



Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston
Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2025-2026 chamber music season **chamber series 4: To Wake the Dead**

Saturday, April 11, 2026, 7:30 PM at First Church in Boston
Sunday, April 12, 2026, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

Program:

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *Souvenir d'un lieu cher* for violin & piano, Op. 42

Herbert Howells, *Rhapsodic Quintet* for clarinet & strings, Op. 31 (1919)

Stephen Albert, *To Wake the Dead: Six Sentimental Songs after Finnegans Wake* for soprano & ensemble

Louis Vierne, *Piano Quintet in c minor*, Op. 42 (1917)

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) was by far the most significant Russian composer before the 20th century, a complete artist who assimilated his national style with the symphonic breadth of the western European masters and a level of deep expressiveness comparable to Beethoven. He was second son of a mining engineer who was forced to move his large family repeatedly, eventually settling in the remote town of Alapayevsk. Pyotr was a precocious child who initially displayed, in addition to musical talent, a tremendous sensitivity to language, reading and writing in French and German as well as Russian. His lifelong emotional fragility was displayed upon being sent away to the School of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg at the age of twelve; as the story he goes, he had to be pulled out of his mother's arms and tried to block the carriage that took her away. Her death only two years later was apparently so traumatic for him that he fell into a temporary insanity.

Upon graduation in 1859, Tchaikovsky went to work at the Ministry of Justice for a few years, but the call to music came soon. He began taking classes at the newly formed St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1861 and graduated in 1865, studying primarily with Anton Rubinstein. It remains somewhat mysterious how the talented but relatively unschooled young man emerged in only four years as a highly skilled, essentially fully formed professional composer. He was hired right away by Anton's brother Nikolay Rubinstein to teach at the Moscow Conservatory. The friendship between the two men proved to be important to the young composer; Nikolay championed his work and introduced him to the highest echelons of Russian culture, but he also occasionally subjected Tchaikovsky to cutting criticism.

1877 was a particularly significant year in Tchaikovsky's life. In July, despite a clearly

established homosexual orientation, he married Antonina Ivanovna Milkyukova. The reasons for the marriage remain unclear and were probably too complex and varied to explain simply, and they lived apart after the first two months. Divorce was considered, but they never went through with the legal proceeding. Later in the year he began a fourteen-year association with Nadezhda von Meck, an extremely wealthy widow who loved music in general and Tchaikovsky's in particular. She sent him a regular allowance, and they carried on an extensive written correspondence but, strangely enough, agreed never to meet in person.

Souvenir d'un lieu cher (Memory of a dear place) for violin and piano was composed in the spring and summer of 1878, and the "dear place" referred to was Brailov, von Meck's country estate, where Tchaikovsky had fled in the aftermath of his tumultuous marriage. "I am living in a palace in the literal sense of the word...", he wrote during this visit; "the furnishings are luxurious, apart from polite and affectionately obliging servants I see no human figures and no one comes to make my acquaintance, the strolls are charming, and at my disposal I have carriages, horses, a library, several pianos, a harmonium, a mass of sheet music – in a word, what could be better?" To his beloved patroness he wrote: "I have left my pieces with Marcel to give to you... In my opinion, the first of these is the best, but it gave me the most trouble; it is called *Méditation* and is to be played a tempo Andante. The second is a very brisk scherzo, and the third – *Chant sans paroles*. On giving these pieces to Marcel, I experienced an indescribable melancholy, which stayed with me even as I sat down to write this; until I saw the lilacs still in full bloom, the grass still long, and the roses only just starting to blossom!"

As Tchaikovsky's fame increased over the next several years he lived a nomadic existence, craving freedom and traveling extensively throughout Europe and within Russia. He ended his association with the Moscow Conservatory and weathered the inevitable cooling of relations with Nikolay Rubinstein. Eventually, in 1885, tired of having no refuge to call his own, he settled in the town of Klin, about 55 miles from Moscow. He cautiously took on a leadership role in Moscow's musical society, becoming director of the Russian Musical Society and serving in various capacities at the Conservatory. Recognition by the tsar led to a lifetime pension and the award of the Order of Vladimir, Fourth Class.

