

# Souvenirs for Strings

## The Sextets of Tchaikovsky and Dvořák

### Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

The genre of the string sextet, amazingly, developed only in the mid-nineteenth century and mostly as the result of two seminal examples by Johannes Brahms, composed in 1860 and 1865, respectively. Although works for six musicians were not uncommon before this time, the specific combination of instruments (two violins, two violas, and two cellos) was not in regular use until its potential had been shown by Brahms. This grouping, while topically resembling the string quartet (two violins, viola, and cello), instead gives increased weight to the middle and lower registers, demanding quite a different approach than encountered in quartet writing.

Tonight we hear string sextets by two of the most renowned nineteenth-century composers, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Antonín Dvořák. Brahms was a friend and mentor to Dvořák, so it is no surprise that Dvořák would approach the genre of string sextet only a decade after Brahms made his contributions and, for that matter, at a time when their friendship was first developing. Linking Tchaikovsky's sextet to those of Brahms is a trickier matter, however, as Tchaikovsky generally dismissed Brahms' music as dull and overrated. Nevertheless, chamber music had long been prized in Russia and, after two composers within Tchaikovsky's circle (Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Anton Rubinstein) had written string sextets in 1876, it was not long before Tchaikovsky too would explore the new genre. With masterpieces such as these, the genre of string sextet has continued to inspire composers into the present day.



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

#### Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

##### String Sextet in D minor, Op. 70 *Souvenir de Florence*

The final years of Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's life were in many ways his most successful professionally but his least happiest personally. They witnessed in quick succession the creation of some of his greatest works, including the ballets *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, his celebrated opera *The Queen of Spades*, and ultimately his formidable Sixth Symphony. Further, when he arrived on tour to the United States in spring 1891, he was overjoyed to learn how well-known and well-loved his music was on this continent. Likewise, in Great Britain in 1893, he received an honorary doctorate from Cambridge. In addition to his celebrity, he had also attained the financial independence that, when in September 1890 his longtime patron Nadezhda von Meck ended her support, he was not left destitute.

Emotionally though, Tchaikovsky had come to rely upon Meck's encouragement, even though they had never met in person. In these last years, the events that should have made him happiest brought him only despair. Desolation never left his thoughts during his professionally quite successful trip to America as he had learned of his sister's death the day before setting sail. Nor was Tchaikovsky ever satisfied with *The Nutcracker*, expressing in his letters a sense of crisis over its scenario. Depression plagued his existence. The cause of his death, traditionally attributed to cholera, has also been suggested as suicide after fear that his advances to a young man would be made public and his homosexuality exposed.

The circumstances surrounding the composition of the string sextet *Souvenir de Florence* were no happier. Following the successful first performance of *The Sleeping Beauty* in January 1890, Tchaikovsky departed for Florence where, alone and without disruption, he hoped to complete his opera *The Queen of Spades*. Previous sojourns to the Italian city had proven both productive and restful, and

that was at least partially true of this trip as well for, when Tchaikovsky returned to St. Petersburg in May, he returned with a completed opera in hand. Regardless, Florence itself had not appealed to him the same way it had in the past: within his first hours there, he was reporting back to his brother Modest that he was “bored beyond belief.” Before long, he was writing to his friend and protégé Alexander Glazunov, “Something is happening within me which I cannot fathom: a sort of fatigue from life, a disillusionment... something hopelessly final.” Work on *The Queen of Spades* seemed to chase away or at least distract him from these feelings of depression, yet it is odd that Tchaikovsky would choose to commemorate the city which he had admittedly grown to hate during his time there.

Tchaikovsky completed much of the work on *Souvenir de Florence* in the first months following his return from that city, specifically from June to August 1890. He seemed quite fascinated with the unfamiliar genre, reflecting “I definitely do not want to write just any old tune and then arrange it for six instruments, I want a sextet – that is, six independent voices, so that it can never be anything but a sextet.” He was still pleased with the new work at the time of its completion, but following a private performance in November 1890 was less satisfied and withdrew it until revisions had been made. The public premiere was finally given two years later on November 24, 1892 at the Society of Russian Musicians and repeated the following day at the St. Petersburg Chamber Music Society, the organization which had requested the new work as far back as 1887.

*Souvenir de Florence* is set in four movements in the conventional fast-slow-dance-fast pattern. The opening *Allegro con spirito* begins abruptly with its furious first theme in D minor. Gradually, a more lyrical second theme in E major, identified by its long-held notes in the first violin, emerges according to sonata form. Marked *dolce, espressivo, e cantabile*, this second theme has a songlike quality which has often been attributed to Tchaikovsky’s stay in Florence as has the similarly lyrical theme we hear in the second movement. The development intensifies the contrast between these radically different themes, the one relentless and the other distracted and indulgent. Through fugal imitation and other devices, Tchaikovsky here elevates various instruments which had remained in some ways accompaniment to the first violin previously. After the recapitulation in which both themes are heard once again, a coda brings circularity to the movement by restating the first theme a final time.



