

Program Notes: Souvenirs

Notes on the program by Patrick Castillo

SAMUEL BARBER

(Born March 9, 1910, West Chester, Pennsylvania; died January 23, 1981, New York City)

Selections from *Souvenirs* for Piano, Four Hands, op. 28

Composed: 1951–1952

First performance: Version for piano, four hands: July 1952, for an NBC television performance; ballet version: November 15, 1955, New York City

Other works from this period: *Capricorn* Concerto for Flute, Oboe, Trumpet, and Strings, op. 21 (1944); Sonata for Solo Piano, op. 26 (1949); *Prayers of Kierkegaard* for Chorus and Orchestra, op. 30 (1954); *Summer Music* for Woodwind Quintet, op. 31 (1955)

Approximate duration: 16 minutes

Samuel Barber ranks among the most venerated American musical figures of the twentieth century. His music is widely admired for its fervent lyricism and expressive immediacy. Throughout his lifetime and in the years since his death in 1981, he has consistently been among classical music's most frequently performed American composers. Barber's compositional language can be classified as neo-Romantic for its audible debt to the music of the late nineteenth century. His *Adagio* for Strings—one of the most iconic works in the repertoire since it was broadcast with the radio announcement of President Franklin Roosevelt's death—illustrates the essence of Barber's finest music: it is melodically concise, harmonically rich, and emotionally affecting.

Barber originally composed *Souvenirs* in 1952 for a ballet by the renowned dancer and choreographer Todd Bolender. He subsequently arranged the score for piano, four hands, and also adapted it as an orchestral suite; a version for solo piano came, as well, in 1954. The music captures Barber's fondness for New York, evoking that city's yesteryear *joie de vivre*. "Imagine a **divertissement** in a setting of the Palm Court of the Hotel Plaza in New York, the year about 1914, epoch of the first tangos," Barber wrote. "*Souvenirs*—remembered with affection, not in irony or with tongue in cheek, but in amused tenderness."

The work is a suite of six miniatures, each based on a traditional dance form. The opening waltz begins with a stylish introduction before settling into a graceful melody. Curious chromatic turns stir the music's surface charm but never mar its immediate attractiveness. The following *Schottische* equally well combines prettiness and piquancy.

The *Pas de deux* introduces a darker hue to the suite's palette, conjuring an air of seductive mystery. Though languidly entering into a minor key, the music remains rich with allure—evoking, perhaps, the smoke unfurling off the end of a cigarette more than any sense of real dismay. A two-step of inane glee follows.

Barber labels the suite's penultimate movement *Hesitation-Tango*. This music is rife with the sense of intrigue associated with that Latin American dance, peppered with provocative melodic and harmonic turns. The tango's sun-kissed middle section calls to mind a Cuban habanera. *Souvenirs* concludes with a rollicking *Galop*, alternately redolent of Stravinsky here, Poulenc there—but ultimately, this finale demonstrates the individuality of Barber's voice as assertively as the rest of the suite.

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

(Born April 25/May 7, 1840, Kamsko-Votkinsk, Vyatka province; died October 25/November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg)

***Souvenir d'un lieu cher* for Violin and Piano, op. 42**

Composed: March–May 1878

*Bolted terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 90.

Published: May 1879

Dedication: B***** ("Brailov," Nadezhda von Meck's estate)

Other works from this period: Violin Concerto in D Major, op. 35 (1878); Symphony no. 4 in f minor, op. 36 (1878); Six Romances, op. 38 (1878); *Album pour enfants: Vingt-quatre pièces faciles (à la Schumann)*, op. 39 (1878); *Douze morceaux*, op. 40 (1878); *Liturgie of St. John Chrysostom*, op. 41 (1878)

Approximate duration: 16 minutes

In 1866, upon graduating from the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Tchaikovsky received an invitation from Anton Rubinstein (brother of Nikolai, Tchaikovsky's teacher and the head of the St. Petersburg Conservatory) to teach at his equivalent institution in Moscow. "I have entered the newly opened conservatory," Tchaikovsky wrote to his sister. "Do not imagine that I dream of being a great artist. I only feel I must do the work for which I have a vocation. Whether I become a celebrated composer or only a struggling teacher—'tis all the same."