Illness in 1886 and 1887 was as damaging to his psyche as to his body, and as he reached the height of his international fame Tchaikovsky became increasingly aware of his legacy. By the last year of his life, he was becoming ever more self-conscious about impending mortality, and the Sixth Symphony is widely considered to be an intentional swan song. He died under mysterious circumstances, possibly from cholera but also possibly by suicide upon facing the prospect of being publicly "outed" for making advances on a young nobleman. Of course, we'll never know for sure.

Herbert Howells (1892-1983) was born to a modest family in Gloucestershire, England, and his early musical talent led to an education first at the Gloucester Cathedral and then a scholarship to the Royal College of Music. His primary teacher at the RCM was Charles Villiers Stanford, who described Howells as his "son in music," conducted the premiere of his first Piano Concerto in 1913, and promoted his career actively. In 1916 Howells won an award from the Carnegie Trust for his Piano Quartet. Ill health from 1917 to 1920 forced Howells to give up a position as organist at the Salisbury Cathedral, but the forced convalescence proved to be a very productive

time creatively; he composed most of his chamber and orchestral music during these years. The Carnegie Trust also continued to support his career, employing him as an assistant to the editor of Tudor works for publication and arranging for a teaching appointment at the Royal College, a position he held into his 80s.

While Howells' early successes did not lead to the acclaim expected for him in the concert hall, he established and maintained an important reputation as a music educator and as one of Britain's leading church musicians, his compositions from the 1940s onward defining 20th century British cathedral music in much the same way his teacher Stanford defined it for the 19th century. From 1936 to 1962 he was director of music at St. Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith, a position held previously by Gustav Holst. He was awarded a Doctor of Music degree by Oxford University in 1937, an honorary doctorate from Cambridge in 1961, and was appointed King Edward VII Professor of Music at London University in 1950, where he had a central role in the establishment of a full-time honors school in music. Over the course of his long career, he served as president of the Incorporated Society of Musicians, the Plainsong and Mediaeval Music Society, and the Royal College of Organists.

The Rhapsodic Quintet for clarinet and strings was completed on the heels of the First World War in 1919 and was another Carnegie Trust winner. Howells, like virtually everybody of his generation, was deeply affected by the war, and that sense of melancholy, of great drama and loss, permeates this piece. He described "a mystic feeling about the whole thing," but neither that sentiment nor the word rhapsodic in the title can take away from the clarity of expression he attained. He wrote in his diary of "long ponderous thoughts on problems of musical form...hours spent in an easy-chair, fire-gazing, form-thinking." Clearly his long hours in front of the fire were productive; the ideas in the quintet flow freely from one to the next throughout, telling a story that we don't need to know the details of to feel its emotional journey.

Stephen Albert (1941-1992) was, until his tragic death in a car accident on Cape Cod, a leader in what came to be called the "New Romanticism" in American music, avoiding both academic serialism and minimalism in favor of a musical language that was undoubtedly contemporary yet spoke more directly to audiences. "I felt that music had reached an impasse," Albert said in a 1990 interview. "The only real masterpieces after World War II had been by Shostakovich. The only place most new music was going was over a cliff into an abyss, and the so-called conservative alternative seemed to be mired in stasis. The only way out of it, it seemed to me, was to go back to where music had been shortly after the turn of the century. Eschewing the music of Schoenberg, Webern and Berg, I became interested in composers like de Falla, Sibelius and early Stravinsky. I wanted a complexity of texture that bears repeated hearings and I wanted at the same time to have a surface accessibility."

Born in New York City, Albert studied primarily with Darius Milhaud at the Eastman School of Music and George Rochberg at the University of Pennsylvania. In the early part of his career, he was determined to remain free to compose as he wished without an academic appointment, so he made the bulk of his living with his childhood hobby, buying and selling rare stamps. Success came relatively early in Albert's life, however, and he won the 1985 Pulitzer Prize in music for his first symphony, titled *RiverRun*. He received commissions from the Chicago, National, Pittsburgh, and Seattle symphonies, The Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and the Library of Congress. His 1990 Cello Concerto was commissioned by the Baltimore Symphony for Yo-Yo Ma. From 1985-1988 he was composer in residence with the Seattle Symphony, and in the last few years of his life served on the faculties of Boston University and the Juilliard School.

