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Russian Chamber Music

CD1

Born into the landowning class, Mikhail Glinka (1804–57) is recognised as the fountainhead of Russian music – i. e. the first major Russian composer, whose music considerably influenced successive generations. His operas *Ruslan and Ludmilla* and *A Life for the Tsar* and the orchestral work *Kamarinskaya* are his most important compositions, but he also wrote several chamber works including a fine viola sonata which he began in 1825 but left unfinished in two movements. Glinka also wrote two pieces for solo harp (or piano). Of these the Variations on a theme of Mozart reflects the vogue for compositions based on popular operatic melodies of the day.

CD2

Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) composed his massive *Piano Trio*, one of the most extended works in the entire chamber repertoire, in 1882, dedicating it ‘To the memory of a great artist’. This dedicatee was Nikolai Rubinstein, founder of the Moscow Conservatory and virtuoso pianist. The first movement is rich in melodic material, with a bravura piano part which pays tribute to Rubinstein’s artistry. **Its emotional intensity rarely decreases.** The second movement is essentially a theme with variations but Tchaikovsky adds a big ‘Variation finale and coda’, a sonata-form structure and effectively a third movement.

Glinka’s *Trio pathétique in D minor*, for clarinet, bassoon and piano dates from 1832, i.e. before he began serious composition lessons. The alternative version played here – with violin and cello – was arranged by the Czech violinist Jan Hřímálý. In this trio Glinka’s predominantly lyrical style typically shows the influence of Italian *bel canto*. The brief scherzo – a little reminiscent of Schubert – is characterised by mild syncopation and a brilliant piano part. It includes a slower trio section with a genial melody. The gentle pathos of the slow movement provides some justification for the description ‘pathétique’, while the more florid passages for the piano show a little influence of Chopin, and of John Field, who taught Glinka in Russia. The concise finale is characterised by a seriousness underlined by expression marks such as *risoluto*, *agitato* and *appassionato*.

CD3

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) is better-known for his orchestral works – symphonies and concertos – than for his chamber music, but nevertheless there are some outstanding works in this more intimate genre. Of the three string quartets *No. 1 in D major* (1871) is the most frequently performed, partly because it includes the celebrated *Andante cantabile* (often played out of context and existing in various arrangements). This movement is a gem of special beauty, unaffected and with felicitous accompanying parts. Of the other movements the first begins with a gentle, syncopated theme in which the quartet sounds like an accordion, while the scherzo and finale both have a strong dance element.

The Second Quartet in F major (1874) begins with a very chromatic introduction full of dissonances which are in no hurry to resolve. This passage is a little reminiscent of the famous prelude to Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, except for the first violin’s increasingly passionate diversions. The rhythmic character of the charming scherzo in D flat major is an irregular alternation of 6/8 and 9/8, whereas the elegiac slow movement begins with a section based on a theme unusually phrased as 2 bars + 2 bars + 3 bars. The finale has a strong dance character, dominated by a vigorous polonaise rhythm, while contrast is provided by a broad second theme. Though habitually self-critical to a fault, Tchaikovsky rated his Second Quartet highly.

CD4

Tchaikovsky composed his string sextet *Souvenir de Florence* in 1890. The connection with Florence is only tenuous, as Tchaikovsky merely happened to be there when he noted down an idea which became the main theme of the second movement. The work opens dramatically, plunging into a bold theme over a pulsating accompaniment – an exhilarating release of sustained energy. The slow movement is expansive and deeply lyrical, its principal melody illustrating the curious fact that even Tchaikovsky’s second-best inspirations are often hauntingly memorable, especially when enhanced by his beguiling instrumentation. Throughout the work Tchaikovsky revels in the thrilling range of tone-colours and textures of a string ensemble. *Souvenir de Florence* is in many ways the composer’s most attractive chamber work – a little uneven, in common with many of Tchaikovsky’s compositions, but abundant in inspiration and imagination.

