

# Tesla Quartet

Sunday, Nov. 10, 4 p.m.  
Monday, Nov. 11, 7:30 p.m.

## Program

### Variations on a Russian Theme

Theme. Adagio

Var.1. Allegretto

Var.2. Allegretto

Var.3. Andantino

Var.4. Allegro

Var.5. Adagio

Var.6. Allegretto

Var.7. Allegro

Var.8. Andante cantabile

Var.9. Fugato. Allegro

Var.10. Finale. Allegro

Nikolay Artsybushev (1858-1937)

Aleksandr Scriabin (1872-1915)

Aleksandr Glazunov (1865-1936)

Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)

Anatoly Lyadov (1855-1914)

Jāzeps Vītols (1863-1948)

Felix Blumenfeld (1863-1931)

Victor Ewald (1860-1935)

Aleksandr Winkler (1865-1935)

Nikolay Sokolov (1859-1922)

### String quaREtet

Pavel Karmanov  
(b. 1970)

### String Quartet No. 3 "Songlines"

Michael Ippolito

## — Intermission —

### String Quartet No. 1, Op. 11

I. Moderato e semplice

II. Andante cantabile

III. Scherzo. Allegro non tanto e con fuoco

IV. Finale. Allegro giusto

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky  
(1840-1893)

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### PLEASE NOTE

- Latecomers will be seated at the discretion of the house manager.
  - Photography and video recordings of any type are strictly prohibited during the performance.
  - Smoking is not permitted anywhere. CU Boulder is a smoke-free campus!
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# Program notes

By Marc Shulgold

## Variations on a Russian Theme

### Various composers

It took quite a while for Russian music to sound Russian. Entering the 1800s, chamber and orchestral works were still being imported from Western Europe—even Italian opera, sung in Italian. But things were changing, thanks to the efforts of Mikhail Glinka in the late 1830s and, later on, a “Mighty Handful” of self-taught Russian composers. That designated moniker playfully characterized the energy and commitment of Alexander Borodin, Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Modest Mussorgsky, César Cui and Mily Balakirev, who feverishly worked (and drank) together in a shared desire to create a Russian sound in the 1860s. But it was an unlikely ally who would serve as a much-needed magnet for all those who were dedicated to this new wave of national pride.

Mitrofan Balyayev (1836-1903) was a lumber magnate and decent violist who offered financial support and unbridled encouragement to young music-makers. In 1885, he had founded a Leipzig-based publishing company for Russian composers, and in the same year established a series of orchestral programs, the Russian Symphony Concerts. It was at one of those that an audience first heard Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Scheherazade.” Which brings us to 1891, when Balyayev began hosting an unbroken series of Friday evenings at his home, inviting any and all to provide and perform (or just listen to) newly written string quartets. Known as “Les Vendredis” (the Fridays, in French), these lively gatherings, which stretched into the wee hours of the morning, combined food, drink, conversation and music. Most of the composers of the new works were content to stick with styles and genres from the West: small scherzos, minuets, sarabandes, polkas, etc.

In 1898, this unique composing laboratory heard a work by 10 contributors—many soon famous, some who would remain obscure. Titled *Variations on a Russian Theme*, this 12-minute piece allowed individual treatments of a home-grown folk song, “I am so tired of the nights,” a young girl’s lament about waiting for her lover. The tune was contributed by Rimsky-Korsakov, who’d employed

it in his *Concert Fantasia on Two Russian Themes*, published in 1887. Among the Variations’ contributors unfamiliar to us: Nikolay Artsybushev, a successful lawyer; Victor Ewald, a civil engineer and a composer specializing in music for brass ensembles; Jāzeps Vītols, a respected Latvian composer; Felix Blumenfeld, a successful pianist and conductor who’d studied with Rimsky-Korsakov; Nikolay Sokolov, also a student of Rimsky’s, later a teacher of Shostakovich; and Alexander Winkler, who had traveled to Vienna and Paris for studies and later taught Prokofiev.