Indeed, Tchaikovsky was only a struggling teacher, constantly mired in dire financial straits, for the following decade. His fortunes changed when he began exchanging letters with Nadezhda von Meck, the eccentric millionaire widow of a railroad tycoon and mother of eleven. Meck, ten years Tchaikovsky's senior, had become enamored with his music and became his patroness for the next thirteen years. By her own request, the two never formally met—yet through their constant written correspondence, they developed a strong, if curious, bond. "In my relations with you," the composer wrote, "there is the ticklish circumstance that every time we write to one another, money appears on the scene."

In addition to receiving financial support, Tchaikovsky was welcome at a guesthouse at Brailov, Meck's estate (so long as their agreement to avoid personal contact remained in effect; during one stay, while the composer was out for a walk and Meck was running late for a social appointment, the two inadvertently came face to face for the only time).

Over the course of three days in March 1878, Tchaikovsky wrote a *Méditation* in d minor, originally intended as the slow movement of his Violin Concerto but quickly discarded. He returned to the work in May, now envisioning it as the first movement of a three-movement work for violin and piano. On May 25, Tchaikovsky traveled to Brailov for a two-week vacation, where he added a scherzo and *Mélodie*.

The resultant work, *Souvenir d'un lieu cher*—"memory of a beloved place"—bears an enigmatic dedication to "B*****." The dedicatee is Brailov itself; Tchaikovsky made a gift of his manuscript to Meck.

The *Méditation* opens with a piano introduction of searching poignancy. The music is set in d minor, but provocatively chromatic turns and sighing appoggiaturas shroud the harmony in an enigmatic haze. The music settles unequivocally into somber d minor as the violin enters, issuing the melancholic theme. Staccato triplets in the piano add a sense of urgency to the violin's soulful strains.

A second theme appears in B-flat major, graceful and elegant. Tchaikovsky marks the piano accompaniment *Dolce* as the violin takes a fanciful turn, marked by dancing triplets and decorative trills and turns. Though the music's character has changed, a sense of nostalgia continues to permeate the movement. The *Méditation* soon returns to d minor; the violin revisits the melancholic opening theme, accompanied now by a florid, cantabile countermelody in the piano. As the movement approaches its close, the violin shows flashes of virtuosity, betraying Tchaikovsky's original intention for the work as the slow movement of his Violin Concerto.

The blistering scherzo movement, marked *Presto giocoso*, recalls the *Midsummer Night's Dream*-style scherzi of Mendelssohn. A songful middle section in A-flat major, *con molto espressione e un poco agitato*, trades fire for lyricism yet retains the scherzo section's caffeinated energy.

If the scherzo betrays the influence of Mendelssohn's scherzi, the *Souvenir's* concluding *Mélodie* may equally recall that composer's *Lieder ohne Worte* (*Songs without Words*); indeed, Tchaikovsky alternately described this movement as a "chant sans paroles." It likewise harkens back to Schubert in its uncannily expressive melodic sensibility. Particularly in its lighthearted **grazioso** *scherzando* moments, this delightful finale strongly suggests the composer's fond appreciation of his benefactress's hospitality.

Aleksandr Glazunov later prepared an arrangement of *Souvenir d'un lieu cher* for violin and orchestra, in which incarnation it is often heard today.

DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH

(Born September 12/25, 1906, St. Petersburg; died August 9, 1975, Moscow)

Ispanskiye pesni (*Spanish Songs*) for Voice and Piano, op. 100

Composed: 1956

Other works from this period: *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, op. 29 (opera) (1955–1963); *The Gadfly*, op. 97 (film score) (1955); String Quartet no. 6 in G Major, op. 101 (1956); Symphony no. 11, op. 103, *The Year 1905* (1956–1957); *Two Russian Folk Song Arrangements* for Chorus, op. 104 (1957)

Approximate duration: 16 minutes

Shostakovich's six *Spanish Songs*, op. 100, set texts found in a book of Spanish ballads in Russian translation. Shostakovich's settings are straightforward and unassuming, allowing the essence of the Spanish folk songs to come through.

"There is no greater tragedy," the saying goes, "than that of a blind man in Granada"—a sentiment affirmed by the first of the set, *Proshchaj, Grenada!* (*Farewell, Granada!*) A noble procession of chords paces the wistful melody, decorated with exotic flourishes that add a dash of Spanish flair. The salacious *Zvjozdochki* (*Little Stars*) follows: "I come with my guitar to teach my sweetheart songs. But to teach for free I'm not inclined: I shall take a kiss for each note...Strange—in the morning she recognizes everything except the notes!" Shostakovich sets this suggestive text with a playful piquancy.