CD5–7

Sergei Taneyev (1856–1915) has been described as the greatest of all Russian composition teachers, but his own music is rarely heard nowadays. At the age of thirteen he began to study composition under Tchaikovsky at the Moscow Conservatory and subsequently the 22-year-old Taneyev replaced him. Taneyev's own pupils would include Rachmaninov and Scriabin. In 1885 he was appointed director of the Moscow Conservatory. He regarded formal cohesion as paramount, usually beginning with an overall structural framework before filling in the content. The Piano Trio in D major of 1908 is a typically big-boned work conceived on a grand scale. Surprisingly the robust scherzo includes, instead of a conventional trio section, a charming set of variations. The slow movement, dominated by an eloquent duet for violin and cello, concludes with a violin cadenza which leads directly to the finale, in which Taneyev recalls themes from earlier in the work. Towards the end a slower, reflective passage culminates in a piano cadenza and then a brilliant *Presto* coda. Taneyev's finely honed technique is no less evident in the shorter Violin Sonata in A minor (1911). His subtitle description 'Of medium difficulty' is matched by a modest emotional range. In the opening movement an ideal balance between assertive and lyrical is achieved. Following a touching slow movement and a gentle minuet (with musette-like trio), the finale is generally restrained, the violin's double-stopping in no way flashy. In common with two of the previous movements, it ends *pianissimo*. Taneyev's Piano Quartet in E major (1902–06) is a three-movement work, again a typically large-scale work of robust material, all subjected to thorough working out in a manner which justifies the label 'the Russian Brahms'.

Taneyev's Piano Quintet of 1911 is among his very greatest achievements. Its massive opening movement begins with a sombre introduction, the main theme of which Taneyev transforms for the main subject of the following *Allegro patetico*. The development section is mostly turbulent and often fierce, so that the beginning of the recapitulation brings a feeling of relief. Brilliant and witty, the scherzo is followed by a stately passacaglia. The successive variations are rhapsodic, poetic and eloquent. In this *Largo* Taneyev achieves a sublime stillness and poise, apparently combining the contrapuntal rigour of the Baroque period with Romantic expressiveness. Tremendously energetic and inventive, the finale concludes in grandly affirmative manner.

CD8–9

Born in Moscow, Gyorgy Catoire (1861–1926) was of French descent. Among his teachers were Lyapunov and Rimsky-Korsakov. An ardent champion of Wagner, he is now very much a forgotten composer, though eminent musicians such as David Oistrakh, Rostropovich and Marc-André Hamelin have all recorded his works. His piano music is the least neglected area of his music. Catoire was influenced by Scriabin, though he disapproved of his later developments. The String Quintet Op.16, which includes two cellos, is richly lyrical but also dramatic and intense. Its slow movement is potently atmospheric. Catoire's Piano Quartet is an equally fine example of his essential lyricism and fluid harmonic language.

CD10

The roster of composers taught by Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908) is impressive, including Arensky, Myaskovsky, Glazunov and Stravinsky. Among his own compositions his chamber music is the least familiar. He was dissatisfied with his ambitious, large-scale Piano Trio in C minor (1897), leaving it in rough draft. The completion by his son-in-law Maximilian Steinberg was published in 1939, so we can appreciate the trio's seriousness, occasional intensity, unflinching craftsmanship and original aspects. Rimsky-Korsakov's Quintet in B flat major for piano and wind was one of two works which he entered for a contest organised by the Russian Musical Society in 1876. Apparently a poor performance contributed to its lack of success with the judges. The central movement is the most Russian and the rondo has a charmingly attractive main theme, fugato passages and cadenzas. This quintet is one of the composer's most individual works.

CD11

Born in Novgorod, Anton Arensky (1861–1906) showed exceptional talent at an early age. Tchaikovsky became a friend and mentor, while his musical language was a significant influence. Arensky's major works include three operas, two symphonies, three orchestral suites, a piano concerto, a violin concerto, two piano trios, a piano quintet and two string quartets. His premature death from tuberculosis, in a Finnish sanatorium, was hastened by his addictions to alcohol and gambling. Of his two piano trios No. 1 in D minor is dedicated to the memory of the celebrated cellist Karl Davidov. Composed in 1894, it begins with an expansive *Allegro moderato*. The sparkling scherzo has brilliant piano writing, while the string parts are delicate and restrained. In the *Elegia (Adagio)*, Arensky's specific memorial to Davidov, the mood is reflective and tenderly affectionate rather than tragic. The finale begins with a theme of driving rhythm, but soon Arensky introduces the first of several recollections of themes from the previous movements.

