



PROGRAM NOTES

Jessie Montgomery

(b.1981)

Strum

Composed 2012

Composer, violinist, and educator Jessie Montgomery is the winner of both the Sphinx Medal of Excellence and the ASCAP Foundation's Leonard Bernstein Award. She has just been appointed to a three-year term as Mead Composer-in-Residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Montgomery's music interweaves classical music with elements of vernacular music, improvisation, language, and social justice, placing her squarely as one of the most relevant interpreters of 21st-century American sound and experience. Her growing body of work includes solo, chamber, vocal, and orchestral pieces, commissioned by such organizations as the Albany Symphony, American Music Festival, Chicago Sinfonietta, Joyce Foundation, National Symphony Orchestra, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Sphinx Organization, Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, and Young People's Chorus of New York. The first recording devoted to her music, *Strum: Music for Strings*, was released by Azica Records in 2015. She is currently a Graduate Fellow in Music Composition at Princeton University.

Strum is the culminating result of several versions of a string quintet I wrote in 2006. It was originally written for the Providence String Quartet and guests of Community MusicWorks Players, then arranged for string quartet in 2008 with several small revisions. In 2012 the piece underwent its final revisions with a rewrite of both the introduction and the ending for the Catalyst Quartet in a

performance celebrating the 15th annual Sphinx Competition.

Originally conceived for the formation of a cello quintet, the voicing is often spread wide over the ensemble, giving the music an expansive quality of sound. Within *Strum* I utilized texture motives, layers of rhythmic or harmonic ostinati that string together to form a bed of sound for melodies to weave in and out. The strumming pizzicato serves as a *texture motive* and the primary driving rhythmic underpinning of the piece. Drawing on American folk idioms and the spirit of dance and movement, the piece has a kind of narrative that begins with fleeting nostalgia and transforms into ecstatic celebration.

-Jessie Montgomery

Instrumentation – strings Duration – 7'

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

(1840-1893)

Serenade for Strings in C Major, Op. 48

Composed 1880

Tchaikovsky drew inspiration for his Serenade for Strings in C Major from the example of his musical idol, Mozart. This four-movement piece has the general outline of a symphony, but the title “Serenade” creates the expectation of a lighter character and a less rigorous formal structure. Many composers of the mid-to-late 19th-century embraced the form of the serenade, as it allowed them to write large orchestral works while avoiding the lofty expectations created by Beethoven’s symphonic achievements. In addition to Brahms’ two Serenades written in 1858 and 1859, Dvořák published a Serenade for Strings in 1877, and composers including Hugo Wolf, Ethel Smythe, and Edward Elgar also wrote in the genre. In 1880, Tchaikovsky

was enjoying newfound freedom, having left both his teaching job at the Moscow Conservatory and his brief and miserable marriage. His work was increasingly recognized and performed abroad, and he had recently completed several major works, including the ballet *Swan Lake*, the Fourth Symphony, the opera *Eugene Onegin*, and the Violin Concerto. A generous stipend from his friend and patron Nadezhda von Meck relieved him of his financial worries, and he embarked on an itinerant existence, traveling through Europe or staying at the homes of friends and family in the Russian countryside. During this period, he turned away from the impassioned drama of some of his earlier works and explored genres such as the orchestral suite, in which simpler dance forms showcased his beautiful melodies and sparkling textures.

The first movement of the Serenade for Strings opens with a warmly expansive chordal introduction structured around a descending C major scale. We hear this material again both at the end of this movement and towards the end of the Finale, and it serves to frame and unify the piece as a whole. The lilting dance of the *Pezzo in forma di Sonatina* is filled with lively textural details, and its melodies and motives are tossed joyfully between the parts. In the second movement waltz we hear Tchaikovsky at his most sweet and graceful. After a more ardent contrasting B section in the minor mode, the waltz theme returns, with charmingly inventive accompanimental lines swirling around it. The third movement *Larghetto elegiaco* anchors the piece with its more introspective and somber mood, and a delicate transition passage leads into the exuberant Russian folk dance of the Finale.

Instrumentation – strings Duration – 30'

~Nell Flanders, Assistant Conductor
Princeton Symphony Orchestra