Florence. Its famed *Duomo* was designed by Filippo Brunelleschi in the fifteenth century.

The second movement is marked *Adagio cantabile e con moto*. Its sweetness and playfulness sounds as if an intensification of the mood of the first movement’s second theme, lending this movement an Italianate quality as well. After a slow introduction, the first violin becomes the bearer of the melody, although this instrument is soon joined by the first cello in a compassionate duo. All six instruments eventually become equals in a largely homogenous texture toward the close of the first section. The faster middle section includes the instruction *a punta d’arco* (to the point of the bow), an unusual instruction in Tchaikovsky’s day; its contrast with *arco* and *pizzicato* playing transforms this section into a timbral dialogue, uncharacteristic for its time. The final section reinterprets the first according to this movement’s ternary form with the first cello now becoming the leader in another duo with the first violin.

In the third movement *Allegretto moderato*, it is the first viola who introduces the rhythmic theme before it is passed to other members of the ensemble; together, the cellos give a particularly passionate interpretation of this theme towards the section’s end. The jumping quality toward the middle of the movement is well-summarized by the Italian instruction *saltando*. Things get back on course after this brief interlude as the rhythmic theme from earlier returns. The fourth movement *Allegro vivace* continues the rhythmic character of the third while also inserting a sweeter second theme that gives the impression of a folksong. The development in this sonata form movement grows into a fugue, before a lively coda brings the piece to an exuberant close.

## Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

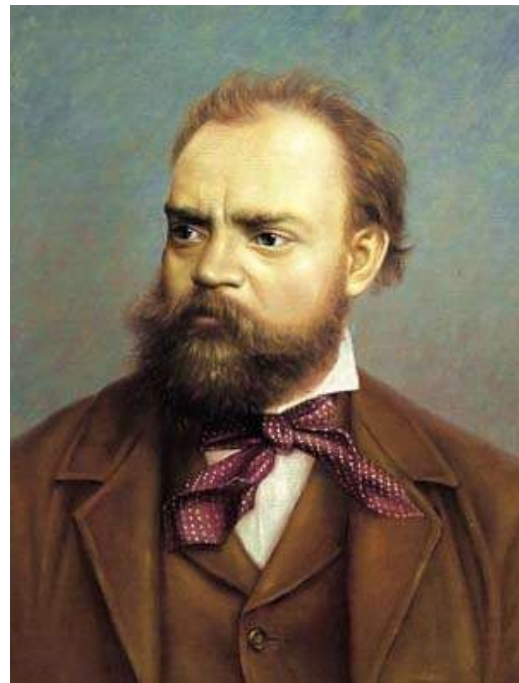
### String Sextet in A major, Op. 48

At the outset of the 1870s, the music of Antonín Dvořák was unknown outside of this composer’s native Bohemia. Yet, within his homeland, Dvořák was beginning to gain recognition as a promising young composer. Through his years playing in the orchestra of Prague’s Provisional Theatre, he had gained an important friend and mentor in its conductor Bedřich Smetana – the first Czech

composer to win international acclaim. By the close of 1874, Smetana had premiered Dvořák's Third Symphony and his opera *King and Charcoal Burner*. The editor of Prague's leading music journal had also taken an interest in Dvořák's compositions and was now actively promoting his music. Perhaps most essential to this newfound success though was Dvořák's reassessment of his musical language: encouraged by Smetana, there was a move away from German models toward Czech and broadly Slavonic folk music as Dvořák came to understand the rich potential his own cultural background could offer his symphonic music.

Still without financial security, however, Dvořák had taken a job as church organist and annually submitted his compositions for the Austrian State Stipendium, a grant offered to artists living in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was with Dvořák's submission in 1877 of his *Moravian Duets* that the composer saw his fortunes change. The influential Johannes Brahms was on the award committee, and so impressed was he with the *Moravian Duets* that Brahms wrote to his publisher Fritz Simrock to encourage him to undertake Dvořák as a client. Simrock not only accepted the duets but he also commissioned a set of *Slavonic Dances*. Their publication in November 1878 inspired an international craze for the previously unknown composer's music. Within just a few months, the *Slavonic Dances* had been performed across Europe and as far away as New York, and an array of publishers were asking for more music by Dvořák.

