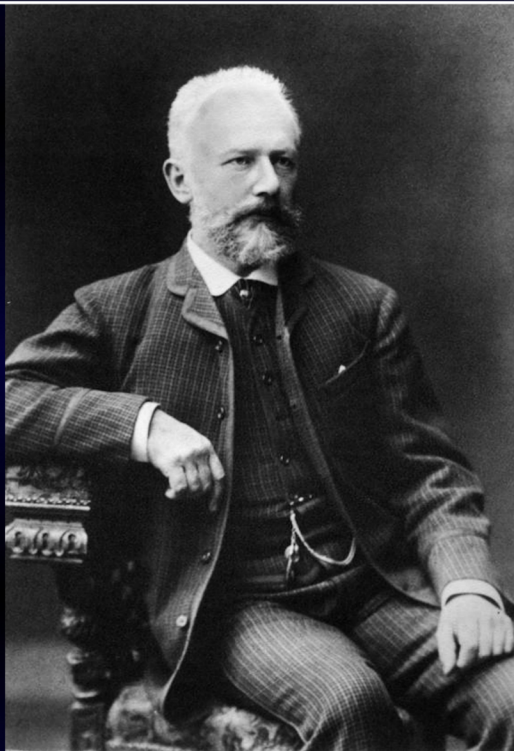


Русская фортепианная музыка
Russian Piano Music Series

volume 15



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Grand Sonata in G, Op. 37
June & December from
'The Seasons', Op. 37a

+

Selected
piano works

Stefania Argentieri

Russian Piano Music Series, vol. 15: Tchaikovsky

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

From **18 Morceaux ('Pieces') , Op. 72** **18:09**

- | | | |
|---|------------------------|------|
| 1 | No. 2 Berceuse | 6:14 |
| 2 | No. 5 Méditation | 5:07 |
| 3 | No. 14 Chant élégiaque | 6:47 |

4 Romance in F minor, Op. 5 **6:11**

From **The Seasons, Op. 37a** **9:06**

- | | | |
|---|--|------|
| 5 | No. 6 Barcarole in G minor (June) | 4:48 |
| 6 | No. 12 Christmas-tide in A flat major (December) | 4:17 |

Grand Sonata in G major, Op. 37 **38:04**

- | | | |
|----|--|-------|
| 7 | I. <i>Moderato e risoluto</i> | 14:53 |
| 8 | II. <i>Andante non troppo quasi moderato</i> | 11:27 |
| 9 | III. Scherzo: <i>Allegro giocoso</i> | 3:43 |
| 10 | IV. Finale: <i>Allegro vivace</i> | 7:59 |

total duration : **71:36**

Stefania Argentieri piano

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and the unending dream of life

An extraordinary singer of dreams – this is perhaps the most beautiful and true definition one could give of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. His was a short life, intense as the scent of the lily of the valley that in May dots the undergrowth with the colour of spring and hope.

Born in Kamsko-Votkinsk on 7th May 1840, Pyotr was deeply attached to his mother, a musician who introduced him to the piano. His childhood and early adolescence passed serenely until 1854, when Aleksandra Andreevna d'Assier died tragically during one of the frequent cholera epidemics that decimated the population at the time. Losing his mother was a hard blow for Pyotr, the beginning of an inner conflict that would mark him for the rest of his life. He began to manifest an emotional character, extremely sensitive and unsettled, bordering on neurosis, which would inevitably influence his relationships and poetics. Despite honouring his father's wish that he complete his law studies, Pyotr did not want to become one of the many mediocre officials at the Ministry of Justice in St Petersburg (then capital of the Russian Empire), where he had found employment. He decided to change life... and become the Tchaikovsky we know. He enrolled at the Russian Musical Society, graduated and, in 1866, obtained the professorship in Harmony at the Moscow Conservatoire, which had recently been established.

