Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

“Mélodie,” arranged for violin and orchestra by Alexander Glazunov

“Sérénade mélancolique,” for violin and orchestra

Serenade in C for Strings, Opus 48

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY was born at Kamsko-Votkinsk, Vyatka Province, Russia, on May 7, 1840, and died in St. Petersburg on November 6, 1893. His “MÉLODIE” was originally the third in a set of three pieces for violin and piano, “Souvenirs d’un lieu cher,” Opus 42, composed in May 1878 at Brailovo, Ukraine. Alexander Glazunov’s arrangement of the three pieces for violin and orchestra was published by Jurgenson in 1896. Details of the first performance are lacking. The present performances of “Mélodie” are the first by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In addition to the solo violin, the version with orchestra calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, two horns, and strings.

Tchaikovsky completed the “SÉRÉNADE MÉLANCOLIQUE” in February 1875, the first performance being given on January 28, 1876, in Moscow by the Russian Musical Society, with Adolf Brodsky as soloist. These are the first performances by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Besides the violin solo, the score calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, and strings.

Tchaikovsky composed his SERENADE FOR STRINGS at Kamenka, in Ukraine, between September 21 and November 4, 1880. The first performance was given by the Russian Musical Society on October 30, 1881, in St. Petersburg, with Eduard Napravnik conducting. The score calls for the usual orchestral strings: first and second violins, violas, cellos and double basses.

“Mélodie,” for violin and orchestra

In May 1878, Tchaikovsky spent several idyllic weeks at Brailovo, the lavish estate of his new patron, Nadezhda von Meck. “I am living in clover here,” he wrote to his sister. “I live in a palace in the literal sense of the word, the furnishings are luxurious, apart from polite and affectionately obliging servants I see no human figures and no one comes to make my acquaintance, the strolls are charming, and at my disposal I have carriages, horses, a library, several pianos, a harmonium, a mass of sheet music—in a word, what could be better.” The composer’s tranquil, unusually happy mood is reflected in the set of three pieces for piano and violin—entitled Méditation, Scherzo, Mélodie—he completed there, presented as a gift to von Meck. Set in the bright key of E-flat major, the Mélodie, less than four minutes in length, has become a favorite piece for violin virtuosi, both in its original form and in the orchestral version produced by Russian composer Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936), Tchaikovsky’s fervent admirer.

“Sérénade mélancolique,” for violin and orchestra

The year 1875 did not begin well for Tchaikovsky. On January 5 he played his just completed Piano Concerto No. 1 for Nikolai Rubinstein, founder of the Moscow Conservatory and a respected mentor. When he was finished, Rubinstein unleashed a tirade, calling the new work “worthless, trite, and clumsy.” The hypersensitive composer was crushed, although he did not change a single note and of course the concerto went on to become one of his most celebrated compositions.

Around this time, Tchaikovsky made the acquaintance—at the home of Rubinstein, with whom he still maintained collegial relations as a professor at the Conservatory—of the legendary, Hungarian-born violin virtuoso Leopold Auer, professor of violin at St. Petersburg Conservatory. Auer asked Tchaikovsky to compose a piece for him, and the Sérénade mélancolique was the result. For reasons that remain unclear, Auer did not give the premiere, although he did introduce this charming, nine-minute “morceau pour le violon avec accompagnement d’orchestre ou de piano” in St. Petersburg in November.

The Sérénade mélancolique shares the same key as the First Piano Concerto: B-flat minor. (It has been suggested that the piece began as a projected concerto for violin that was later set aside.) In every other way, however, it is quite different: intimate, understated, transparent, and tender, without the concerto’s dramatic theatricality and extroverted passion. After an eleven-bar introduction, based on music from Tchaikovsky’s recently completed opera Vakula the Smith, the soloist enters with the main theme, played on the G-string—a mellow, slow tune drooping from the dominant F to B-flat and rising again. The orchestration is spare, except for a fine passage contrasting the soloist and cellos in canon with a new faster
melody, and a radiant concluding section where the clarinets sing the mournful main tune against ascending octave scale passages in the solo part, climaxing on an extended B-flat trill high up in the violin’s register.

Full of longing and regret, the “Sérénade mélancolique” has often been used in Hollywood film scores, most notably in the first “talking picture,” *The Jazz Singer* (1927), where it represents the hero’s struggle between the New World of Broadway and the Old World of his traditional Jewish parents.

**Serenade in C for Strings, Opus 48**

During the autumn of 1880, while staying at his sister’s estate in the Ukrainian countryside, Tchaikovsky produced two of his most popular, enduring—and dissimilar—orchestral works. In the composer’s large oeuvre it is difficult to find two pieces less alike than the elegant, cozy Serenade for Strings and the enormous, bombastic, and overtly nationalistic *1812 Festival Overture*. Where the carefully crafted and “private” Serenade is suffused in the warm glow of Mozartian neoclassicism, the relentlessly “public” overture (described by Tchaikovsky’s biographer David Brown as a “thematic ragbag”) shudders and bangs and crashes, threatening to fall apart at the seams as it celebrates the 70th anniversary of the Russian victory over Napoleon.