The String Sextet in A major, Op. 48 was written within the course of a mere two weeks in May 1878, immediately following the completion of the *Slavonic Dances*. It was Dvořák's first chamber composition to be performed abroad: in fact, the first Czech performance followed its premiere in Berlin on November 9, 1879 by violinist Joseph Joachim and an ensemble expanded from his quartet. Simrock had published the Sextet that September, and Joachim would introduce it to London audiences in spring 1880. Following a March performance there, *The Daily Telegraph* wrote of the Sextet, "Nowhere is the higher mission of music neglected... a first hearing of the entire composition involves a series of surprises, so unexpected and new are the abounding touches of the master's hand. Clearly we must know much more of Dvořák, and that soon." Dvořák's music would be heard frequently in London over the next few years, and he himself would be invited there to conduct his Sixth Symphony, *Stabat mater*, and other works in March 1884. A similar invitation, recall, would famously bring him to the United States less than ten years later.



Antonín Dvořák

Dvořák's Sextet consists of four movements which follow the customary symphonic scheme despite the Slavonic genres referenced by the titles of its second and third movements. These are the *dumka*, a sung lament of Ukrainian or Polish origin, in the second movement and the *furiant*, a Czech dance in moderate to fast tempo, in the third movement. Dvořák often referenced these genres in his instrumental music, and examples can be found in the Piano Trio in E minor, Op. 90 subtitled *Dumky* and his Seventh Symphony where a *furiant* takes the place of the scherzo. As we shall hear, Dvořák did not merely reference these folk genres by name, but also borrowed from their tunes and general characteristics. It was this appeal to Slavonic folk culture which excited listeners abroad through its sense of otherness while inspiring Bohemian audiences with its familiarity.

The Sextet's first movement is marked *Allegro moderato* and is in a sonata form with three themes. The first theme, heard at the outset, is in the tonic of A major while the second theme is in C-sharp minor and the third in its parallel key, C-sharp major. The movement is a tribute to Dvořák's skill at motivic transformation through contrapuntal devices, something which links his music to the German tradition then personified by Brahms. Alternatively, we hear elements of the unschooled Slavonic heritage emerge in the slow second movement marked *Dumka. Poco allegretto*. This was the first time Dvořák had used the term *dumka* to describe a movement of his and, while its application is justified by the melancholic nature of this movement, it lacks certain elements which would become typical of his later *dumky*. Most significantly, this *dumka* lacks their contrasting faster passages, although it already possesses their duple meter. The character of its second theme, notably, is Hungarian rather than Slavonic, evoking a general Eastern European flavor not specific to Dvořák's homeland.

The third movement is marked *Furiant. Presto* and has the proud, swaggering mood common to Dvořák's movements in this genre. It substitutes here for the *scherzo* and takes on the ternary form common to that genre. Folk elements abound in this movement, and there is also thematic similarity with the recently-completed *Slavonic Dances*. Furthermore, the precedent for the fast tempo and playful character of the symphonic *furiant* had already been set by Smetana who in 1869 added a *furiant* to his opera *The Bartered Bride*. The fourth movement is marked *Finale. Tema con variazioni*. Dvořák creates a sense of tonal ambiguity in this movement which is ostensibly in the first movement's tonic of A major but often finds itself heading into B minor and F-sharp

minor. This ambiguity brings to mind the chamber works of Franz Schubert which were a model for Dvořák at this time. Six variations follow the initial statement of the theme and, as in the first movement, Dvořák displays his dual mastery of counterpoint and motivic transformation.

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**About Jackson.** Jackson Harmeyer is a composer, music scholar, and advocate of music. Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College located in Natchitoches, Louisiana in May 2013 after completing his undergraduate thesis "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." As series director of the successful Abendmusik Alexandria chamber music series from May 2014 to April 2016, Jackson played a vital role in the renewal of interest in chamber music across Central Louisiana. This interest has encouraged the creation of the annual Sugarmill Music Festival and the new series Nachtmusik von BrainSurge, both of which Jackson remains active in as concert annotator and creative consultant. He also blogs at MusicCentral where he shares concert

experiences, gives listening recommendations, posts interviews with contemporary composers, and offers insights into his own compositions. As a composer, Jackson has worked to integrate the vocabulary and grammar of modern music into pieces which are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. In fall 2016, Jackson began graduate studies in musicology at the University of Louisville where he has recently been awarded the Gerhard Herz Scholarship in recognition of his accomplishments. His current research interests include French spectral music and the compositions of Kaija Saariaho. He also sings with the University of Louisville Chorus and participates in the School of Music Composition Seminar.

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