The musical context of Tchaikovsky's career was varied and complex. Russia did not have a strong musical tradition behind it: there were a few local composers, such as Alyabyev (father of the famous Nightingale), whose music accompanied life in the palaces of the nobility. An immense gap separated the rich aristocracy, which Tolstoy was to depict so well, from other social classes. It was a small-minded and bigoted society, anchored in medieval values such as serfdom and absolute faith in the Tsar,

which not even Beccaria's Enlightenment ideas – though welcomed with interest by Catherine II – had managed to undermine in the slightest. The nationalist spirit that was sweeping across the rest of Europe was still to come in Russia: in the first pages of “War and Peace”, the characters at a sumptuous reception express themselves in perfect French in a sign of contempt for Russian culture, considered coarse and inadequate by the nobility, who disdainfully distanced themselves from it. It was a slap in the face of the peasants dying of hardship in villages throughout the empire's vast territory; they would follow their 'little father', the Tsar, to their death, while he, surrounded by a court of ostentatious nobles, was deeply indifferent to them.

If John Field, the inventor of the nocturne, had not moved to St Petersburg, Russia would not have known then the great classical instrumental music to which it began to look with keen interest and admiration. The works of Rossini and the Italians were very popular in theatres, and Berlioz made a successful tour in 1847, opening the way to French and German musical romanticism in Russia. However, this course was not universally followed. If Mikhail Glinka had laid the foundations for a musical renewal especially through theatre, Modest Mussorgsky leaned towards a nationalistic and anti-academic music, one that could be “true”, close to the people, to the soul of the peasant. He aimed at the expression of sentiment and at the faithful rendition of language embedded in the popular idiom. The East was also a recurring theme, as reflected in Rimsky Korsakov's 'colourful' fairy tales as opposed to the folklore depicted by Aleksandr Borodin.

In short, everything was welcome, except for the canons of scholarly European music. The 'Group of Five' led by Balakirev drew a clear and uncrossable line between Russians and non-Russians. And Tchaikovsky? Despite feeling “Russian to the very core of his bones”, he never shared the path of the Five, although in his youth he did not disdain Russian and Ukrainian folk melodies in the service of historical and cultural

themes. This was a result of the influence Dargomyžsky's music had on him. To this period belong, among others, the *First String Quartet* op. 11 (1871), the first two Symphonies (written in 1866 and 1872), the *Sonata in C sharp minor* (1865) and the *Scherzo à la russe* for piano (1867). Even in the "discourse" of the *First Piano Concerto*, the most beautiful of the three, we find two popular melodies in a tight and painful dialogue between piano and orchestra, between the soul and the world. This, ultimately, is the peculiarity of Tchaikovsky's poetics: the contrast between the melancholy of existence and the aspiration to serenity, between a tragic reality and the dream that shines light into the darkness, music into the silence of incomprehension.

Swan Lake, staged in Moscow in 1877 with little success, is an extraordinary combination of sweetness and love, of hope extinguished amidst the inexorable waves of destiny. During these years Tchaikovsky had an intense and intimate correspondence with the wealthy widow Nadežda Filaretovna von Meck, who encouraged him to continue his work as a composer by offering him generous donations. The two never met: this stimulated Tchaikovsky's imagination, his deep affection for this mysterious woman, much older than himself, who, according to a psychoanalytical analysis, may have represented the maternal ideal that tormented him. The second *Piano Sonata in G major*, Opus 37, dates from 1878. Tchaikovsky's unsettled mind was still reeling from his ill-fated marriage – which lasted only a few weeks – to Antonina Ivanovna Miljukova, his former pupil at the Conservatoire, as well as from gossip about his homosexuality, from his attempted suicide and his separation.

