

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840 - 1893)

STRING QUARTET NO.1 IN D MAJOR OPUS 11

Moderato e semplice

Andante cantabile

Scherzo and Trio - allegro non tanto e con fuoco

Finale - allegro giusto

In 1871, whilst working at the Moscow Conservatoire, Tchaikovsky decided to raise his profile - and a little money - by presenting an evening of his most recent compositions. This took place on 16th March and consisted of several songs, piano pieces and, written especially for the occasion, the String Quartet No.1 Op.11, dedicated to Sergei Rachinskii. In fact, he only started writing the quartet in February, one month before the first performance date. It was well received and consequently had many performances in Russia and Europe.

In 1876, the Moscow Conservatory organised a musical evening in honour of Lev Tolstoy, the programme of which included this Quartet No.1 by Tchaikovsky. The *Andante Cantabile* movement so moved the author - reportedly to tears - that he wrote to Tolstoy to express his admiration for the piece. In his reply to Tolstoy, Tchaikovsky wrote: 'I cannot express how honoured and proud I felt that my music could make such an impression on you.'

Considering that this quartet was written in the early part of Tchaikovsky's career, there are glimpses of real maturity in the use of musical form, development of thematic material, use of all four instruments to great effect and the production of almost orchestral texture - perhaps a sign of things to come.

The first movement - in Sonata Form - opens with a simple homophonic theme almost worthy of a chamber choir and the rhythmic feature of tied notes in 9/8, give it a swaying quality. The introduction of the more evenly flowing semi-quavers and linear writing of the second subject, start to give this movement a sense of real anticipation. The development is a journey of real blossoming and the brisker Coda almost suggests orchestral strings.

The most identifiable movement is without a doubt the second one. The muted instruments and the shift in key to the flattened sub-mediante (Bb major), create a real sense of calm and wistfulness after the highs of the first movement. There are two themes, the first is a folk-song from the Ukraine and the second is by the composer. This movement is very much a ballad, initially sung by the first violin over the cello's descending, chromatic pizzicato notes and was subsequently arranged by Tchaikovsky for cello and string ensemble. Through the years, it has also been adapted for a variety of other musical combinations.

We are then launched into a dance-like third movement, which is full of energy and vitality. The forceful gravitas comes from this movement being in the tonic minor - D minor. There is a feeling of being wrong footed in the *Scherzo* through the displacement of accented notes, mainly to the second beat of the bar instead of the usual first beat. The Trio, in Bb major, retains these displaced accents and the melody dances over a pedal note on the cello, providing a drone-like quality.

And finally, happily back in D major, the *Finale* is a nimble and assured-footed 2/4 in Sonata Form, again starting like the first movement, with homophonic writing. Not for long, as the melodies weave and unravel, with each instrument having their say and notably the viola introducing the second theme in the closely related Bb major key, the flattened sub-mediante. There is a playful quality to this movement with motifs being passed around almost in a child-like way but as ever, with strong orchestral texture, the maturity shines through producing a triumphant climax to the whole quartet.