

YING QUARTET

ANTON ARENSKY

QUARTET NO. 1 OP. 11

QUARTET NO. 2 OP. 35

PIANO QUINTET OP. 51

String Quartet No.1 in G Major Op.11

1. i. Allegro — 7:44
2. ii. Andante sostenuto — 5:18
3. iii. Menuetto: Allegretto — 3:10
4. iv. Finale (Variations sur un theme russe): Allegro non troppo — 4:41

String Quartet No.2 in A minor Op.35

5. i. Moderato — 11:07
- ii. Thème and Variations
 6. Theme: Moderato — 1:10
 7. Variation I: Un poco piu mosso — 1:23
 8. Variation II: Allegro non troppo — 1:02
 9. Variation III: Andantino Tranquillo — 1:10
 10. Variation IV: Vivace — 1:27
 11. Variation V: Andante — 2:10
 12. Variation VI: Allegro con spirito — 1:14
 13. Variation VII: Andante con moto — 1:21
 14. Coda: Moderato — 1:47
15. iii. Finale: Andante sostenuto – Allegro moderato — 4:44

Piano Quintet in D Major Op.51

16. i. Allegro moderato — 7:33
17. ii. Variations: Andante — 7:18
18. iii. Scherzo: Allegro vivace — 8:46
19. iv. Finale (in modo antico): Allegro moderato — 3:51

Total Time — 76:56

A CONVERSATION WITH THE YING QUARTET ABOUT ANTON ARENSKY, HIS MUSIC, AND RECORDING

Anton Arensky lived at the same time as some of the most famous Russian composers of the 19th century. What do we know about his life?

Born in Novgorod in 1861, Arensky entered the St. Petersburg conservatory in 1879 where he studied with Rimsky-Korsakov. After he graduated in 1882, he joined the faculty of the Moscow Conservatory where he taught among others Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Gliere, and Gretchaninov. In 1895 he moved to St Petersburg where he served for several years as Director of the Imperial Choir. Even though he was an active composer, performer, and professor at such a significant time, there is surprisingly little biographical information that exists on Arensky.

What about Tchaikovsky?

Arensky and Tchaikovsky were friends and colleagues, and both men admired and respected the music of the other. In fact, of all the well-known Russian composers of the second half of the 19th century, most people agree that Tchaikovsky had the most significant musical influence on Arensky. There is a wonderful example of a musical tribute to Tchaikovsky on this recording-- the second movement of Arensky's Second Quartet is a glowing set of *Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky*. Later transcribed for string orchestra by Arensky, it has since become perhaps his most frequently performed work.

What led you to record Arensky's String Quartets and Piano Quintet?

Chamber music fans may be familiar with Arensky's beautiful and exciting Piano Trio No. 1. We feel that Arensky's chamber music writing shows off some of his greatest strengths as a composer. Throughout his trios, quartets and quintet, his music is consistently lyrical, expressive, rich, and often brilliant. Because of Arensky's close relationship with Tchaikovsky, we also felt that this would be an intriguing follow-up to our GRAMMY®-nominated record a few years ago, *Tchaikovsky: Three String Quartets And "Souvenir de Florence" Sextet In D Minor*.

When in his life did Arensky write these chamber music works?

The First Quartet dates from 1888, the Second Quartet from 1894—both from the years he was teaching at the Moscow Conservatory—and the Piano Quintet from 1900 when he was living in St. Petersburg. Unfortunately, Arensky died of tuberculosis in 1906 at the relatively young age of 44.

What do you consider some of the musical highlights of the Quartets and Quintet?

We have come to admire especially Arensky's ability to write a theme and variations movement. All three of these works include a theme and variations, and to us, these movements contain some of the most exquisite and entrancing moments of the record. In the First Quartet, the theme and variations appear as the Finale. Based on a compact eight-bar Russian theme, Arensky takes us on a whirlwind of virtuosic quartet textures, at times evoking Russian folk instruments, eventually breaking into a first violin cadenza that leads to a thrilling conclusion of ever increasing speed and dynamic. The *Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky* mentioned before is a much more expansive variation set that makes up the middle of the Second Quartet. Here, each variation is like a quartet miniature with alluring charm and character. We especially enjoy coming into the seventh variation as it evokes a similarly tender sentiment and atmosphere as the famous *Andante Cantabile* from Tchaikovsky's First Quartet. In the Piano Quintet, Arensky uses a theme and variations for his slow (second) movement, and along with his deep expressivity, creates magical transitions and connections that flow between the individual variations.



Anton Steponovich Arensky
1861-1906

What else is there to say about Arensky's First Quartet?