By leaving Russia for some time, Pyotr found the serenity and inspiration he needed to compose. The result is a rhapsodic sonata of immediate passion, reminiscent in some respects of Robert Schumann's *First Sonata in F sharp minor* op. 11. In the *Moderato e risoluto* [7] the first theme, introduced by chords in dotted rhythm that build an imposing architecture, is followed by a cantabile, reflective second theme, which a

reprise leads to the concluding coda. In the second movement, *Andante non troppo quasi moderato* [8] we find Tchaikovsky's most authentic pathos, that lyrical tension that becomes the intimate voice of the human soul. The classical and traditional setting of the *Allegro giocoso* [9], highlighted by the typical tripartite structure, opens to the *Allegro vivace* [10], where the bright chromaticism is the basis of a narrative rich in suggestive emotions, in questions of a melancholic love that almost expect answers from an absent orchestra. The sonata's architecture is shaped in the classical-romantic manner, but not without innovations and impulses that make it a praiseworthy example of Tchaikovsky's poetics.

His relationship with the poet and writer Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (not exactly a fervent tsarist), for whom he set several plays to music, also leads us to reconsider the clichéd idea of Tchaikovsky as a socialite and a pro-imperialist. On the one hand, he was tied to a world that was slowly and progressively declining. On the other, he worked for the valorisation of patriotic Russian ballet (remember, among others, *The Sleeping Beauty*, 1876, and *The Nutcracker*, 1889) and developed a line of thought that was entirely his own: starting from the teachings of ideal classical beauty, it opens up to a Dostoyevskian interpretation of murky reality.

Tchaikovsky's notes are a kaleidoscope of feelings, a rhapsody of the "human comedy", which do not have the strength to oppose the world's hypocrisy in the manner of Oscar Wilde, but which clearly and desperately express a deep desire for love and understanding. A desire that Tchaikovsky, fragile and openly homosexual, never attained, oppressed by the evil fate that plays a leading role in the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies and to which he seems to surrender in the Sixth, the most lugubrious and extraordinary of the six symphonies.

In his later years, after his agonising break-up with von Meck, Tchaikovsky had to

scrape together the money he needed to support himself, so he agreed to write on commission – without much enthusiasm – a series of eighteen pieces for piano. Among these, the *Berceuse* [1] follows the rhythm of a lullaby, where the piano becomes a delicate voice introducing and explaining the theme. It's a whispered discourse, dominated by arpeggios that evoke reflections of light on an enchanted lake, and project the listener into a dreamlike and melancholy dimension devoid of pain.

The more emphatic *Méditation* [2] is reminiscent of some of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*. It's a song without words that sentiment elevates to a profound existential quest. The trill that concludes the piece seems to suggest the image of a dragonfly hovering in the air, perhaps unaware of the value of its life but happy to savour it, to be there – because, after all, the value of life is intrinsic to life itself. The *Chant Elégiaque* [3], dreamy and full of pathos, expresses the painful awareness of an ideal that cannot be attained, of a desire that will never be realised. And yet – perhaps this is what the last lines want to tell us – dreams give us the strength to continue walking even when "the ache of living", to quote Montale, overwhelms us at every step.

Love's sorrow presents itself melancholically as the first theme of the *Romance in F minor* op. 5 [4], composed in 1868. The sadness is soon swept away by the second theme – powerful and energetic – of ephemeral hope. It's only a moment, a glimmer. The opening theme returns, gloomy, decisive, closing the discourse with a chord similar to a human lament. *The Seasons*, Op. 37a, which Tchaikovsky wrote between 1875 and 1876 for the publisher of the St. Petersburg magazine *Nuvelist*, is also worth mentioning. It consists of twelve pieces inspired by the verses of various authors. They start from the particular – the heat emanating from a fireplace, or birdsong – to describe the universal (to use Aristotelian terms), the months of the year. Tchaikovsky, in the vein of Vivaldi's concertos, imprints on the stave what Benedetto Antelmi does in the stone of the Baptistry of Parma: moments of life that art makes eternal.

