



BORODIN QUARTET 60TH ANNIVERSARY

ALL NEW RECORDINGS

*BORODIN QUARTET No. 2,
SCHUBERT, RACHMANINOV,
TCHAIKOVSKY & WEBERN*

onyx

ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833-1887)

String Quartet No. 2 in D Major · ré majeur · D-Dur · re maggiore

1	Allegro moderato	8.45
2	Scherzo: Allegro	5.10
3	Notturmo: Andante	8.37
4	Finale: Andante-Vivace	7.14

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

5	Andante cantabile (from String Quartet No. 1)	7.22
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SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)

6	Romance	6.13
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FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

7	Quartettsatz	9.37
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ANTON WEBERN (1883-1945)

8	Langsamer Satz	11.08
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ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833-1887)

9	Serenata alla Spagnola	2.18
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Total Time 66.28

BORODIN QUARTET

Rubén Aharonian (violin)

Andrei Abramnikov (violin)

Igor Naidin (viola)

Valentin Berlinsky (cello)

The Borodin Quartet at 60

Whenever the Borodin Quartet notches up an anniversary, so too does its cellist (and so in 2005, while the ensemble marks 60 years as what the Russians call 'the Quartet named Borodin', we also toast Valentin Berlinsky on his 80th birthday). This is very much as it should be: "Valentin" Berlinsky is both patriarch and soul of the quartet. As anchorman throughout of the group which turned to the Soviet authorities for its present name in 1955, Berlinsky has lived through many changes of personnel in the early years, guided the quartet through difficult times at home and on countless tours, and still imparts his ineffably cultured tones to its latest incarnation.

Berlinsky was still in his teens, and not yet graduated from the cello class of the Moscow Conservatory, when in the autumn of 1944 he formed a quartet with three other students. The guiding force was an inspirational professor in the Conservatory's chamber department, Mikhail Terian, while the other players were first violinist Rostislav Dubinsky, who stayed until the 1970s, and – as second violin and viola respectively – Nina and Rudolf Barshai. (Nina was replaced first by Vladimir Rabei, who like the Barshais suffered to a certain extent from the anti-Semitism of the late Stalin years, then by Yaroslav Alexandrov; Rudolf, a future conductor of great integrity, by Dmitri Shebalin). At first they functioned under the title of the Moscow Philharmonic Quartet; in 1955 they took as their figurehead the composer of the most sheerly beguiling specimens in Russian musical history, Alexander Borodin.

Another major Russian figure has always dominated the Borodins' musical thinking. An evocative photograph from 1946 shows Dubinsky, the Barshais and a shock-haired, dreamy-eyed Berlinsky gathered round Dmitri Shostakovich – the composer whose cycle of 15 quartets was to become the cornerstone of the 20th century repertoire. The Borodins' celebrated association with these works started early, though in those initial years deference was due to the senior players of the Beethoven Quartet. 'We were not the first to be granted the premières of the Shostakovich quartets', says Berlinsky – as we now know, Shostakovich was bound by a sense of honour in giving that right to the more established group – 'but we always presented

them to him before we played them in public, just to have his final blessing' (the Russian phrase has almost religious overtones). 'He never spoke about the meaning – but we were 100 per cent sure of what we were playing.' (Their first complete recording of the quartets – minus Nos. 14 & 15 which were still to be written – would later evoke an ecstatic response from the composer himself: 'Please accept my heart-felt gratitude for your magnificent performance of my quartets and my octet,' wrote Shostakovich on 14 December 1967. 'Your splendid gramophone recordings have acquainted me with your brilliant mastery. I derive immense joy from listening to these albums'.)

