

Le Grand Tango for Cello and Piano

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA

Born March 11, 1921, Mar de Plata, Argentina

Died July 4, 1992, Buenos Aires

As a young man, Astor Piazzolla learned to play the bandoneon, the Argentinian accordion-like instrument that uses buttons rather than a keyboard, and he became a virtuoso on it. But his musical path was not at first clear: he gave concerts, made a film soundtrack, and created his own bands before a desire for wider expression drove him to the study of classical music. He received a grant to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, and it was that great teacher who advised him to follow his passion for the Argentinian tango as the source for his own music.

Piazzolla returned to Argentina and gradually evolved his own style, one that combines the tango, jazz and classical music. In his hands, the tango—which had deteriorated into a soft, popular form—was revitalized. Piazzolla transformed this old Argentinian dance into music capable of a variety of expression and fusing sharply-contrasted moods: his tangos are by turn fiery, melancholy, passionate, tense, violent, lyric and always driven by an endless supply of rhythmic energy.

Le Grand Tango, which Piazzolla wrote specifically for cello and piano, is one of his few chamber works and one of his few pieces of “classical” music, though it too is driven by the varying moods and vitality of the tango. This is a big piece, and it has become a great favorite of cellists—there are a number of recordings available. *Le Grand Tango* is episodic in structure: moments of lulling languor alternate with impassioned sequences full of energy, and finally this *Tango* rushes to its fiery close on a great upward glissando.

Five Pieces for Two Violins and Piano

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg

Died August 9, 1975, Moscow

We think of Shostakovich as one of the most deadly serious composers who ever

lived, but he also wrote a great deal of “light” music—ballets, film scores, waltzes, and even an operetta: *Moscow, Cheryomushki*, about the housing shortage in Moscow in the late 1950s. In the catalog of Shostakovich’s works are several sets of short pieces for two violins and piano, and these charming pieces are an example of his lighter music, even if he did not actually compose these duets: they are arrangements for two violins and piano of themes from works he had composed over a period of twenty years. The *Five Pieces* were probably arranged by Shostakovich’s good friend Lev Atovmian (1901-1973), a composer and administrator Shostakovich trusted to make the arrangements of his ballet and film scores. The music itself, however, is pure Shostakovich, here at his most melodic and appealing.

A note in the published score lists the sources of these five movements. The *Prelude* is from the music for the film *The Gadfly*, which Shostakovich composed in 1955. The *Gavotte* was originally the second movement of his *Third Ballet Suite*, composed in 1952; this movement had in turn been derived by Shostakovich from his incidental music to the play *The Human Comedy* (1937). The *Elegy* is also from the *Third Ballet Suite*, where it comprises the fourth movement; it was originally composed in 1934-35 as part of the music for the ballet *The Limpid Stream*. The *Waltz* comes from Shostakovich’s music for the cartoon *The Tale of the Priest and His Servant Balda* (which was one of the earliest movies with sound—it dates from 1933-34). The concluding *Polka* was derived from the *First Ballet Suite*, though it too was originally part of the ballet *The Limpid Stream*.

Quartet in C Minor for Piano and Strings, Opus 15

GABRIEL FAURÉ

Born May 13, 1845, Pamiers, France

Died November 4, 1924, Paris

Fauré wrote the *Piano Quartet in C Minor*, one of the masterpieces of his early period, between 1876 and 1879, when he was in his early thirties. Despite the work’s success, the composer was dissatisfied with the final movement and rewrote it in 1883, making it—as he said—“new from top to toe.” In its completed form, the quartet is an extraordinary achievement, both for the range of its expression and for Fauré’s imaginative craftsmanship.

The *Allegro molto moderato* opens with a sturdy theme in the strings, with off-the-beat accompaniment from the piano. The vigor and drive of this opening continue throughout the movement, and its rhythm—heard almost continuously in the piano—unifies the entire movement; the gentle second subject, announced by the viola and marked *espressivo*, gracefully sets off the energy of the opening episode. In the development Fauré brings back the opening theme, now slowed down and played gently, and the wonder is that a theme which moments before had moved forward martially can be so transformed and made to sing lyrically. In the coda, this opening theme recurs quietly in the viola as the movement draws to its calm conclusion.

Fauré reverses the expected order of the interior movements and places the scherzo, marked *Allegro vivo*, second. The piano's opening idea rocks along cheerfully above pizzicato accompaniment in the strings; alert listeners will recognize it as a variant of the *espressivo* second theme of the first movement. The scherzo reaches a cadence, and then in another pleasing surprise Fauré replaces the expected trio section with a graceful chorale for muted strings.

Because of their many similarities, the final two movements should be considered together. The *Adagio* is built on the brief dotted phrase first heard in the cello: this rising figure will unify the final two movements. The lyric second episode, introduced by the violin, contains the same rhythm, and the opening theme of the finale—*Allegro molto*—rushes along on this same rising, dotted theme-shape. The energetic finale seems to be in motion throughout. Even when the viola sings the second theme, marked *dolce e espressivo*, this graceful melody assumes the rising shape that characterizes the final two movements. It is a measure of Fauré's achievement in this music that so simple a figure can be made to yield such a range of expression. Buoyed along by its inexhaustible energy, the quartet rushes to its close.

Given this music's popularity today, it comes as a surprise to learn that Fauré had a great deal of trouble getting it published. No publisher wanted to take a chance on a little-known composer. The quartet was rejected by two of France's major publishing firms and was accepted by a third only on the condition that composer surrender all his rights to it. Desperate to have his work published, Fauré could do nothing but accept those terms. He never made a penny on this music.

