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by Rebecca Winzenried

Anton Arensky (1861-1906)

String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, Op. 35, for Violin, Viola and Two Cellos (1894)

It is not much of an exaggeration to suggest that Anton Arensky grew up in parallel with the development of a professional life for musicians in Imperial Russia. When Arensky was born in 1861, the St. Petersburg Conservatory was still a year away from opening, with Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky in the first class of students. Arensky's future mentor Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, although he had no formal musical training, was appointed a professor in 1871 when Arensky was still a child writing his first songs and piano pieces. Like Tchaikovsky, Arensky first studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory before immediately securing a position teaching at the Moscow Conservatory. Here, Arensky's students included Sergei Rachmaninov, Alexander Scriabin and Reinhold Glière, and he became close to Tchaikovsky, who provided him with both advice and support. Arensky also began to compose in style more closely resembling Tchaikovsky's, much to the disappointment of Rimsky-Korsakov, long an opponent of Tchaikovsky. Rimsky-Korsakov noted Arensky's shift in allegiances in his memoirs, snippily (and incorrectly) predicting that Arensky would be soon forgotten as a result of this disloyalty. Tchaikovsky, on the other hand, described Arensky as "a man of remarkable gifts" who deserved "unqualified praise."

The String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 35 was composed in 1894, the year after Tchaikovsky's death, and dedicated to Tchaikovsky's memory. As a memorial work, it follows the example of

Tchaikovsky's own String Quartet No. 3 (1876), which was dedicated to Ferdinand Laub, a violinist who was Tchaikovsky's colleague at the Moscow Conservatory, and who had presented the premieres of his first two string quartets. The Arensky quartet is for the unusual ensemble of one violin, one viola and two cellos. This sufficiently distressed Arensky's publisher for him to demand another version for a conventional string quartet with two violins and one cello, but the original scoring is wonderfully effective, providing possibilities both for a darker and more somber ensemble sound and also opportunities for one cellist to soar into an expressive upper register while the other supports it with a deep bass line (the original version is also a boon to organizers of chamber music workshops, and to households with more than one cellist).

Arensky's great strength as a composer was the creation of memorable and appealing melodies, and, while much of the material in this quartet is not his own invention, the piece is typical of his output in being more about the presentation and repetition of attractive themes than about developing them. Each movement is based on pre-existing themes that are heavily freighted with meaning. The first movement opens with a phrase from a Russian Orthodox psalm chant, with a rich sound created by the first cello playing the highest line with the violin and viola on their lowest strings. Even for those of us unfamiliar with the Russian

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Orthodox liturgy, the sound of repeated notes and block chords immediately evokes something somber and religious. This was music that Arensky would have known well, as he was part of the council of the Synodal School of Church Music in Moscow in the years before he composed the quartet. After the psalm phrase is repeated, Arensky combines it with a new and more expansive melody of his own in the violin. The remainder of the movement is a sort of fantasia on this new theme, moving through different tempos and characters. The new theme is sometimes juxtaposed with the somber psalm chant, which makes a return in the middle of the movement that swells to a grand sonority, and a final appearance at the end.

The first movement has something of the feel of a set of variations, with numerous short sections in contrasting styles, but the second movement is a proper, formal theme and variations. The theme is by Tchaikovsky, from his Songs for Children, Op. 54. Tchaikovsky's theme has two halves, each repeated. Arensky's arrangement gives the melody to the violin, with a plucked accompaniment in the lower strings. Arensky keeps Tchaikovsky's melody prominent for the first three variations, before using fragments of it for a series of increasingly ornate and brilliant versions. The mood changes suddenly for a slower variation, with muted strings imitating the textures of the famous slow movement of Tchaikovsky's first string quartet. The movement ends with the opening of the theme played in ethereal harmonics and a return of the psalm chant from the first movement.

The third and final movement introduces two additional borrowed themes. The first is another chant from the Russian Orthodox liturgy, this one from a funeral service setting the words "eternal memory." The chant is played in a moderate tempo with mutes on, before giving way to the final musical quotation. This is the Russian folk song "Slava!" ("Glory") that appears in many musical works, starting with Beethoven's string quartet in E Minor, Op. 59, No. 2, and continuing to operas by Modest Mussorgsky, Anton Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. Originally used as part of a Christmastime women's fortune telling game, the song became associated with the glorification of the Tsar, a connection that was cemented by its use in the coronation scene of Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov. Arensky (possibly following Beethoven's example) first presents "Slava" in a free contrapuntal setting in which it is tossed from instrument to instrument before a series of ever-grander repetitions. This completes the emotional arc of the quartet, starting as a somber memorial, moving through an homage to Tchaikovsky's own music to a reference to a requiem before celebrating Tchaikovsky as a kind of Tsar of Music.

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Pēteris Vasks (b. 1946) Castillo Interior, for Violin and Cello (2013)

Born in Latvia as the son of a Baptist pastor, Pēteris Vasks was at odds with the Soviet regime both as a native of a Baltic Republic recently and forcibly occupied by the Soviet Union, and also on account of his religious beliefs. Although active as a composer during this time, he made his living as an orchestral double bass player and music teacher. In more recent years, Vasks's compositions have been championed by many prominent musicians and ensembles, including Gidon Kremer, the Kronos Quartet and the Hilliard Ensemble. Vasks has been particularly engaged with communicating ideas about the relationships between humans and nature and about the human condition. In his words, "every honest composer searches for a way out of time's crises. Towards affirmation, towards faith. He shows how humanity can overcome this passion for self-annihilation."