CD12

When Tchaikovsky composed his Piano Trio as a memorial to Nikolai Rubinstein, he unwittingly established a Russian tradition of commemorative chamber works. Arensky's String Quartet No. 2 in A minor (1894), unusually scored for violin, viola and two cellos, is inscribed 'In Memory of Pyotr Tchaikovsky'. The inclusion of two cellos creates a darker texture which suits the sombre, elegiac aspects of the work. Arensky arranged the central movement for string orchestra as *Variations on a theme by Tchaikovsky*. In beginning the quartet with a Russian Orthodox funeral chant he may have been influenced by passages in the *Andante funebre e doloroso* from Tchaikovsky's Third String Quartet. The Tchaikovsky theme on which the variations of the central movement are based is the *Legend* from his *Sixteen Songs for Children Op. 54*, better-known as *The Crown of Roses*. The most curious movement is the finale, in which Arensky juxtaposes – not once, but twice – an Orthodox requiem chant with *Slava Bogu* (Glory to God), the Russian folk-song which in the early 19th century acquired great patriotic significance. After the remarkably sombre scoring of the chant, Arensky treats *Slava Bogu* fugally, then subsequently pulls out all the stops with majestic double- and triple-stopping and vigorous accompaniment.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–75) was prolific in many genres, but especially so in the areas of symphony and string quartet, composing fifteen of each. He composed his Cello Sonata Op. 40 in August–September 1934. Currently cultivating a style of greater simplicity, he composed this sonata in Classical style. The piece was commissioned by Viktor Kubatsky, principal cello of the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra, founder of the Stradivarius Quartet and recital partner of the composer. The sonata-form opening movement has a development section dominated by an enigmatic, potentially subversive element which also returns to have the last word. In the heavily accented scherzo of rugged humour and abundant material, scintillating groups of arpeggios played by the cello in glissando harmonics are the most striking incidental feature. Bleak and sombre in mood, the *Largo* is followed by a rondo-finale characterised by sardonic humour and with an understated, perfunctory ending.

CD13

Anton Rubinstein (1829–94), brother of virtuoso pianist Nikolai, composed 20 operas, six symphonies and five piano concertos. He also founded the St. Petersburg Conservatory. His music is rarely played outside Russia, though the Fourth Piano Concerto has been championed by a few soloists. The first of his three violin sonatas is an extended work with a slow movement in the form of a theme with two variations, a *Prestissimo* scherzo and a finale with alternating slow and fast tempos.

CD14–16

Alexander Borodin (1833–87) is best known for his opera *Prince Igor*, the tone-poem *In the Steppes of Central Asia* and one particular movement from his Second String Quartet, but in general his chamber music – about a dozen compositions in total – is a neglected area. As a cellist Borodin was an enthusiastic chamber-musician, especially while in Heidelberg (1859–61) studying chemistry. He showed great independence in composing his chamber works in the face of strong opposition from fellow-composers of the group known as The Five or The Mighty Handful, who favoured programmatic music. Borodin began work on his First String Quartet in 1874, but did not complete it until five years later. It is an amiable, unpretentious work, essentially Classical with elements of Russian folk-song, but already Borodin's own captivating melodic gift is evident. The delightful scherzo (*Prestissimo*) has a slower trio section in which the novel use of harmonics is very suggestive of a musical-box.

Borodin composed his Second Quartet within two months during the summer of 1881. The work displays his enviable melodic fluency, while his mastery of quartet-writing produces a wonderful clarity of texture. In the Scherzo Borodin's combination of a waltz-melody with the initial quaver patterns shows that his lyrical gift is supported by fine craftsmanship. In the celebrated *Nocturne* Borodin skilfully varies the accompaniment on each recurrence of the principal melody. In the typically attractive finale, beginning with a gesture influenced by the same point in Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 135, Borodin combines bustling activity and delightful lyricism, using the most unpretentious of materials. Borodin's other chamber works include a String Quintet, a String Sextet, a Piano Quintet and a Piano Trio, though several were left unfinished.