No one was more aware of the vast distance separating the two works than the composer himself. In a letter to his mysterious longtime patron Nadezhda von Meck, he confessed: “The overture will be very loud and noisy, but I wrote it with no warm feeling of love, and therefore there will probably be no artistic merits in it... I composed the serenade from inner conviction. It is a heartfelt piece and so, I dare to think, is not lacking in real qualities.”

When Tchaikovsky began writing (amidst the peaceful surroundings of the village of Kamenka, a favorite retreat) what eventually became the Serenade, he was thinking in terms of a symphony or a string quintet. A few weeks later, he was referring to it as a suite for string orchestra. But by the time the piece was completed, Tchaikovsky had settled on the label “serenade.” Originally, the term was used to refer to a vocal or instrumental work for a soloist performing in the evening. (Often, the performer was a love-struck admirer pouring out his passion beneath a lady’s window.) In the 18th century, the serenade developed into an instrumental form for ensembles of various sizes and compositions. Mozart, probably the most successful and best-known practitioner of the form, produced numerous serenades for orchestra and for wind ensembles.

Tchaikovsky’s fondness for Mozart had already been made evident in several of his earlier works, including the *Variations on a Rococo Theme* for cello and orchestra. In the music of his 18th-century predecessor, Tchaikovsky saw an idealized vision of a perfect and harmonious age infinitely superior to his own debased and vulgar era. This romanticized yearning for a lost age of classical beauty and symmetry, perhaps intensified by the homosexual composer’s frustrating search for romantic and emotional fulfillment in a society hostile to his inclinations, may help to account for the charming, nostalgic escapism of the Serenade for Strings. Until the very end of his career, Tchaikovsky repeatedly returned to the 18th century for solace, even in his tragic late opera *The Queen of Spades*, with its inserted Mozartian pastoral interlude.

And yet the Serenade does not lack for abundant Russian local color. In the zestful finale (with the subtitle *Tema russo*), Tchaikovsky uses two Russian folk songs that he had already arranged in an 1869 collection: “*A kak po lugu*” (“And so across the meadow”) in the introduction and “*Pod yabloyu zel’yonoyu*” (“Under the green apple-tree”) as the first subject. This movement is also the most elaborately developed, unfolding in conventional sonata form. In contrast, the opening movement, bearing the title *Pezza in forma di sonatina* (“A little piece in the form of a sonatina”), presents its two subjects in exposition and then repeats them virtually unchanged in recapitulation. The solemn, stately introduction to the first movement also returns just before the end of the finale, deftly interwoven with the folksong theme, providing not only a satisfying sense of closure and unity, but a fusion of the classical and national styles found in many of Tchaikovsky’s finest scores. In between these two more substantial movements come a seductive waltz that one critic described as “characteristic of Johann Strauss with additional French grace,” and a warmly lyrical *Elegy (Larghetto elegiaco)* built around ascending scale fragments in E-major. Underpinning the entire piece is a strong feeling of dance movement and rhythm, not surprising considering that Tchaikovsky had composed his ballet *Swan Lake* just a few years earlier.
In incorporating the Russian material in his Serenade, Tchaikovsky consciously adopted a different approach from that employed by the more “ethnographic” members of the St. Petersburg group known as “The Mighty Handful.” He believed that “national” material had to be fully integrated into a classical stylistic and structural context, as he wrote to the Moscow composer and pedagogue Sergei Taneyev:

I value very highly the wealth of material which the slovenly and suffering people [Taneyev’s words] produce, but we...who use this material will always elaborate it in forms borrowed from Europe—for, born Russians, we are at the same time even far more Europeans, and we have so resolutely and deeply fostered and assimilated their forms that to tear ourselves from them we would have to strain and do violence to ourselves, and from such straining and violence nothing artistic could come.

Audiences as well as Tchaikovsky’s colleagues were unanimous in their praise of the Serenade. Even the hard-to-please Anton Rubinstein, founder of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, told the publisher Jurgenson that it was “Tchaikovsky’s best thing.” More recently, the Serenade served as the basis of the first “American” ballet created by Russian-American choreographer George Balanchine. Called “Serenade,” it was performed for the first time in New York in 1935. Later, this “dance in the light of the moon” (Balanchine’s words) became a popular signature piece for Balanchine’s New York City Ballet. The music, wrote Balanchine, “contains many stories. It is many things to many listeners, and many things to many people who see the ballet.”

Harlow Robinson

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The First American Performance of Tchaikovsky’s Serenade for Strings was given by Leopold Damrosch and the New York Symphony Society on January 24, 1885, at the Academy of Music.

The First Boston Symphony Performance of the Serenade for Strings was given by Wilhelm Gericke on October 13, 1888, performances of the complete score subsequently being given by Emil Paur, Karl Muck, Serge Koussevitzky, Pierre Monteux, Charles Munch, Seiji Ozawa, Christoph Eschenbach, Gennady Rozhdestvensky, Yuri Temirkanov, Robert Spano, Kurt Masur, the strings of the BSO without a conductor (the orchestra’s most recent subscription performances, in January 2012), and Marcelo Lehninger (the most recent Tanglewood performance, on August 1, 2014). Between 1888 and 1949, the orchestra also gave occasional performances of just the second and/or third movements, conducted by Gericke, Paur, Max Fiedler, and Koussevitzky.