If in *June* [5] Tchaikovsky intends to evoke the lapping waves that propel a barcarole in the sad silence of a summer evening, the waltz of the month of *December* [6] Christmas, is an engaging melody expressing joviality, the dance of life that we all have a duty to dance to the last beat.

Tchaikovsky died in St Petersburg on 6th November 1893, perhaps from the same illness that took his mother many years earlier and for which there was no cure. His life was as turbulent as a Van Gogh painting, one of great sadness, which only found fulfilment in the wonderful notes that history has generously handed down to us. His vast output embraces every form, testifying to Tchaikovsky's extraordinary and inexhaustible compositional vein and capacity for orchestration. It's a subdued voice that knows how to create chiselled cathedrals of notes that describe the drama of life.

Sometimes destiny is cruel: it deprives man of the simplest things, but entrusts him with an infinite gift that becomes his obsession, his only hope, his end, his eternity. The grandiose and moving main theme of the first movement of the *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D major*, Op. 35 (1878) offers perhaps the most beautiful message that Pyotr Tchaikovsky left us: faith in life – which is reborn every day like the sun on the sea – is a mountain higher than human pain, a dream that not even the frost of death can shatter.

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translated by Valeria Vescina





The pianist

An artist renowned for her innate elegance, communicativity and superb control of the keyboard, **Stefania Argentieri** graduated in piano in 2009, when not yet twenty years old, with the highest marks and praise at the Conservatory "T. Schipa" in Lecce, Italy, and later also with excellence the Biennial Academic Diploma in Music Disciplines as soloist at the "N. Rota" Conservatory of Monopoli in Italy. Following this extensive and successful path in education, she attended, with brilliant achievement, the three-year master-course in chamber music and solo performance at the Academy of Music in Florence; she also obtained the prestigious diploma for the Advanced Course in Piano and Chamber Music at the Santa Cecilia Piano Music Academy.

Stefania teaches Principal Piano at the Conservatory N. Piccinni in Bari. She also performed at the Italian Embassy in Washington D.C. in the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome, at the Italian Cultural Institutes in Los Angeles, Paris, Budapest, Strasbourg, at the Athens Concert Hall in Bacau, Romania, at the Parco della Musica in Rome, at the CASC Auditorium of the Bank of Italy in Rome, at the Teatro dal Verme in Milan, for the European Young Festival in Passau (Germany).

Stefania enjoys a continuous collaboration with major orchestras such as Orchestra Filarmonica Pugliese, Bari Metropolitan Orchestra, Bacau Philharmonic Orchestra and she performed with such conductors like O. Balan M. Cormio, D. Frandes, G. Minafra, M. Nitti, and many others.

She has recorded "Capitoli Pugliesi" in chamber music for Digressione Music, piano solo for Vatican Radio, EuroClassicPlanet and IICC in Los Angeles. Her artistic career has been enriched through international masterclasses held by great high-profile musicians including P. Camicia, R. Cappello, A. Ciccolini, C. Elton, P. Iannone, A. Jasinski, L. Margarius, K. Bogino and P. Bordoni.

This recording of the works of Tchaikovsky follows her well-received album of music by Prokofiev (Divine Art DDA 25156) which attracted excellent critical reviews:

"A new talent who has much to say in Prokofiev's brilliant music. Her Sixth is particular is outstanding." – MusicWeb International

"Argentieri demonstrates a true command of this daunting repertoire" – The Whole Note

"Argentieri manages all of the demands for an effective presentation with an excellent understanding of the music." – American Record Guide

Stefania is planning numerous special ambitious projects for the near future.



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Stefania Argentieri

Piano Sonatas 1 & 6, Etudes, 'Suggestion diabolique' and Pieces from 'Cinderella' in acclaimed readings.



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Programme notes by Sebastiano Coletta

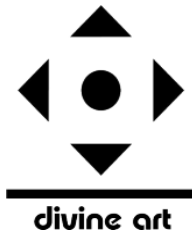
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Stefania Argentieri

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