The rest of the First Quartet is a delightful, modestly scaled work that comes in the typical four-movement form and follows many of the conventions of the string quartet genre by this time. The

opening movement is a clear sonata-allegro form that opens with an exuberant, unified first theme that soon contrasts with a quiet, gentle and lilting second theme. The second movement is the slow movement, and Arensky writes an outright sentimental song for the quartet, made all the more affecting by the use of mutes on the instruments. An elegant minuet movement is third, perhaps deliberately kept simple to highlight the excitement of the brilliant theme and variations of the finale.

Arensky's Second Quartet is sometimes performed with two cellos in the quartet. Is this the same piece?

Arensky actually composed two versions of his Second String Quartet. One of them is scored for traditional string quartet, and the other is scored for violin, viola and 2 cellos. The musical material in both versions is identical, but by examining the different compositional solutions Arensky arrived at for each ensemble, one can appreciate all the more his imagination for color and the facility of his writing. In the two-cello version, Arensky takes full advantage of the additional depth and fullness possible with two bass instruments; the opening of the Quartet sounds especially rich like low voices chanting together. On the other hand, the paired violins of traditional quartet instrumentation allow many of the lyrical passages to soar and sing out in a higher range. The string quartet version of the Second Quartet is represented on this record, of course, and is in fact the less frequently performed version.

What are other features of the Second Quartet?

The Second Quartet is cast in three movements with the centerpiece being the substantial theme and variations. Arensky unifies the work around an opening motive that repeats the same notes in a steady rhythm. This is the dark, quietly pulsating music that sounds to us like chanting, and this distinctive texture reappears at key structural moments throughout the rest of the quartet. As the music builds, the way in which Arensky crafts layers and weaves lyrical lines around the opening material creates beautifully arching and cascading phrases. In the third movement of this quartet, a familiar Russian theme appears that is sometimes referred to as, "The Coronation of the Tsar." In this setting, it is appropriately grand and majestic and brings the work to a rousing conclusion. Composers such as Mussorgsky have included this same melody in other works, and Beethoven quotes it in the third movement of his second Razumovsky Quartet, Op. 59, No. 2.

What else can be said about the rarely heard Piano Quintet?

As you might expect, Arensky makes full use of the increased resonance, volume, and virtuosic possibilities of adding a piano to the string quartet. This is full-blooded, passionate, and singing music that perfectly captures the spirit of Russian music of the second half of the 19th century. We revel in the way Arensky writes uncomplicated sweeps of emotion that arrest a listener from the first notes of the Quintet to the reprise of the same music 25 minutes later that closes the work as warmly and triumphantly as it opens. In between, there are moments of great subtlety and detail, from the expressive range of the theme and variations slow movement to the bustling scherzo. We are pleased on this recording to be joined by our colleague and friend, Adam Neiman, who himself has recently made a recorded exploration of Arensky's solo piano works.

Can you tell me a little about what the recording process was like?

We were privileged to be among the very first groups to record for Sono Luminus in their newly renovated 95-year-old stone church. It was exciting to work with Dan Shores and Dan Merceruo as they learned about their new space and experimented with microphones and set-up to get just the right sound. When you're recording, sometimes an inch or a fraction of an inch means all the difference to ideal microphone placement. In one of the early sessions, in order to get exactly the soundstage they wanted, Dan and Dan ended up building a platform for Dave using pieces of wood and cushions from the old pews so that his cello was closer to the level of the violins and viola. Recording sessions also require a tremendous amount of extended concentration as you seek to illuminate and bring life to every musical detail. We could always rely on Ayano and Janet to keep us well stocked with a wide array of healthy and delicious snacks to maintain our energy. At the end of each day, we would invariably head off to celebrate with a great meal at the nearby Hunter's Head Tavern in Upperville, Virginia. We are like many other musicians we know—we think great music and good food belong together!





YING QUARTET

Ayano Ninomiya, violin

Janet Ying, violin

Phillip Ying, viola

David Ying, cello

The Ying Quartet occupies a position of unique prominence in the classical music world, combining brilliantly communicative performances with a fearlessly imaginative view of chamber music in today's world. Now in its second decade as a quartet, the Quartet has established itself as an ensemble of the highest musical qualifications in its tours across the United States and abroad. Their performances regularly take place in many of the world's most important concert halls, from Carnegie Hall to the Sydney Opera House. At the same time, the Quartet's belief that concert music can also be a meaningful part of everyday life has also drawn the foursome to perform in settings as diverse as the workplace, schools, juvenile prisons, and the White House. In fact, the Ying Quartet's constant quest to explore the creative possibilities of the string quartet has led it to an unusually diverse array of musical projects and interests.