The Variations unfold pleasantly enough, each segment hinting at the particular style of its composer. Some of the contributions stuck to Western formulas, including a canon (Var. 5 by Anatoly Lyadov) and fugue (Var. 9 by Winkler). More important was the impetus for this music—the craving for a national sound. The excitement and experimentation of those vodka-filled nights at Balyayev’s home would lead to symphonic and chamber masterpieces by a group of Russians committed to breaking free from Western Europe’s chains and proclaiming to the world that the music of their homeland deserves to be heard. And boy, were they right.

## String quaREtet

### Pavel Karmanov (b. 1970)

Born in Bratsk in south-central Russia in 1970, composer and rock musician Pavel Karmanov studied at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow and was accepted in the Moscow Composers Union in 1996. For 17 years, he was a member of the eclectic Russian avant-garde band *Vezhliy Otkaz* (Polite Refusal). *String quaREtet*—no, that’s not a misprint—dates from 1997. The odd spelling in the title comes from the almost continual presence of variations on the notes of the D-major chord (D representing the second degree of the Do-Re-Mi scale).

This is a single-movement work that unfolds through a series of organically linked episodes. It begins with a repeating three-note pulse played in pizzicato and ends with the emphatic return of that 1-2-3, 1-2-3 motif. In between are engaging moments, including a Russian-flavored folk tune, a waltz-like scene featuring descending and ascending chord patterns, and passages of *pizzicato* and softly uttered harmonics. Karmanov is here influenced by the churning

drive of Steve Reich’s “Different Trains” and the repeated-chord explorations heard in minimalist composer Terry Riley’s ground-breaking “In C.” Equally intriguing are the titles chosen by Karmanov for his other works. Among them: “The City I Love and Hate” for piano sextet, “Different... Rains” (a clue to Reich’s influence), “Second Snow at the Stadium” for viola and piano, and “Twice” for “two chamber orchestras in different tunings.”

## String Quartet No. 3 “Songlines”

Michael Ippolito

The music of 34-year-old Texas-based composer Michael Ippolito has been performed by numerous American orchestras and chamber ensembles. His works are inspired by the sounds, stories and colors of poems, paintings, literature, world cultures and the centuries-old traditions of improvisation. Those last two qualities figure prominently in his third string quartet, “Songlines,” composed in 2012 and honored as this year’s winner of Tesla’s Call for Scores competition.

In a single 10-minute movement, the work ebbs and flows with a spontaneous feel through periods of quiet introspection to explosions of unison anguish. According to the composer, the piece emerged from his reading of “Songlines,” the 1986 book by British travel writer and storyteller Bruce Chatwin (1940-89). The title refers to the routes taken by the spirit ancestors of Australian Aborigines. Those paths, known as “Dreaming Tracks” or “Songlines,” were said to be traveled by the ancient spirits in their acts of creation, “giving each mountain, river, plant and animal its name as they traversed the earth and sky,” the composer writes. Rather than using maps, the spirit ancestors were guided by recited songs. Appropriately then, the music in this quartet carves its own journey, each episode subtly linked to the opening melody. “As in the Songlines of the Aborigines,” the composer notes, “this (opening) song can be thought of as a map, guiding the music as it traverses different landscapes.”

## String Quartet No. 1, Op. 11

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

The romantic image of composers living in a dreamy world of artistic inspiration, fueled by melodic ideas from the cosmos, has little connection to the banal demands of real life. For Tchaikovsky, real life was very hard. It doesn’t

seem fair that, in the winter of 1870-71, he occasionally went without food—but friends reported that such was the case. This was despite the fact he’d recently received a pay raise as a faculty member at the Moscow Conservatory, and had accumulated a handful of private students. It just wasn’t enough. To improve his financial situation (which the composer described as “utterly chaotic”), conservatory director Nicolai Rubinstein suggested a profitable all-Tchaikovsky concert. Since the cost of hiring an orchestra for the occasion would cut into the evening’s take, the agenda would be a sampling of his chamber works. Tchaikovsky knew that his listeners might also expect something fresh. How about a string quartet? Sure—why not?

Those were the decidedly unromantic factors that led to one of the world’s most beloved chamber works. Written within a few weeks of the March 28 concert in 1871, Op. 11 instantly connected with listeners. No surprise that they took particular pleasure from the second movement, the *Andante cantabile*. It happens so often with instantly popular pieces (think of Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in C-sharp minor): Smitten audiences constantly demanding to hear that music again—often to the private dismay of the composer. In this case, this lovely, melancholy melody was soon transcribed for all manner of instruments (at least nine re-castings).