CD17

The only works of Alexander Glazunov (1865–1936) played at all frequently are his *Violin Concerto* and his ballet score *The Seasons*. His engaging *String Quintet Op. 39*, with two cellos, was completed in 1892. In the unhurried opening movement Glazunov avoids conflict, resourcefully developing and transforming his themes with characteristic fluency. Both the pizzicato scoring and triplet-duplet rhythmic feature of the scherzo may suggest the equivalent movement in Debussy's String Quartet, composed only the following year. (Debussy admired Russian music). The ardent, nostalgic *Andante sostenuto* bears some family resemblances to the first movement, but has an intermittent restlessness. The rondo finale includes as its first episode a fugal passage begun by the viola, whereas the second contrasting episode introduces a lyrical melody. Subsequently Glazunov skilfully combines both these themes.

CD18

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943) composed about a dozen chamber works between 1889 and 1901, the last and by far the most characteristic being his Cello Sonata (1901). For Rachmaninov one of the greatest virtuosos of the twentieth century, the piano was a natural medium, but in this sonata he generally avoids the most obvious risk of overpowering the cello part. A poetic slow introduction leads to an *Allegro moderato*. Here, as a preliminary to the lyrical first theme, the piano plays a compact figure of well-defined rhythm which will function as a recurring motto. The shadowy scherzo is characterised by a terse, descending phrase which generates surprising momentum, maximum contrast being provided by two gloriously lyrical episodes. In the luxuriant but concise slow movement, with its increasingly rich piano texture, Rachmaninov is at his most beguiling. Opening with a call to attention, the finale is dominated by compound rhythms in the same manner as the Second Symphony finale. The second theme is noble and expansive and incidentally combines well with the first theme. In the *vivace* coda, added only after the work's premiere, Rachmaninov recalls the rhythm of the first movement motto.

When Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953) heard the 20-year-old Rostropovich perform his Cello Concerto in 1947 he was inspired to compose a sonata for him. In his later years Prokofiev re-worked the concerto with Rostropovich's assistance and left a concertino and a solo cello sonata unfinished. Thus Rostropovich's phenomenal artistry helped to keep Prokofiev's inspiration alight at a most troublesome time for Soviet composers. Responding to the authorities' demand for more accessible music, Prokofiev composed a sonata of especially direct and cloudless character, almost entirely free from the subversive elements common to many of his earlier works.

At the head of the manuscript of the Cello Sonata Prokofiev wrote 'Man! The word has such a proud sound!' – a quotation from Maxim Gorky's play *The Lower Depths*, reflected in the noble bearing of the opening theme. This opening movement is blessed with a prodigal amount of memorable material, remarkable even for such a phenomenally gifted melodist as Prokofiev.

Lacking the malicious or sardonic undercurrents of many Prokofiev scherzos, the central movement is predominantly playful and childlike. The principal melody of the finale establishes a genial tone, but the composer's fondness for unprepared shifts of key adds piquancy. In the coda Prokofiev recalls the very opening theme of the sonata in grandiose manner.

CD19

Nikolai Myaskovsky (1881–1950) was educated at various military schools, but was increasingly drawn towards a career in music. He studied privately with Glière in Moscow, then, having left the army in 1906 to devote himself to composition, studied with Rimsky-Korsakov and Lyadov at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, also establishing what would prove to be a life-long friendship with Prokofiev. It was not until 1908 that he wrote the first of his 27 symphonies. Other major works include two concertos, 13 string quartets and nine piano sonatas. His two cello sonatas are separated by nearly 40 years. The First Sonata (1911, revised more than 20 years later) begins with an expansive, reflective melody above deep bell-like octaves in the piano. After the equally lyrical second theme an element of conflict is introduced with an idea in short chords, becoming more insistent. The *Allegro passionato* second movement is notable for its often turbulent development section. A final climax subsides into a recall of the initial *Adagio*, which leads to a *pianissimo* ending. This sonata is so generously melodic that its wider circulation seems overdue.

Originally conceived for viola or viola d'amore, the *2nd Cello Sonata* (1948) was one of Myaskovsky's last compositions, dedicated to the 21-year-old Mstislav Rostropovich. It begins with a characteristically noble, cantabile theme. Clearly, the cello was ideally suited to Myaskovsky's innate lyricism. There are no strong contrasts or drama in this typically undemonstrative sonata-form movement. In the central movement an eloquent melody, above a rocking, syncopated accompaniment, gives way to a more passionate mood, before the music recedes into lyrical innocence. There is a brief return to the declamatory phase, but the movement ends in tranquility. The main theme of the rondo-finale is characterised by nimble semiquavers, but its contrasting episodes introduce much broader melodies.

