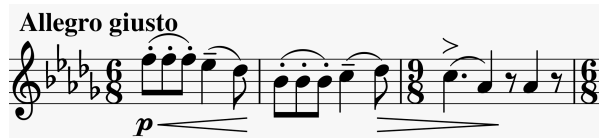
Today's second quartet followed three years later and was composed almost effortlessly over the 1874 New Year. Tchaikovsky in a letter to his brother Modest wrote: "*I regard it as my best composition; none of my works flowed out of me so simply and easily. I wrote it practically at one go...*". Modest's remark that parts of the quartet evoke the intoxicated revels of a Russian Christmas perhaps goes some way to explaining why the quartet has been much more popular in Russia than elsewhere. The work combines an admiration for Beethoven with the Russia spirit sought by The Five.

The work opens in Beethovenian style with a discord and a long slow *Adagio* introduction painfully searching for how to proceed. The second theme (illustrated) of the ensuing



Moderato is unmistakably Russian. Russian spirit prevails as its accompaniment becomes manically orchestral before the movement's first theme returns us to the string quartet.

The endearing *Scherzo* is based on a 7-beat phrase made out of two 2-beat bars and a 3-beat. There is nothing lame about this asymmetric melody - Tchaikovsky was adept at making unusual numbers of beats flow, such as in his *Pathétique* Symphony's 5-beat Waltz.



The substantial *Andante* contrasts two moods: the poignant soulfulness of the opening, and a more agitated and tipsily discordant section. The first part is dominated by a falling, dotted figure (illustrated) first in the violin and then, with added soul, in the cello. The contrasting agitation starts with a rising syncopated scale which leads to madly drunken discords as each instrument hammers away *fortissimo*, doing its own thing. But the Christmas drunks pass and the beautiful soulful opening returns.



Genial and only slightly tipsy revels dominate the Finale. Its opening theme recalls the *Allegro* movement that Beethoven wrote to replace the Great Fuge at the end of Op 130. After his own perfunctory attempt at a fugue, Tchaikovsky looks again to the orchestra to rescue him and rings out the bells on the jovial revelers.



The premiers of both of Tchaikovsky's first two quartets were given by the Russian Musical Society quartet led by Ferdinand Laub, professor of violin at the Moscow Conservatoire; Laub died shortly after the second quartet appeared, and Tchaikovsky dedicated his third quartet to Laub's memory.