Pervaja vstrecha (*First Meeting*), based on a Spanish folk poem rather than an actual folk song, departs from the overtly Spanish character of the preceding two settings. Befitting the text—"Once, you gave me water near a stream, fresh water, cold...Your gaze was darker than night"—the song's opening takes on a solemn, more characteristically Russian flavor. Shostakovich's setting turns upbeat as the singer recalls the thrill of love at first sight: "See, the round dance turns once more, the tambourine roars, rings, and sings..." Following the spirited *Ronda* (*The Round Dance*), the set turns warmhearted in *Chernookaja* (*Black-Eyed Maiden*), a fetching love song. The set's finale, *Son* (*The Dream*), is equally love struck.

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Souvenir de Florence for String Sextet, op. 70

Composed: June 12/24–August 1890 (sketches begun in 1887); rev. December 1891–January 1892

Published: 1892

Dedication: St. Petersburg Chamber Music Society

First performance: December 10, 1890, St. Petersburg

Other works from this period: *Valse-scherzo* no. 2 in A Major for Piano (1889); *Ne kukushechka vo sirom boru* (*'Tis Not the Cuckoo in the Damp Pinewood*) for Chorus (1891); *Iolanthe*, op. 69 (opera) (1891); Piano Concerto no. 3 in E-flat Major, op. posth. 75 (1893)

Approximate duration: 34 minutes

In 1886, Tchaikovsky was elected an honorary member of the St. Petersburg Chamber Music Society, whom he promised a new composition. The new work, a sextet for strings, did not come to fruition until 1890, shortly after the composer completed his opera *The Queen of Spades*. The sextet's title, *Souvenir de Florence*, is literal: Tchaikovsky sketched the main theme of the second movement while working on the opera in Florence. Otherwise, the work betrays little that is particularly Italian; on the contrary, *Souvenir* demonstrates the distinct Russian character that, integrated with the Romantic idiom of his German contemporaries, fueled Tchaikovsky's intensely personal musical voice and has placed him among Western music's most irresistible composers. The work ranks among Tchaikovsky's finest creations and, indeed, is one of the foremost masterpieces of the Romantic chamber repertoire. If it is not universally regarded as such, *Souvenir* certainly warrants closer attention, particularly for its place in the literature, bridging the string sextets of Brahms to the hyper-expressionism of Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*.

Tchaikovsky confided to the pianist and conductor Aleksandr Siloti that, having just completed such a large-scale work in *The Queen of Spades*, he worried he might have thought in overly orchestral terms while conceiving the sextet. The grandeur of *Souvenir's* opening measures, blasting off from a powerful dissonance into the hot-blooded theme, lends some credence to the composer's concern; the result, however, is magnificent. Tchaikovsky marks the second theme *Dolce, espressivo e cantabile*—"sweet, expressive, and singing"—as the accompaniment figure in the violas and second violin maintains the steady, driving rhythm of the opening melody. After developing this musical idea into a series of fortissimo chords, Tchaikovsky introduces a third melody in the second viola: a gentle serenade, accompanied by pizzicato chords throughout the rest of the ensemble, creating the impression of a strumming guitar.

The slow movement begins with a richly textured, sensuous introduction. Accompanied by pizzicati in the lower strings, the first violin sings a tender lullaby; the second half of the melody takes on a plaintive, Russian-inflected character. After the first viola reprises the opening melody, the movement launches into a contrasting central section, music of a hushed, jittery nervousness, as if over-caffeinated to offset the languor of what came before. When the movement returns to the music of the opening section, it is the first cello that reintroduces the theme, while the upper strings provide a faster sixteenth-note accompaniment, instead of the triplet accompaniment employed at the beginning of the movement.

The *Allegretto moderato's* opening section suggests a hearty Russian folk dance. Following the dance, the music embarks on a more contrapuntal section: overlapping entrances by the violins, violas, and cellos in succession lead to a more haughty and festive musical gesture, characterized by forceful rhythms and wide melodic leaps. In this music, we hear indeed the cogency of Tchaikovsky's mother tongue within the trappings of Brahmsian Romanticism. The movement's staccato middle section gallops along at a quicker, carefree gait. Here, perhaps, we hear Tchaikovsky under Italy's spell.

The energetic finale begins with a rollicking accompaniment in the violas and second violin, and the first violin introduces a Gypsy-like dance tune. The movement fashions what sounds like simple peasant music into well-crafted contrapuntal passages, demonstrating Tchaikovsky's dual musical profile as a composer steeped in his Russian heritage yet equally facile in the Western tradition.