OSVALDO GOLIJOV (1960-)
LAST ROUND
Duration: ca. 14 minutes

It only takes a moment in listening to the music of Golijov to feel a unique presence, a talent the New York Times once called “classical music’s great globalist hope.” Born in Argentina to Eastern European parents, Golijov grew up with music in the home and was fascinated by the tangos of his elder countryman, Astor Piazzolla.

Golijov moved to the United States in 1986 and studied with the maverick George Crumb, who helped “liberate” the young composer from working in any one style. Today, Golijov’s music is a fusion of Yiddish klezmer, American folk, jazz, and South American influences, but the composer attributes his inspiration to a constant swirl of “inner voices.” Golijov made a lasting impression by juxtaposing Latino street music and Gospel text in his St. Mark Passion, composed in honor of the 250th anniversary of Bach’s death. He wrote the soundtrack to Francis Ford Coppola’s film Youth Without Youth (2007).

With Last Round, written in 1996 for double string quartet and bass, Golijov returns to the roots of his homeland and his beloved Piazzolla. The title refers to the imaginary chance that Piazzolla’s spirit will fight one more time, and the music depicts an idealized bandoneon – the keyless accordion that Piazzolla mastered as a child. The first movement is full of compressed violence, and the second is an elegy to the tango, with a bit of onstage choreography thrown in for good measure.

Here’s how the composer describes Last Round: “Two quartets confront each other, separated by the bass, with violins and violas standing up as in the traditional tango orchestras. The bows fly in the air as inverted legs, always attracting and repelling each other, always in danger of clashing, always avoiding it by transforming hot passion into pure pattern.”

PETER ILYCH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)
SERENADE FOR STRINGS IN C MAJOR, OP. 48
Duration: ca. 28 minutes

Tchaikovsky has never been viewed as herculean, much less heroic, in the sense of Beethoven or Brahms. His brand of expression is more about vulnerability, personal pain, and sensitivity. Attached to supreme technique, this emotionalism becomes a tonic, and since his death Tchaikovsky’s music has never left the center of the repertoire. His last three symphonies, concertos, ballet scores, and tone poems are universal, and prove their worth at the box office.

Part of his appeal, of course, is his gift for melody. He was the Cole Porter, the Paul McCartney, of classical composers. Where Beethoven created symphonies that grew out of a kernel of form, Tchaikovsky crafted them around tunes – delirious, haunting, organic melodies that no amount of music theory or instruction can teach.
The *Serenade for Strings* is a relaxed work, written when Tchaikovsky was free of financial and emotional stress and desiring only to make beautiful music. Written alongside the *1812 Overture*, which Tchaikovsky dismissed as noise, the *Serenade* flowed without much effort, and he wrote his publisher in 1880, saying “Whether because it’s my latest child or because it really isn’t bad, I’m terribly in love with this serenade.”

The work is Tchaikovsky’s tribute to a form popular in the 18th century, and embraces his nostalgia for the delicate, chamber-like serenades of Mozart. It opens with a plaintive cry from the entire ensemble, a theme with a wisp of nobility, and concludes with an upward thrust by all strings. A short waltz movement follows, deftly handled by a composer who knew the form as well as Johann Strauss.

Then Tchaikovsky moves listeners into an elegy on a rising scale, ever delicate, and ending with a hush. The finale – marked *allegro con spirito* – begins with muted strings and introduces a pair of Russian folk themes, one introverted, the other extroverted. The ensemble speeds up, quotes the tune from the beginning of the work, and dashes to a spirited climax.

**ANTONIO VIVALDI (1678-1741)**

**THE FOUR SEASONS**

*Duration: ca. 37 minutes*

Give Vivaldi credit: He wasn’t a slacker. Known as the “red priest” because of his crimson hair, Vivaldi cranked out music for paying patrons at an amazing rate, and not just instrumental pieces. In the last few decades, musicians have awakened to many of his 50-odd operas, which reveal both a flair for the human voice and a treatment of the orchestra as more than just an ornament.

Listeners can find countless recordings of many of his 230 violin concertos, and more than 250 works for other instruments. The rap on Vivaldi, however, is that he composed one concerto 500 times (or 500 concertos in the same mold). But close listening to the variety of his concertos, sacred works, chamber pieces and operas reveals something else: a wellspring of dynamic shades, nervous energy, colors and fervent melody.

*The Four Seasons* remains his trademark – a musical postcard of spring, summer, autumn and winter – and is among the first true pieces of program music (it tells a story through a series of sonnets that accompanied the published score in 1725). Cast in the style of a violin concerto, the work begins with brisk tempos and stirrings of spring, an E major theme borrowed from one of the composer’s early operas. Summer arrives under a hot sun in the key of G minor, a bird song and thunderstorm. Autumn, in F major, announces itself in dance to celebrate the harvest. Finally, winter takes listeners full circle with shivering musical figures in F minor that depict the flurries of an ice storm.

*Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for the Tampa Tribune.*