Kabalevsky

String Quartets Nos. 1 & 2

Glazunov Quartet

alto

Dmitri Borisovich Kabalevsky (1904–87)

String Quartet No. 1, Op. 8

1	I. Andante – Allegro moderato	9:48
2	II. Vivace	4:51
3	III. Andantino	6:44
4	IV. Allegro assai	8:43

String Quartet No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 44

5	I. Allegro molto ed energico	8:41
6	II.Andante non troppo	9:31
7	III. Scherzando leggiero (Quasi Presto)	5:51
8	IV. Adagio molto sostenuto (attaca) – V. L'Istesso tempo– Vivace giocoso	12:29

Total duration – 66:51

The Glazunov Quartet

Elena Kharitonova & Natalia Likhopoi, violins
Inna Peskova, viola • Elena Erofeyeva, cello

Dmitri Kabalevsky, like his close contemporaries Shostakovich and Shebalin, belongs to the first generation of Russian composers who can be considered exclusively as products of the Soviet era. Whilst Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Stravinsky indisputably occupy the front rank in the history of Russian 20th century music (though of the three, only Shostakovich never left Russia, and consequently experienced in full measure the turmoil of post-revolutionary 'reconstruction'), Kabalevsky was one of the more important representatives of the second rank.

Kabalevsky was born in St. Petersburg in 1904, and his background could be described as intellectual but not especially artistic. His father, a mathematician, developed in the young Dmitri an 'interest in literature, painting, geography, the natural sciences and technology'; to his mother Kabalevsky clearly owed his early love for music, and when he was seven years old, she arranged his first music lessons. In 1918 the family moved to Moscow and Dmitri and his sister began lessons at the then private music school of Viktor Selivanov (later the Scriabin Music Institute). Having developed a good piano technique and a flair for improvisation, he entered the Moscow Conservatoire in the autumn of 1925 and composed his *Three Preludes,* Op.1.

The five years which Kabalevsky spent at the conservatoire were a major factor in his development, for he came into contact with several fellow students who were later to play an important role in Soviet musical life: the pianist Lev Oborin, and the future members of the Beethoven Quartet. He studied simultaneously in two faculties: piano with Alexander Goldenweiser, and composition with Georgy Catoire. When Catoire died in 1926, many of his former pupils transferred to Myaskovsky's class. Shebalin later called this class 'Myaskovsky's School', for between 1925 and 1940 thirty- four composers graduated under his guidance. Undoubtedly, in these formative years Myaskovsky became for Kabalevsky an enduring influence, especially as regards the symphony. Some years later Kabalevsky recalled that in February 1924 he attended a concert at the Theatre of the Revolution and heard the *Fourth* and *Seventh Symphonies* of Myaskovsky — apparently the first symphonies he encountered by a Soviet composer — and he wrote: 'From that day on Myaskovsky enthralled me, as he enthralled many a young composer, who had started at that time on an independent artistic career.' In later years Kabalevsky made several piano arrangements of his teacher's symphonies and remained on good terms with him until the latter's death in 1950.

During the mid-1920s and early 1930s the clash between ASM (Association of Contemporary Music) and RAPM (Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians) was at its height. Founded in 1923 at the State Academy of Art Sciences, ASM soon began issuing its own journal, *Sovremennaia Muzyka,* to which both Shebalin and Kabalevsky contributed. The adherents of 'serious' music were viciously attacked by RAPM as perpetuators of bourgeois tastes, Myaskovsky and Prokofiev *(in absentia)* being singled out in particular for writing 'for the audience of the Small Hall', and ignoring the demands of the broad masses with their patriotic songs and revolutionary choruses.

In 1928, amid the clamour of this debate, Kabalevsky composed his ***First String quartet***, premiered on 3rd April the following year in the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire by the future members of the Beethoven Quartet. There is much in the lyricism of this quartet which recalls Myaskovsky, and perhaps it is significant that it was Myaskovsky who edited it for publication by Universal Edition. It was not until the early 1930s, however, that Myaskovksy himself turned seriously to the genre, and more likely, Kabalevsky was persuaded to try his hand at quartet writing by the appearance of two works by his contemporaries — Shebalin and Mosolov. The first quartets of these composers (both in the key of A minor) appeared in 1923 and 1926 respectively. In particular, the quartet by Shebalin, who went on to compose some nine quartets, was also premiered by the Beethoven Quartet. This famous ensemble, in fact, premiered most of the quartets by Shostakovich, Myaskovsky, Shebalin and both essays by Kabalevsky in the medium, and therefore occupies an historic and quite unique position in the history of Soviet chamber music.

Although Kabalevsky's quartet is an early work one immediately senses his complete confidence in handling the form. It is not devoid of a certain youthful striving for effect in the conscious use of cross-rhythms and harmonics, but none of that spoils the undoubted freshness of the work. The quartet follows the traditional four-movement design and is cyclic in form. The opening modal introduction, with its characteristic falling fourths in the first violin, transforms itself into the first subject *(Allegro moderato)* — a wistful, haunting melody, in which not only the voice of Myaskovsky but also that of Ravel show through. It is the evocative lyricism of this melody which sets its seal on one aspect of the quartet.