CD20

Rachmaninov composed two Elegiac Trios, the second (autumn 1893) dedicated to the memory of Tchaikovsky No. 1 (probably 1890–1, but unpublished until 1947) has some characteristic touches which anticipate Rachmaninov's mature style, while the confident piano writing also reflects his burgeoning virtuosity. Influenced by Tchaikovsky's A minor Trio, Rachmaninov's Second Trio is a much more extended piece. Its central movement comprises a theme with eight admirably contrasting variations on a theme which includes a quotation from Rachmaninov's own early tone-poem *The Rock*.

CD21

Shostakovich composed two piano trios. The single-movement Trio No. 1 in C minor (Poème), Opus 8, dates from 1923, when the prodigiously gifted Shostakovich was only 16. The much more frequently performed Trio No. 2 in E minor, Op. 67 (1944), beginning with a melody in cello harmonics, has a madcap scherzo, a chaconne slow movement and a finale including elements of *danse macabre* and klezmer (Jewish dance-music).

One of the masterpieces of Shostakovich's last decade, achieving profundity with simplicity, is the *Seven Romances on poems of Alexander Blok* (a Russian Symbolist), a work in which his preoccupation with mortality is obvious, as well as the influence of mortality. He composed the set in 1967, having recently suffered a heart attack.

CD22

The two greatest contributions to the 20th-century string quartet genre are Bartók's six and Shostakovich's fifteen. Shostakovich's 2nd Quartet (1944) is the longest he composed apart from *No. 15*. His most frequently performed string quartet is the 8th, which he composed in three days during July 1960, after visiting the ruins of Dresden, devastated in World War II. The work's dedication 'to the victims of fascism and war' is merely an official statement for the benefit of the Soviet authorities. Actually he intended this quartet to be autobiographical. As he wrote: 'I had to remember that after my death no one would probably compose a work in my memory. That is why I decided to write such a work myself.' The last few quartets are generally more enigmatic, less accessible. Structured in a single movement, *No. 13* is perhaps the most extraordinary of all.

CD23–24

Prokofiev wrote his *First Violin Sonata*, generally regarded as one of his greatest works, between 1938 and 1946. The gloomy, haunted first movement is followed by a spiky scherzo, a dream-like slow movement and a rondo-finale which concludes with a recall of the rapid scales ('wind blowing through a graveyard', Prokofiev commented) from the end of the first movement.

The D major Sonata originated as the Flute Sonata, Op. 94a (1942) which Prokofiev arranged for violin at the suggestion of David Oistrakh. It is a sunnier, more attractive and up-beat composition than the First Sonata.

The *Visions Fugitives*, Op. 22 (1915–17) were originally piano miniatures, whimsical and imaginative. Here they are played in quartet arrangements by Sergei Samsonov. Of the two string quartets, both in three movements, *No. 2* is roughly contemporary with the Second Violin Sonata. Prokofiev was officially ordered to base this work on Kabardino-Balkar folk-tunes. String Quartet No. 1 (1931), commissioned by the Library of Congress in Washington, ends with an intense slow movement which Prokofiev later arranged for string orchestra and then piano. Myaskovsky wrote: '... there is true profundity in [its] sweeping melodic line and intensity'.

CD25

Nikolay Roslavets (1881–1944) was a modernist initially inspired by the concepts and harmonic innovations of Scriabin. Roslavets' music was officially suppressed by the Soviet authorities from 1930. For 30 years after his death it was as though his music had never existed, until perestroika (1980 onwards) brought a degree of rehabilitation. The 3rd Piano Trio and Cello Sonata (both 1921) show Roslavets adopting, after his rather explosive works of the previous decade, more traditional forms as the basis for his individual classicism. The two viola sonatas, the second more lyrically sustained, date from 1925 and 1926 respectively. Intense, astringent and dramatic, all these single-movement works carry powerful expressive weight. The 5th Piano Sonata (1923) also demonstrates that this major figure, a strange but potent voice, was air-brushed out of Russian musical history for far too long.

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Cover: *On the Terrace* (1908) by Ilya Repin (1844–1930)

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