Although Shostakovich's quartets soon became central to the Borodins' repertoire – along with the Piano Quintet, which they performed at various times with very different pianists in the composer himself and Sviatoslav Richter – they were only part of an ambitious programme in which the classical and romantic repertoire tended to be overshadowed by the contemporary. According to the journal *Sovietskaya Muzyka*, 'all new works created by our composers in the quartet genre are snatched right from under their pens by the Borodins'. Even Shostakovich was beginning to wonder why the quartet didn't investigate the entire Haydn cycle before embarking on yet another première. As Berlinsky remembers, though, 'most of these composers were our friends, so we had a duty'. The long list of names includes Moisei Weinberg, Lev Knipper, Boris Tchaikovsky and Alfred Schnittke – whose First Quartet the Borodins recorded in 1967, only to meet with official opposition to the LP's release.

Yet the Borodins were never a 'Soviet' quartet in the pejorative sense of the word. Dubinsky, in his memoir *Stormy Applause*, has defined what it was in Soviet quartet playing they managed to avoid when he writes of a female quartet they once faced in competition. Their style, he writes, was a 'coarse-ground' one: 'it came into fashion in Moscow after the war, when traditional playing was branded "non-Slavic" (read "Jewish")'. This new style neglected everything that is so attractive in quartet-playing: flexible ensemble, refined phrasing, variety of colours. In their place was something else, insolent and smug.' Very far from 'insolent and smug', the flexible style of the Borodins has never permitted routine to creep in even with the bread-and-butter (or rather samovar-and-raspberry-jam) stalwarts of their repertoire – the

Borodin and Tchaikovsky quartets. It would have been all too easy; after all, these were the slow movements which they had been forced to play over and over at Stalin's funeral; these were the song-and-dance movements which they used to accompany a circus troupe in East Germany and which Americans eagerly clamoured for (in the case of Borodin's Second) as 'the music from Kismet'. In the present recording of this their signature work, the freshness and spontaneity of the music-making remain breathtaking.

With the arrival of Mikhail Kopelman and Andrei Abramenkov as first and second violinists in the mid 1970s, the identity was bound to change a little. Abramenkov believes that 'there was a new and very conscious evaluation of the music, on a deeper and more philosophical level.' Certainly much philosophy had to be brought to bear on the complete cycle of Shostakovich quartets which the new team began to present around the world in the 1980s. For audiences outside Russia, these were interpretations of the highest authenticity and managements found to their amazement that repertoire previously regarded as hard to sell played to full houses.

There was another cycle, however – the only one to anticipate Shostakovich's in its steady and painstaking evolution – which Kopelman was reluctant to play in its entirety. Yet it remained, says Berlinsky, 'the great dream of my life: to play all Beethoven's quartets from first note to last.' In 1995/6 the outstanding solo violinist Rubén Aharonian and the 26-year-old viola-player Igor Naidin, who had studied under Kopelman and Berlinsky at the Moscow Conservatory, inaugurated a new era; and Beethoven became the challenge. Together the team worked seriously and painstakingly through the series, from the six that make up the set of Op. 18 through to the ultimate challenge of the fathomless late quartets. Their first concert cycles, starting in 2000, placed Beethoven alongside Shostakovich in performances carefully spaced over two seasons. Then they decided to face Beethoven alone – a braver step than it might seem. As Aharonian put it, 'when you play Shostakovich or another composer alongside Beethoven, you can change your angle of concentration in the same way that you change your clothes, and we breathe more easily. But after playing two or three Beethoven quartets in a single concert, we feel absolutely devastated and exhausted.'

This is the challenge they face with each new cycle – and just as there are no limits to the secrets Beethoven yields up on each new playing, there are no limits, either, to the insights this most intense and serious of quartet groups can bring to his masterpieces. In the meantime, it isn't only within the quartet that several generations of Russian string-players meet. In addition to their work with other already celebrated instrumentalists – including viola-player Yuri Bashmet and Berlinsky's daughter Ludmila – they also give masterclasses to fledgling quartets at home and abroad. This is not so much history, but a living tradition which, like so much within the indomitable world of Russian music, looks set to continue for many years to come.

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For more information about the Borodin Quartet please visit www.onyxclassics.com

ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833-1887)

String Quartet No. 2 in D Major

'I am deeply convinced that chamber music is one of the most potent ways to develop musical taste and understanding', wrote Borodin. Indeed, he was an ardent lover of chamber music from a young age, and as a cellist took great delight in playing in amateur trios and quartets. So it is no surprise that his quartets, along with Tchaikovsky's, laid the foundation of the Russian quartet tradition.