The scherzo introduces the other facet of the work: a rhythmic ebullience grounded in Russian folk-song. The *spiccato* semiquavers of first and second violins form an energetic accompaniment to a folk-song melody recalling the bustling Shrovetide fair of Stravinsky's *Petrushka.* The countersubject *(Tranquillo, ma in tempo vivace),* however, again harks back to the quiet lyricism of the first movement. The slow movement is reflective and subdued, its clear melodic shape masked by alternating bars of 3/4 and 4/4. The principal theme of the finale is again lively with clear folk-song overtones. The reflective side of the quartet is never far away, however, and constantly threatens to gain the upper hand. One by one the main themes from each movement of the quartet make their re-appearance like the apotheosis to a drama. First comes the folk-song from the second movement, then the slow movement *Andantino,* then the first subject of the first movement. Finally the finale's folk-song melody and the quartet's introduction are married together in a contrapuntal union intended, perhaps, to signify a compromise between the folk-song aspirations of RAPM and the aesthetic tastes of their musical rivals.

Some seventeen years separate the **First *Quartet*** from its successor. A work of more obvious dramatic intensity, the **Second *Quartet*** dates from the war years and already shows to what extent Kabalevsky had matured as a composer. He had already been appointed a professor of the Moscow Conservatoire in 1939 and the following years proved to be a period of heightened creative activity. By the time that the quartet was completed in 1945, he had already written his first three symphonies, two piano concertos, the operas *Coias Breugnon* and *In the Flames (Before Moscow),* and an impressive corpus of piano music, including the *Twenty-Four Preludes,* Op.38 (ALC 1084). The *Second Quartet* was the most important work Kabalevsky wrote after this set of preludes and was contemporaneous with the *Second Piano Sonata.* It was premiered on New Year's Day 1946 in the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire, and was shortly afterwards awarded a Stalin Prize (later known as a USSR State prize). The quartet, unlike its predecessor, is in five movements, the last two being linked without a break.

The first movement is an almost classically structured sonata *Allegro;* its opening chords, with their alternation between G minor and major, distinctly recalling Schubert. The impelling drive and the sweep of Kabalevsky's 6/4 answering phrase, however, set the work's origins firmly in Russia and are entirely in keeping with the character of a wartime composition. Its lyrical moments are almost overwhelmed by the embattled development section *(Allegro feroce)* — angular, aggressive and interrupted by eerie *tremolando* semiquavers *(sui ponticello).* The slow movement begins as a gentle serenade on the cello with the lightest of *pizzicato* accompaniments, but soon the first violin takes up a new variant of the theme which grows steadily in contrapuntal complexity and in emotional intensity. The scherzo is a fantastic and relentless dance, in which the disquieting rhythms and continual use of muted strings give a kind of ghostly, nocturnal effect. The *Adagio* is solemn and bleak — perhaps a tribute to the victims of the war — and like the finale of Shostakovich's *Ninth Symphony,* leads without a break into unbridled merriment. In the case of Kabalevsky's quartet, the first violin launches into a theme *(Vivace giocoso)* of infectious humour. There are some brief recollections of more serious matters, including a reference to the violin theme from the second movement, but it is primarily the humour which wins the day in a series of highly inventive variations. At one point the two violins are pitted together in a wonderfully folksy duet with stomping *pizzicato* from viola and cello, and even the ominous G minor opening figure of the quartet is transformed as the movement reaches its final exhilarating chords.

On 5th March 1987 a new string quartet gave its fi rst concert. The musicians had met at professor Andrei Shishlov's class at the Moscow Conservatoire, and at fi rst called themselves the *Moscow Conservatoire Quartet*. They went on to win the Voronezh All-Union Competition.

Later the ensemble changed its name to the **Glazunov Quartet,** and alongside the masterpieces of this composer, the Quartet's repertoire included many of the Russian classics such as the quartets by Tchaikovsky, Borodin and Shostakovich. The Quartet also played compositions by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Ravel and Debussy.

The Glazunov Quartet gave highly successful performances in many of Europe's prestigious concert halls, which have been very favourably reviewed. They also made radio recordings in Germany, Athens and the Russian regions. The Quartet seems to have folded in the late 1990's.

Alto ALC1708 5055354417085

Recorded for Olympia in August 1993 at Studio 5 of the Moscow Radio
Engineer: **Elena Dneprovskaya**.
Mastered for alto by **Paul Arden-Taylor**
2026 digital edition produced by **Gene Gaudette**, **Urlicht AudioVisual**

Cover image: **Ivan Tvorizhnikov** (1848-1919), "At Sunset"
Design produced by **AliCat Design**

Reissue producer: **Robin Vaughan**

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