Castillo Interior was composed in 2013 at the behest of cellist Sol Gabetta, to whom the duo is dedicated, along with the violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja. The piece is constructed from two strongly contrasting blocks of musical material. The first is slow and contemplative, with a musical space created by moving outward from a single note, and the two players tracing the same shapes against open string drones.

The other material is fast and active, with vigorous arpeggios arranged such that the highest (and lowest) notes create jaunty syncopation. The two blocks alternate before the slow material subsumes the arpeggios and the mode turns to a glowing major for the final phrases.

The title of the work comes from a 16th century book by Saint Theresa of Avila. In this work, Theresa conceives of the human soul as being like a castle made from diamond, containing seven chambers through which the soul can journey before being united with God in the central chamber. Vasks seems to have chosen the title for the piece after composing it, so it is probably imprudent to look for close connections between text and music. Nonetheless, it is irresistible to connect the agitated arpeggios with the worldly concerns that must be overcome through meditation and prayer, and the eventual victory of the slow material and the shift to major as representing the successful conclusion of a spiritual journey.

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Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) **Sextet for Strings No. 2 in G Major, Op. 36 (1864-65)**

While Arensky's quartet is a public act of tribute to a famous composer, Johannes Brahms's second string sextet is partially a secret message about a personal relationship. This sextet came at an important juncture in the composer's career, and also at a significant point in the history of chamber music in Vienna. Brahms began to compose the sextet in 1864, when he had just moved to Vienna, shifting his base of operations from North Germany to Austria, and beginning his associations with the musicians and institutions with whom he would collaborate for the rest of his career. Amongst the new opportunities for him in Vienna was the possibility of public performances of his chamber works by professional ensembles like the string quartet of Joseph Hellmesberger (the elder), the leading violinist in Vienna at the time, and the concertmaster of the Court Opera. Brahms concertized with Hellmesberger for the first time in 1862, and Hellmesberger also presented Brahms's first string sextet. In general, the middle of the 19th century in Vienna was a time when the worlds of amateur chamber music and professional chamber music split. By 1864, works like the Brahms G Major sextet were intended to be played by professionals, and amateurs increasingly contented themselves with playing older (and less technically demanding) works. While this Brahms sextet certainly does seem to assume both highly trained players and a sophisticated and an attentive audience, early presentations sat on the boundaries between the public and the private.

As the musicologist Marie Sumner Lott points out, the first known performance of this sextet for an audience took place in Boston in 1866, when the Mendelssohn Quintette Club (made up of professionals from a local theater orchestra) programmed it on a subscription concert for an invitation-only (but paying) audience.

The most striking thing about the opening movement of the G Major sextet is the wiggling two-note ostinato, heard initially in the first viola and remaining present for much of the movement, moving freely from instrument to instrument and from register to register. The movement begins softly, presenting short ideas - a rising gesture from the first violin, answered by a descending sigh from the first cello - rather than a proper melody or theme, and shifting unexpectedly from major to minor. The full ensemble finally does build to an arrival (and settle on the major mode), changing texture to downward scales scrubbed in repeated notes. This then leads to a real melody (and a glorious one, at that) for the second theme, introduced by the first cello, who is then joined by the first violin. This, too, rises to a climax, and it is in this climax that the secret meaning of the piece for Brahms is hidden.

This ecstatic climax features a five-note figure played in the upper registers of the first violin and viola. The note-names of this figure are a music cipher for the name "Agathe." The Agathe in question was Agathe von Siebold, with whom

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Brahms had been engaged in 1859. Agathe, gifted with a beautiful voice, was the inspiration for (and first performer of) many of Brahms' early songs. Although Brahms broke off the engagement, he still longed for Agathe years later, even going to Göttingen to revisit their old haunts in 1864. Soon thereafter, he began the sextet, symbolically releasing himself from the relationship. "By this work," Brahms wrote a friend, "I have freed myself of my last love." Agathe was much slower to recover. She eventually did marry, but always felt that Brahms was the great love of her life.

The inner movements are both based on older material. The opening of the Scherzo quotes a gavotte for piano written for a neo-Baroque dance suite in 1854, a most unusual project for the time. The short trills that occur on every other note of the Scherzo theme are faint echoes of the ornamentation that pervades Baroque keyboard music. This, once again, forms a connection with Agathe, for the gavotte was the first composition by Brahms that she heard, as part of a recital by Clara Schumann. Perhaps because of its heritage as an elegant dance, the movement is oddly slow and reserved for a scherzo, but it does have a rambunctious middle section in the style of a Czech furiant.

The theme of the adagio appears in a letter to Clara Schumann from 1855 and was possibly intended for the same piano suite. This theme is the basis for a set of variations that range from spooky, slinky chromatic descents through stern counterpoint to a lush outpouring in the major, with both first violin and viola soaring in their upper registers. The final movement is light and fleet, opening with quiet scurrying and quickly moving to a tranquil and singing theme. This singing theme has a particularly rich texture, created by a brief use of exactly the Arensky ensemble of violin, viola and two cellos. This is followed by an echo of the odd character and short trills of the scherzo. There is more counterpoint in the middle of the movement (perhaps more mock serious than learned) but it ends with a rousing dash to the finish.