The Second Quartet, which is, with Prince Igor, the composer's most famous work, dates from 1881. It was written to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the composer's first declaration of love to his future wife Catherine. 'God, to think what I went through!' exclaimed Borodin, recalling the exhilarating time of their first meeting. 'What a combination of joy and grief!' Only bright, joyous and uplifting tones hold sway in this quartet. And it is surely not fanciful to suggest that Borodin's own instrument represents him and the first violin his wife, as both first and third movements (the famous *Nocturne*) lead off with the main melody in the cello and feature much loving alternation, imitation and interaction.

The quartet's four-movement cycle is not entirely traditional in structure. The first movement is a world of entrancing soft lyricism, with no hint of drama or struggle. Next comes not the slow movement as in the Viennese classical tradition, but the scherzo, which, according to the composer, was inspired by an evening walk in one of the gardens near Petersburg. Its unique feature, a lilting central waltz, seems particularly evocative of such real-life impressions and memories. The famous *Nocturne* then follows, the emotional core of the work and an exquisitely enchanting musical portrait of an amorous encounter between two young people. In counter-balance to this languorous rapture and bliss, the quartet's finale opens with a questioning *Andante*, answered by an invigorating and energetic *Vivace*. The quartet as a whole is surely one of the most exquisite anniversary presents in history and it has been part of the Borodin ensemble's repertoire since 1948 – their signature work indeed.

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

String Quartet No. 1 in D Major op. 11: Andante Cantabile

'A person who passionately loves life and no less passionately hates death', Tchaikovsky once said about himself. But the theme of death did not occupy the composer during his younger years to anything like the degree it would during the later years of say, *The Queen of Spades* and the Sixth Symphony. By contrast, his first quartet, written in February 1871, is full of romance, bright lyrical emotion, and the spontaneous love of life, and without trace of hopeless fatalism or tragedy. At its première on 16 March 1871 in Moscow it was given a very warm welcome, enjoying even greater success when first given in the capital. 'My quartet caused a sensation in Petersburg', Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother.

In particular, the Quartet's slow movement, Andante cantabile, in which the melancholy of a folk melody contrasts with the passionate amorous outburst of the second theme, immediately gained exceptional popularity. Tolstoy was particularly enraptured: 'I have perhaps never before in my life been so flattered and had my artistic pride so touched', wrote Tchaikovsky in his diary, 'as when Leo Tolstoy shed tears as he sat next to me and listened to the Andante of my first quartet'. Subsequently, Tchaikovsky rearranged it for string orchestra and conducted it himself many times. The piece became his musical signature, was invariably played whenever the composer went on tour, so that he finally noted with some irritation, 'They are so taken up with this Andante, they don't want to hear anything else'. Nevertheless, the words from *Moskovskie novosti* (Moscow News) of 1881 still apply: '*Andante cantabile* is really one of the most wonderful pieces of Russian music; there is the feeling that for several seconds after the last note has died away, the audience is still afraid to break the silence evoked by the irresistible charm of this *Andante*'.

SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)

Romance

Despite a reputation for exquisite, lingering and heart-rending violin melodies, Rachmaninov wrote very few works for string instruments. Among the few exceptions are two pieces for string quartet written as a sixteen-year-old student: *Romance* and *Scherzo*. Although he attached no great importance to them at the time, they have a certain significance in the development of his fledgling career. At the end of 1890, for an Open Beginners' Concert at the Moscow Conservatory, Rachmaninov arranged his two quartet pieces for string orchestra, and was promised that he could conduct them himself. His appearance as a conductor was then cancelled, but not before rehearsals prevented him from attending the première of Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* in Petersburg, where he was also hoping to see the Skalon sisters, with whom he was somewhat captivated. 'If I had known I would be deprived of my leave because of this thing I would never have written it', said a distressed Rachmaninov. However, at the beginning of 1891, the orchestrated versions of *Romance* and *Scherzo* were performed under the baton of Vasily Safonov, and these marked the first orchestral performances of the young composer's work. Although as quartet pieces they were not published until after his death, they have gained a foothold on the concert stage, not least through performances by the Borodin Quartet, who have been playing them since 1951.