The Ying Quartet's recordings reflect many of the group's wide-ranging musical interests and have generated consistent, enthusiastic acclaim. Their 2007 release of the three Tchaikovsky Quartets and the *Souvenir de Florence* (with James Dunham and Paul Katz) was nominated for a GRAMMY® Award in the Best Chamber Music Performance category. In addition, their much-heralded collaboration with the Turtle Island Quartet, "Four + 4," explored the common ground between the classic string quartet tradition and jazz and other American vernacular styles, and won a GRAMMY® Award in 2005. Their most recent release with the Billy Childs Chamber Jazz Ensemble, *Autumn in Moving Pictures* was nominated for a GRAMMY® in 2010. In addition, the Ying Quartet's *Dim Sum* features music by Chinese-American composers that merges the Western string quartet with the aural world of traditional Chinese music. The Quartet has also documented its noteworthy LifeMusic commissioning project in its recorded work. "The Ying Quartet play LifeMusic" was named Editor's

Choice by Gramophone magazine and is the first in a continuing series. The Ying Quartet is now pleased to be in a relationship with Sono Luminus with this release of Arensky's Quartets and Quintet and a release last year of the third record in their LifeMusic commissions.

In addition to appearing in conventional concert situations, the Ying Quartet is also known for its diverse and unusual performance projects. For several years the Quartet presented a series called "No Boundaries" at Symphony Space in New York City that sought to re-imagine the concert experience. Collaborations with actors, dancers, electronics, a host of non-classical musicians, a magician and even a Chinese noodle chef gave new and thoughtful context to a wide variety of both traditional and contemporary string quartet music. They have also worked with composer Tod Machover and the MIT Media lab in the use of Hypescore, an innovative musical composition software. Other musical partners range from pianists Menahem Pressler and Gilbert Kalish and cellist Paul Katz to folk musician Mike Seeger, jazz pianist Billy Childs, and the Turtle Island Quartet.

The Ying Quartet's ongoing LifeMusic commissioning project, created in response to their commitment to expanding the rich string quartet repertoire, has already achieved an impressive history. Supported by the Institute for American Music, the Quartet commissions both established and emerging composers to create music that reflects contemporary American life. Augusta Read Thomas, Michael Torke, Chen Yi, Kevin Puts, Paquito D'Rivera, Paul Moravec, Lowell Liebermann, Bernard Rands, Pierre Jalbert, Sebastian Currier, and Carter Pann are only some of the renowned composers and musicians who have written for LifeMusic.

As quartet-in-residence at the Eastman School of Music, the Ying Quartet maintains full time faculty positions in the String and Chamber Music Departments. One cornerstone of chamber music activity at Eastman is the noted Music for All program, in which all students have the opportunity to perform in community settings beyond the concert hall. From 2001-2008, the Ying Quartet has also been the Blodgett Artists-in-Residence at Harvard University.

The Ying Quartet first came to professional prominence in the early 1990s during their years as resident quartet of Jesup, Iowa, a farm town of 2000 people. Playing before audiences of six to six hundred in homes, schools, churches, and banks, the Quartet had its first opportunities to enable music and creative endeavor to become an integral part of community life. The Quartet considers its time in Jesup the foundation of its present musical life and goals. The residency, supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, was widely chronicled in the national media. Toward the end of the residency, the quartet and several of the townspeople were invited to Capitol Hill to testify before Congress on behalf of the NEA.

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Recording Engineer: Daniel Shores

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Mixing Engineer: Daniel Shores

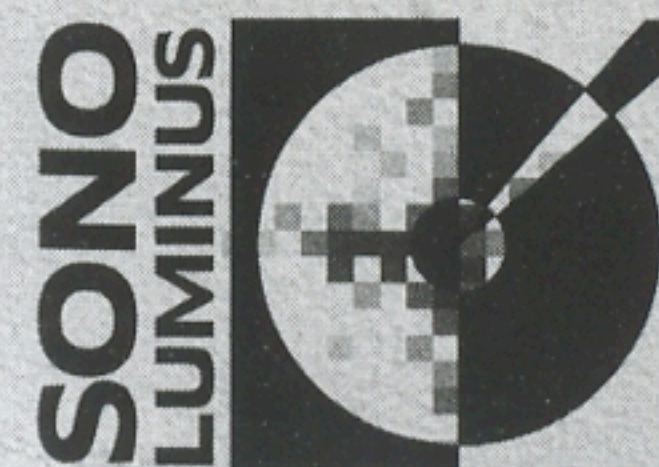
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