

Borodin, Alexander (1833-1887): String Quartet No. 2 in D Major

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Scherzo. Allegro
- III. Notturmo. Andante
- IV. Andante - Vivace

During the 19th century, Europe underwent a radical change with the rise of Nationalism. In revolt against the 'old order' this new movement sought to throw off the yoke of imperial power to allow nations to become free to determine their own identity, culture and future prosperity. Aside from folk music, Russian music was composed following the model of European counterparts until the middle of the 19th century and did not exist as a unique entity. Glinka saw a desperate need for a school of nationalist music but it was only when five young composers – Balakirev, Cui, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov and Mussorgsky – joined forces as "the Mighty Handful", (also known as "The Russian Five") that the nationalist ideals were finally realised in Russian music. European models of Italian opera and Classical and Romantic chamber music were eschewed in favour of programmatic symphonic works and operas with rousing mass choruses to texts that also projected national character. Balakirev, the putative leader of "The Five", deplored chamber music, regarding it as a refuge of lesser western composers. He discouraged his talented protégés from writing chamber works, urging them instead to incorporate Russian folk tunes into their music so as to develop a more individual style. Under Balakirev's influence, Borodin found a voice in favour of specifically Russian music, and his best known works in this new nationalist idiom include *In the Steppes of Central Asia*, three symphonies, and the opera *Prince Igor*.

It is significant, however, that Borodin remained independent of the other members of "The Five", in spite of their ideological prejudices against chamber music, in that he was the only composer of the group to make this genre central to his repertoire. In his relatively small output of 21 works, his orchestral works are far outnumbered by his chamber music compositions, which include a number of works for string and piano-based ensembles. Perhaps the most successful are his two string quartets (1873-1877 and 1881).

Buoyed by the successful premiere of his first quartet on December 30, 1880, the second quartet was composed during the course of a country summer retreat in the township of Zhitovo (south-east of Moscow), and completed in August of 1881. By Borodin's standards, the work was finished extremely quickly, taking approximately two months from conception to completion. He dedicated the work to his wife, Ekaterina. Serge Dianin, Borodin's biographer, has suggested that the quartet was in fact an anniversary gift, having been exactly twenty years since the composer first met his wife. Even though there is no direct quotation of folk melody as was common in the compositions of "Nationalists" at that time, the quartet evokes a quality that is identifiably Russian, with its long melodic lines and richness of colours and rhythms. Indeed, melody drives much of the quartet, often presenting itself in conversational form between the first violin and cello. Himself an amateur cellist and keen chamber musician, Borodin had studied the quartets of Beethoven and Haydn, and had a particular fondness for the works of Mendelssohn.

The first movement is one of the most perfect examples of Borodin's lyrical treatment of the sonata form. The opening exudes a delicate sensibility with the first theme and then by contrast a second theme adds a stout but vigorous counterweight to the lithe, gentle sway of the beginning. A wonderful sense of affection permeates the movement.

Mendelssohn's influence is present in the second movement, a swift scherzo. Its opening phrases skittishly gather momentum, before melting into a waltz that keeps the cellist busy with string-crossings. Throughout, the movement alternates between these "skittish" and "waltz" characters, but ultimately closes with a brief pizzicato passage of great delicacy. Borodin explained this movement as an attempt "to conjure up an impression of a light hearted evening spent in one of the suburban pleasure gardens of St. Petersburg."

The third movement is undoubtedly Borodin's most famous work. The beautiful Nocturne has gained the attention of numerous arrangers and transcribers. (Fellow "Five" member, Rimsky-Korsakov, arranged it for violin and orchestra and it was also used in the 1953 musical *Kismet* in the song, *And this is My Beloved*.) Again opening with a sweeping cello melody that passes to the first violin, each appearance of the theme is marked with the instruction "in a singing style, expressively", underscored by a gently throbbing accompaniment.

In the final movement, Borodin begins with a questioning figure, offered by the violins and answered by the viola and cello in brooding and equally questioning terms. The music soon unfolds from this darker opening, flourishing into a movement of an overall bright and vivacious character.

The second string quartet was premiered on January 26, 1882 at an Imperial Russian Musical Society concert in St. Petersburg. It was not published until after the composer's death at the age of 53 in 1887.

Elizabeth Dalton, 2015