

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

Tchaikovsky & Vivaldi for Strings

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OSVALDO GOLIJOV (1960-)

LAST ROUND

Duration: ca. 14 minutes

It only takes a moment in listening to the music of Golijov to feel an unusual sonic 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 Spanish and Argentinian 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 also wrote the soundtrack to Francis Ford Coppola’s 2007 film *Youth Without Youth*.

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, according to the composer, 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 violent compression, and the second is an elegy to the tango, with a bit of on-stage 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.”

ANTONION VIVALDI (1678-1741)

CONCERTO FOR FOUR VIOLINS in B MINOR, RV 580

Duration: ca. 10 minutes

Give Vivaldi credit: He cranked out music at an amazing rate, including 230 violin concertos, more than 250 works for other instruments, about 50 operas and numerous sacred pieces. The rap on Vivaldi, however, is that he composed one concerto 500 times, or, as some prefer, 500 concertos in the same mold. But close listening to his oeuvre reveals something else: a wellspring of dynamic shades and colors, nervous energy – and a talent for melody.

So, it’s hard to imagine that the bulk of Vivaldi’s work lay forgotten for nearly two centuries, when scholars and musicians began to turn their attention to him in the 1930s. By the 1970s, period style performances began to sprout, revitalizing the classical record industry. Vivaldi became a best seller, notably for his ever-present *The Four Seasons*.

Vivaldi's influence lies in almost single-handedly inventing the three-movement Italian-style concerto: a rhythmic opening section, an operatic slow movement, and an energetic close that borrows ideas from the first movement and turns them on their heads. As a virtuoso violinist, he expanded the possibilities of the instrument and the boundaries of technique.

Vivaldi's best qualities come to life in the *Concerto for Four Violins in B Minor*, the dark key offset by a vitality and clarity that keeps the soloists both separate and aligned. The 10th in a set of 12 concertos from *L'Estro Armonico, Op. 3*, it displays Vivaldi at his most engaging.

The work is a juggernaut for its time, notes musicologist Richard Taruskin in his *Oxford History of Western Music*: "The four soloists are forever intruding with calculated unruliness on one another, vying obsessively for the last word, forcing the music out of its harmonic sanctuaries, so to speak, and into the flux."

The opening movement is a marvel of counterpoint, with the foursome weaving in and around the fabric of the small chamber orchestra. In the lyrical section that follows, Vivaldi showcases different ways to spread out a single chord and slows the pace to a crawl, then plunges everyone into a rousing dance with lots of excited fiddling to close.

This work made such an impression on Vivaldi's contemporary, Johann Sebastian Bach, that he transcribed it almost note-for-note in his *Concerto for Four Harpsichords, BWV 1065*.

GEORGE WALKER (1922-2018)

LYRIC FOR STRINGS

Duration: ca. 7 minutes

George Theophilus Walker holds a special place in the arts of our country: He was the first African American composer to win a Pulitzer Prize, in 1996 for *Lilacs* for voice and orchestra, a meditation on the death of Abraham Lincoln. The following year, the prize for music went to Wynton Marsalis, ending the half-century dominance by white composers and widening the scope of how such talent is judged.

But Walker had made his mark much earlier. In the mid-1940s, he became the first African American pianist to play a recital at New York's Town Hall, to play solo with the Philadelphia Orchestra and to graduate from the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. He also had the good fortune of an all-star lineup of teachers, including Nadia Boulanger, Clifford Curzon and Rudolf Serkin, who instilled in him a deep understanding of the keyboard that led to a career as a concert pianist.

"I've benefited from being a Black composer in the sense that when there are symposiums given of music by Black composers, I would get performances by orchestras that otherwise would not have done the works," Walker once said. "The other aspect, of course, is that if I were not Black, I would have had a far wider dispersion of my music and more performances." Walker, who died in 2018 at age 96, published more than 100 pieces, ranging from symphonies to songs, many embracing the influence of church spirituals, jazz and the 19th century European symphonic tradition.

His most popular piece is the Lyric for Strings of 1946, originally titled *Lament* in memory of his grandmother, who died the previous year. The six-minute work is disarmingly simple: a linear melody that rises and falls and blends with the other instruments for climactic effect. The music hits an impassioned high

before ending quietly. This simplicity is the source of its impact.

Much has been said about how *Lyric for Strings* resembles a famous work from a decade earlier, Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. Coincidentally, both pieces were adapted from the middle movement of each composer's *First String Quartet*.

"It's a beautiful piece," said Jeffrey Multer, TFO's concertmaster. "Obviously, it's deeply indebted to Barber's *Adagio*. (But) it's a great piece, and it has been neglected."

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 romantic expression is more about vulnerability, personal pain, sentiment and sensitivity. Attached to a 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 over and over 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. Folk tunes played a part in much of his music, as Tchaikovsky was intensely nationalistic – "I am Russian in the completest possible sense," he said – but he blended the songs of his homeland with formal European structures, making him the most "Western" of the Russian bunch.

The *Serenade for Strings* is a relaxed work, written at a time when Tchaikovsky was free of financial and emotional stress and inspired simply by the desire to make beautiful music. Written alongside the rowdy *1812 Overture*, which Tchaikovsky dismissed as noise, the *Serenade* flowed without much effort, and Tchaikovsky 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 so popular in the 18th century, and embraces his nostalgia for the delicate, chamber-like serenades of Mozart. It opens with an impassioned cry from the entire ensemble, a theme both noble and vulnerable, which cascades and tumbles before concluding with an upward thrust by the entire ensemble.

A short waltz movement follows, deftly handled by a composer who knew the form as well as Johann Strauss. From there, 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.

Kurt Loft, former music critic for The Tampa Tribune, has been writing about the Tampa Bay arts for more than 40 years.