

Grażyna Bacewicz (1909-1969): Quartet for Four Violins (1949)



Prodigiously talented as a pianist and violinist, Grażyna Bacewicz won prizes and gave concerts across Europe, performed her first concerto with orchestra at age 12, and became the Polish Radio Orchestra's concertmaster in 1930. Bacewicz studied composition with Nadia Boulanger and became a prolific composer and acclaimed teacher. Her works not only bridged the gap between neo-romanticism and modernism, but also paved the way for the pursuit of new music by the next generation of composers. She lived through the eras of pre- and post- World War II, with their accompanying musical freedoms and restrictions. Like Chopin, she came from a bi-national family, with a Lithuanian father and a Polish mother.

The Quartet for Four Violins was written as a pedagogical piece for her students. It embodies the style of "socialist realism," which had become official doctrine in the Eastern Bloc and mandated an idealized representation of life under socialism in the arts. Characteristic of this style, Bacewicz transforms Polish folk music through a neo-classical lens, balanced by soulful lyricism—all while cleverly structuring four string voices that share the same range.

Anton Arensky (1861-1905): String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, Op. 35 (1894)



Born into an affluent, music-loving family in Novgorod, Russia, Anton Arensky was musically precocious and had composed a number of songs and piano pieces by the age of nine. The family moved to Saint Petersburg in 1879, where as a teenager Arensky studied with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. After graduating from the Saint Petersburg Conservatory, Arensky became a professor at the Moscow Conservatory. Among his students there were Alexander Scriabin and Sergei Rachmaninoff. He was not particularly interested in musical folklore or Russian musical identity, but rather combined his native musical influences with a much more cosmopolitan compositional style.

Composed in 1894, Arensky's second string quartet is unusually scored for violin, viola and two cellos. (At the request of his publisher, Arensky created a variant of the quartet for the conventional instrumentation of two violins, viola, and cello, which did not catch on.) Tchaikovsky had died the previous year, and Arensky wrote this quartet in his memory, following a Russian tradition that Tchaikovsky had also observed when he composed his Piano Trio "À la mémoire d'un grand artiste", in memory of Nikolai Rubinstein.

Dense, elegiac harmonies dominate the work, and the instrumentation with two cellos gives the quartet a wonderfully warm, dark sonority. The opening movements uses motifs from the orthodox mass for the dead. The second movement bears the title "Based on a theme by Tchaikovsky," and the theme is from Tchaikovsky's song "Legend," the fifth of his Sixteen Songs for Children. The seven variations are quite elaborate, with each instrument given the lead while the composer explores all of the tonal and textural possibilities of which four string instruments are capable. It is a huge movement and clearly the heart of the work. The mood lightens and darkens—here a scherzo, there a lyrical song, and at last a somber plaint. The finale begins in the same somber mood, but this dirge-like solemnity gives way to a robust celebratory anthem, bringing the quartet to rousing finish.

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904): String Quintet No. 2 in G Major, Op. 77 (1875)



Antonín Dvořák was the first Bohemian composer to achieve worldwide recognition, noted for turning folk material into 19th-century Romantic music. He became an accomplished violinist as a youngster, joining in the amateur music-making that accompanied the dances at his father's inn. A contemporary of Brahms and Tchaikovsky, Dvořák infused western European classical structures with a profound commitment to his Bohemian roots.

Adding a string instrument to a standard quartet (two violins, viola, cello) transforms the ensemble into something quite different. Mozart added a viola, Schubert, a cello; most string quintets feature one or the other. In this case, Dvořák chose the double bass, which is relatively unusual in chamber ensembles. The breadth and range of sound is notable in this lush quintet in at least three ways: the surprisingly deep bass lines, the liberation of the cello to become a melodic "middle" voice, and the sheer fullness of sound. With Dvořák's skill, what borders on sounding almost as large as a chamber orchestra maintains a rich chamber texture throughout.

The first movement is an energetic (*con fuoco* or "with fire") sonata with crystalline themes and a powerful development. The second movement comes closest to Dvořák's later style, characterized by lively folk dances and his expansive approach to the scherzo form. The third movement slows into a lyrical song, tinged with a soulful blend of melancholy and profound nobility. The finale revisits the drive and drama of the earlier movements with more ravishing melodies, rich textures, and the mighty groundswell of the bass.