

Serenade for Strings in C major, Op. 48

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

In the autumn of 1880, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky worked simultaneously on a pair of orchestral compositions that could hardly be more different: his concert overture *1812* and his *Serenade for Strings*. The *1812 Overture* (as it is widely known) is one of numerous entries in Tchaikovsky's catalogue that were written to celebrate official occasions and might have been expected to fall from view immediately thereafter. More typical was the fate of his occasional piece *Music for a Tableau Vivant of Montenegrins Receiving the News of Russia's Declaration of War on Turkey*, also from 1880; that score has been lost, but it's hard to imagine one would hear it much even if it survived. Tchaikovsky penned *1812* for the inauguration of a cathedral and had no expectations for it beyond that. He informed his patron Nadezhda von Meck, "The overture will be very loud and noisy, but I wrote it without warmth or love, so it will probably not have any artistic merit." It went on to become hugely popular, of course, especially among people trying out new speaker systems.

In the same letter the composer said:

The *Serenade*, by contrast, I wrote from an inner compulsion; it is deeply felt and for that reason, I venture to think, is not without real merit.

Some weeks later, after being treated to a surprise performance of the *Serenade* by students and professors at the Moscow Conservatory, he told her, "At the moment I consider it the best of all that I have written so far." Tchaikovsky was not alone in that opinion. Even Anton Rubinstein, his former principal teacher at the St. Petersburg Conservatory — and often a stern critic of his achievements — told the publisher Pyotr Ivanovich Jurgenson

(so Jurgenson informed Tchaikovsky): "This is the best thing Tchaikovsky had written. You can congratulate yourself on the publication of this opus." Jurgenson published the score in January 1881, and within a few years it was showing up on concert programs in New York, Paris, Prague, Hamburg, London, and Berlin.

At first Tchaikovsky was unsure about the forces he would use; perhaps it would be a full symphony orchestra, perhaps a string quartet. He ended up splitting the difference. By the time he finished the third movement, he had decided it would be a work for string orchestra, thereby maintaining the unified timbre of a quartet but expanding to the forces of an orchestral string section with double basses. In the autograph of the full score, Tchaikovsky

IN SHORT

Born: May 7, 1840, at Votkinsk, in the district of Viatka, Russia

Died: November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg

Work composed: October 3–18, 1880; dedicated to Constantin Albrecht, a cellist and inspector at the Moscow Conservatory

World premiere: October 30, 1881, in St. Petersburg, with Eduard Nápravník conducting a concert of the Russian Musical Society; the piece had already been heard in a surprise performance for Tchaikovsky at the Moscow Conservatory on December 3, 1880, conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 23, 1885, with Leopold Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (a Philharmonic forebear)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: complete work, July 7, 1999, Kurt Masur, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 28 minutes

noted: “The greater number of players in the string orchestra, the more this will be in accordance with the composer’s wishes.”

The Serenade for Strings is a gracious piece that stresses comfort rather than tension. Tchaikovsky wrote to von Meck that the first movement was crafted to imitate the manner of Mozart, although it’s hard to figure out precisely how he viewed it that way. It seems more redolent of a late-Baroque overture (at least in its formal layout), with a stately introduction repeated at the end to bookend a more spirited, dance-like center. What strikes the listener most forcefully, however, is not the work’s architecture but rather the sheer sumptuousness of the sound, which Tchaikovsky achieves at the opening by having his players produce double-stops to achieve chords of up to nine voices (counting octave doublings), an effect that can also be

accomplished by simply dividing the upper string sections.

The second movement is a graceful *Waltz*. It was encored at the first public performance, and Tchaikovsky would report ensuing encores of that movement in his letters to von Meck. The *Elegy* is built from ascending melodic phrases, keeping it from being a downer; when the violins sing its main theme, this movement seems no less balletic than a waltz. For his *Finale*, Tchaikovsky draws on two Russian folk tunes. The second, which launches the lively *Allegro con spirito* section, takes on added significance at the very end. There Tchaikovsky recalls the stately music from the first movement, which now reveals that it shares its melodic contour with the skittering folk song.

Instrumentation: string orchestra.

An Early Performance

A composer and pianist named David Chernomordikov, who attended Tchaikovsky’s concerts in Paris in 1888, left this account of the composer’s podium appearance:

The composer gave the impression of an old man, though he was then not yet 50 years old. I recall his stately figure, the gentle and pleasant features of his face. ... The audience greeted the composer with loud, friendly applause. When the hall had fallen silent, Tchaikovsky mounted the rostrum, took the baton and, after a pause, began waving it.

You sensed that Pyotr Ilyich was very agitated. This showed itself both in the uncertainty with which he took hold of the baton and in a certain sluggishness in his hand movements. When the orchestra began playing the Serenade for Strings, the composer’s baton, as it were, swam through the air. One got the impression that, if the conductor had stopped conducting, the orchestra would have gone on playing just the same.

Tchaikovsky, ca. 1888

