

TCHAIKOVSKY SOUVENIR D'UN LIEU CHER

Violinist **Jennifer Koh** explores how imagination and a flexible technique can help to bring out varied colours and a feeling of dance in these three short works



Tchaikovsky Souvenir d'un lieu cher for violin and piano, op.42. Urtext edition, paperbound with marked and unmarked string parts. Ed. Alexander Komarov. Pf fingering Klaus Schilde. Vn fingering and bowing Ingolf Turban. Order no.HN1275, ISMN 979-0-2018-1275-5. €14.00. Printed with permission of G. Henle Verlag, Munich © 2019

There are some pieces that stay with you for life, and others that you probably never want to play again. I have always had the softest place in my heart for Tchaikovsky, and I've felt connected to his music since I was a child. I learnt all of his violin pieces before I was 15 and, of course, when I was 18 I was the top medallist in the 1994 Tchaikovsky Competition, which was an important moment in my life. It was there, in the final round, that I met conductor Alexander Vedernikov, and it was with him that I recorded Tchaikovsky's complete works for violin and orchestra – including Glazunov's orchestrated version of *Souvenir d'un lieu cher* – twenty years later. There was something beautiful about returning to Tchaikovsky with him after so much time, as a way to mark our musical journey together. He passed away last year, from Covid-19.

Approach to slides and fingerings

Tchaikovsky's music really asks you, as a violinist, to utilise every tool at your disposal. Every thematic repetition opens an entire world for your imagination, inviting you to say something unique. It is like a metaphor for life: every moment you live changes how you approach something when you return to it. It's just a matter of listening, and being present and aware of how to make musical decisions to reflect that.

A good technique will give you absolute freedom to make these expressive choices in the moment, and usually I don't write any fingerings or bowings into my scores. Finding five fingerings for every phrase, and practising with musical intention all the time, can help anyone to develop that flexibility. You can also experiment with slides at different speeds, with crescendos and diminuendos, with vibrato and different bowings, to show breath or breathlessness, or to place a heartbeat in a certain moment. That variety and the individual choices that we take are what make performances special. Don't just blindly follow.



THE SOLOIST

NAME

JENNIFER KOH

NATIONALITY

KOREAN-AMERICAN

STUDIED WITH

JAIME LAREDO, FELIX GALIMIR

RECORDS FOR

CEDILLE RECORDS

'A good technique will give you absolute freedom to make these expressive choices in the moment'



Jennifer Koh's recording of Tchaikovsky's complete works for violin and orchestra is available on Cedille Records

JÜRGEN FRANK

Piece no.1: Méditation

The first eight bars of the violin line in *Méditation* repeat throughout the piece, and the choices of how to play them are numerous. You could stay on the G string, or change within the first two bars; you could slide within the first two notes, change the timing of a shift, or slow down your vibrato. Use your different tools at different times, to build up the colours as you go.

The material in bar 40 repeats from bar 47 with the same dynamic, but this time the phrase is longer, going up to *fortissimo*, so I like to give it a darker colour on the G and D strings through bars 48–50, and then to climb high up the A string in bar 51. I don't move to the E string until I'm near the *fortissimo* range for the last few notes of bar 52.

Think about what kind of journey you want to create for the faster notes in bars 42, 50 and 52–54: where do you want to brighten the sound by going on to the E string? Do you want to start on the D string, or even the G string? I like these upward gestures to have a balletic but Mozartian elegance and style, like the uplift of a dancer jumping.

Also consider how the *fortissimo* for the run in bar 53 compares to the *fortissimos* in bars 101, 136 and 154. Look at the entire piece to figure out what the climaxes and calmest moments are, and build up structurally from there. Which one do you want to play the most, and how are you going to build into it? *Fortissimo* only means 'strong', and that strength doesn't necessarily have to come from volume.

In bar 72 there's a return to a slightly darker timbre of sound, before the build-up from bar 75 to the high A in bar 82. I delay going on to the E string for as long as possible in bars 75–80, but in bars 81–82 I use it much earlier for more contrast and brilliance. The speed of vibrato that you choose is incredibly important to build intensity here.

I see bar 103 as dynamically the smallest and quietest point in the piece, in contrast to the opening. It's a fragile return to what came before, as though we're coming home, but now 'home' is something different from what it was two years ago, before the pandemic.

I still play it on the G string but without as many slides, to show more fragility. When I do slide, I do it lightly and balletically, on the old finger instead of the new one, for a simpler sound.

The crescendo from bar 177 is only poco and it's also high on the E string, so there's no danger of being covered or muffled. You can play it as quietly as you want, just increasing in intensity by using a narrower, faster vibrato in the left hand, rather than increasing in dynamic using the bow.

Piece no.2: Scherzo

The Scherzo is a simple, balletic piece that should not be virtuosically fast or tempo-driven, but guided by a dance-like feel. It's like a Mendelssohn scherzo and can be played with light, short bows, on-the-string accents and upward gestures that feel like a dancer being lifted into the air.

Don't play beat by beat, or even bar by bar, or you'll make your audience seasick

Years ago Vedernikov gave me some old Russian editions of *Souvenir d'un lieu cher*, with the Scherzo's chords all marked pizzicato. Tchaikovsky utilises pizzicato not only in the Violin Concerto but also throughout his symphonies, so I feel that he wouldn't mind that I have also added them in here!

In the Scherzo in general, but particularly in the middle section from bar 95, don't play beat by beat, or even bar by bar, or you'll make your audience seasick. Instead aim for a minimum of a twelve-bar phrase. Within that you can cross over the strings if you want to, and explore a million other options, but always remember the simplicity of the music, and keep it floating, light and dance like, without rubato. You can't

suddenly ask a dancer to stop time and suspend themselves in mid-air.

Piece no.3: Mélodie

In terms of fingerings I play the *Mélodie* more simply than the *Méditation*, with a less dense sound. I also aim for a more graceful, floating feel, with less intense *fortes*, lighter slides and a vibrato closer to the middle section of the Scherzo. It is still dramatic music, but simplicity can be dramatic without any need to play into the string with tons of vibrato all the time.

Any rubato in this piece should be very subtle: if you use it in bars 9, 18 and 58, you will have to make up any lost time within the same beat to avoid losing tension as you move into the faster sextuplets. Rubato at the beginning of the *grazioso* of bar 19, or for the repeat of that material in bars 27 or 31, should again be subtle, graceful and also different each time. Always concentrate on 'poco', even for the *molto ritenuto* in bars 48–49, which shouldn't be drama-laden. The pause in bar 70 can be balletic, like a slightly suspended lift.

Fitting the pieces together

The three pieces of *Souvenir d'un lieu cher* are interesting because they are almost the opposite of concerto form during Tchaikovsky's time. *Méditation* is a longer piece, just as a concerto might start with a longer movement, full of drama, repetition, contrast and bigger gestures. Then the Scherzo is more like a concerto's last movement, and the simple, innocent *Mélodie* could belong somewhere in the middle. Structurally it's closer to a string quartet or a sonata.

After the dramatic, obsessive first movement, it's as though we're happily blowing in the wind, and it's through contrast with the simplicity of the third piece that the other two really shine. After all of that drama and angst, you can finish with simple joy – just as Bach finished 17 years of work on his Sonatas and Partitas with the E major Partita, which is the shortest, simplest and happiest of them all. ▸

INTERVIEW BY PAULINE HARDING