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

String Quartet No. 12 in C Minor, D703 'Quartettsatz'

Schubert's friend and admirer, Franz Lachner, recalls how after the first hearing of one of his quartets, Ignaz Schuppanzigh, who was participating in the performance, remarked, 'This piece has nothing to say for itself, brother. You would do better to stick to your songs!' Fortunately, Schubert did not heed this advice. He composed many different chamber scores, including 15 quartets that belong to the treasury of quartet literature. The 'Quartettsatz' occupies a special place here. It is the first movement of an unfinished quartet in C Minor, dating from December 1820. In addition to it, Schubert composed the first 41 bars of a tragic Andante in Ab.

The music's truly romantic temperament is not foreseen in any of Schubert's or even Beethoven's previous quartets. Indeed, Schubert himself related in a letter to a friend that he wanted to 'pave the way for a major symphony' in his quartets of the 1820s, and the 'Quartettsatz' can certainly be seen as the turning point in his quartet-writing. It is defined by the contrast between two themes, the dramatically stirring first theme using tremolo in both theme and accompaniment, followed by the lyrical second melody in Ab imbued with light and inner harmony. Genuinely symphonic inspiration is inherent in their development, but there is no true recapitulation, just a 'reappearance' of the ghostly opening material.

The unfinished quartet did not receive its première until almost forty years after the composer's death, in 1867 in Vienna. Like the even more famous 'Unfinished' Symphony, the 'Quartettsatz' will always retain a special fascination, for the reasons behind its incompleteness, for the mastery of what we have, all tinged by regret for what might have been.

ANTON WEBERN (1883-1945)

Langsamer Satz

Langsamer Satz ('slow movement') belongs in a group of several quartet pieces written by the young Webern while studying in Vienna with his idol Arnold Schoenberg. Its immediate inspiration was an idyllic holiday Webern took with his future wife in Lower Austria in the Spring of 1905, and its musical influences are Schoenberg's own late romantic and highly chromatic early masterpieces of the turn of the century and in particular *Verklärte Nacht*. The lyrical and continuously flowing melody, expansive lines and very emotional romanticism demonstrate the brilliant musical talent of the young Webern and stand in stark contrast with his later refined and ultra-economical work, in which, as his tutor put it, 'each glance becomes a poem, and each inspiration conveys an entire romance'.

Paradoxically, though hardly surprisingly given its accessible musical language, this beginner's work is now at least as popular as any of his 12-note or serial compositions, despite waiting almost sixty years for its first performance.

ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833-1887)

Serenata alla spagnola

This Spanish-style serenade is part of a collective composition called the 'Name-Day' quartet, written in honour of Mitrofan Belayev (1836-1904). A passionate music-lover, Belayev used his own funds to organise symphonic concerts, open a sheet-music publishing house in Leipzig (which exists to this day), create the annual Glinka prize for new composition and found a competition for chamber ensemble composition. In November 1886, Rimsky-Korsakov, Liadov, Borodin, and Glazunov decided to write a quartet for Belayev's fiftieth birthday, on a theme composed of three notes (B flat, A and F), the syllables of which make up his name "Be-la-ef".

Borodin noted with satisfaction that this 'extremely curious' piece 'was done in a single flourish, very quickly. It turned out very well, original, extremely witty, and at the same time very melodious'. In the quartet miniature, sultry oriental passion is interlaced with vivid splashes of Spanish colour and the faintest ironical smile.

The quartet was first performed on 23 November 1886 in Belayev's home. 'A multitude of friends gathered to celebrate Mitrofan's birthday', recalled Rimsky-Korsakov, 'which was accompanied by Herculean feasting and drinking... the quartet was performed before the feast, and the guest of honour was in absolute raptures over our surprise'.

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