Ironically, the tune wasn’t even original. The source of the second movement’s theme was a Ukrainian folk song, heard by Tchaikovsky during a visit to his sister’s estate in 1869. The lyrics began, “Vanya sat on a couch and smoked a pipe of tobacco.” It didn’t take long for the quartet, with its hit tune, to follow the composer wherever he went—not that he minded. He knew right from the start he’d written something special. In 1876, he made an entry in his diary, recalling with pride the tearful reaction from Leo Tolstoy upon hearing the *Andante* at a concert. Its touching opening in the major briefly falls into the minor with a short phrase reminiscent of “The Volga Boatman,” before it returns to the major. Simple, but unforgettable.

That said, Op. 11 does offer numerous other pleasures, starting with the opening movement’s hymn, played in rich, six-part harmonies, whose sonority inspired the quartet’s nickname, “The

Accordion.” The final two movements bubble with inspiring melodies, notably the hurdy-gurdy drone in the dance-like *Scherzo* and the folksy, Slavic colors of the energetic finale. Despite the success of String Quartet No. 1, Tchaikovsky would complete only two more. The world of the orchestra was beckoning, after all.

## About the performers

*“Though free to think and act, we are held together, like the stars in the firmament, with ties inseparable. These ties cannot be seen, but we can feel them.”* —Nikola Tesla

These words are the inspiration behind the Tesla Quartet’s vision. For the quartet, music is the conduit for this incredible, binding force, these “ties inseparable.” Through performance, teaching and outreach, the Tesla Quartet strives to tap into this palpable feeling and create meaningful connections with their audiences.

Praised for their “superb capacity to find the inner heart of everything they play, regardless of era, style, or technical demand” (The International Review of Music), the members of the Tesla Quartet bring refinement and prowess to both new and established repertoire. Dubbed “technically superb” by The Strad, the Tesla Quartet has won top prizes in numerous international competitions, most recently taking second prize as well as the Haydn Prize and Canadian Commission Prize at the 12th Banff International String Quartet Competition. In 2018, the Tesla Quartet released its debut album of Haydn, Ravel and Stravinsky quartets on the Orchid Classics label to critical acclaim. BBC Music Magazine awarded the disc a double 5-star rating and featured it as the “Chamber Choice” for the month of December. Gramophone praised the quartet for its “tautness of focus and refinement of detail.” Its second disc on the Orchid Classics label, a collaboration with clarinetist Alexander Fiterstein featuring quintets by Mozart, Finzi, John Corigliano and Carolina Heredia, will be released in October 2019. Now entering its second decade, the quartet performs regularly across North America and Europe, with recent highlights including its debut at New York’s Lincoln Center, a return to London’s Wigmore Hall and performances at Stanford University’s Bing Concert Hall as winners of the prestigious John Lad Prize. Other

recent international engagements include tours of Brazil, China and South Korea. Notable festival appearances include the Banff Centre International String Quartet Festival; the Joseph Haydn String Quartet Festival at the Esterházy Palace in Fertőd, Hungary; the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Festival in Germany; and the Festival Sesc de Música de Câmara in São Paulo, Brazil. Having served as the Marjorie Young Bell String Quartet-in-Residence at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, Canada from 2016-17, the Tesla Quartet also recently completed a four-year community residency in Hickory, North Carolina, that included performances and workshops at local colleges, universities and in the public school system, as well as a dedicated chamber music series.

The Tesla Quartet was formed at The Juilliard School in 2008 and quickly established itself as one of the most promising young ensembles in New York, winning second prize at the J.C. Arriaga Chamber Music Competition only a few months after its inception. From 2009 to 2012, the quartet held a fellowship as the Graduate String Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Colorado Boulder, where members studied with the world-renowned Takács Quartet. They have also held fellowships at the Aspen Music Festival’s Center for Advanced Quartet Studies, the Britten-Pears Young Artist Program and the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival.

The Tesla Quartet is Ross Snyder (violin), Michelle Lie (violin), Edwin Kaplan (viola) and Serafim Smigelskiy (cello). Learn more at [teslaquartet.com](http://teslaquartet.com)