In the late 1970s, Albert became fascinated with the writing of James Joyce, and specifically his notoriously difficult and revolutionary novel *Finnegans Wake*. *To Wake the Dead*, considered his first major work, was the first piece to arise from this inspiration. Subtitled “Six Sentimental Songs and an Interlude after *Finnegans Wake*” and scored for soprano with flute (doubling alto flute and piccolo), clarinet (doubling bass clarinet), violin (doubling viola), cello, piano, and harmonium, it was premiered in March of 1979 in New York by Pro Musica Moderna.

To Wake the Dead was followed in quick succession by three more Joyce-inspired pieces: the song cycle *TreeStone*; the aforementioned Symphony No. 1 *RiverRun*; and *Flower of the Mountain*, a setting of the final pages of Molly Bloom’s long soliloquy in *Ulysses* composed for the eminent soprano Lucy Shelton. Surprisingly, Albert confessed that *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was the only work of Joyce he had read in its entirety. “I didn’t really read *Finnegans Wake* from beginning to end,” he said; “I used it more or less as a reference work, the way other composers might use the Bible, finding certain passages in it that lend to musical treatment of a direct sort, such as actual song settings, or a more indirect sort, such as my symphony.”

He went on to express his admiration for “the very musical rhythm of Joyce’s language; among 20th-century poets, only T.S. Eliot and perhaps Yeats strike me as being more musical in that respect. The flashes of imagery are marvelous, and there is that convoluted nostalgia – for under all his artful disguises and arcane language one finds a basic Irish sentiment which I for one like so much. In his work I discovered what I regard as a foreign language – a language enormously suggestive of English, and of course directly related to English, but essentially a foreign language. Through this invented language he has been able to elusively chronicle man’s endurance of tragedy and the whole human comedy . . . *Finnegans Wake* does not produce literal or direct images for me, but works in terms of generalized suggestions and impressions. This stimulus produces a sort of mental atmosphere that provides for me an escape from contemporary America – in much the same way, I suppose, that the theological stimuli to which Bach responded provided him an escape from the realities of early 18th-century Leipzig.”

Commentator Kenneth Slowik suggested that a “useful summary of [*To Wake the Dead*’s] major themes,” is provided in the following lines from Joseph Campbell’s famous study *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*:

Tim Finnegan of the old vaudeville song is an Irish sod carrier who gets drunk, falls off a ladder, and is apparently killed. His friends hold a death watch over his coffin; during the festivities someone splashes him with whiskey, at which Finnegan comes to life again and joins the general dance . . . Finnegan’s fall from the ladder is Lucifer’s fall, Adam’s fall, the setting sun that will rise again, the fall of Rome, a Wall Street crash . . . It is Humpty Dumpty’s fall and the fall of Newton’s apple. And it is every man’s daily recurring fall from grace . . . By Finn’s coming again (Finn-again) – in other words, by the reappearance of the hero – . . . Strength and hope are provided for mankind.

Louis Vierne (1870-1937) was one of the greatest organists in the grand French Romantic tradition. He was born blind due to cataracts, and at the age of six his vision was restored to what we would probably call legally blind; he could recognize people, identify objects, and read large type if it was very close. He studied with Franck and Widor at the Paris Conservatory, served as assistant to Widor and then Guilmant, and in 1900 won a competition to be named official organist of the cathedral at Notre Dame – the first deemed worthy of the position in over 100 years.

Despite holding the most prestigious organ position in France and quite possibly the world, Vierne was passed over twice for the professorship at the Conservatory, first in 1911 in favor of Gigout and then in 1926 for his own former student Dupré. The bitterness of these slights never really left him, and a life filled tragedy, loss and personal betrayal fed his tendency to depression, as well as the stage fright which would hamper his ability to consistently perform at the technical level of which he was capable.

Vierne's Piano Quintet was written in 1917 following the death of his older son Jacques, killed in action in the war at the age of only seventeen. This was just the most recent of tragedies: his wife's infidelity led to a tumultuous divorce in 1909, he lost both his mother and his good friend friend Guilmant in 1911; and his younger son, André, had died of tuberculosis in 1913. Vierne wrote of the piece:

I am constructing...a Quintet of vast proportions, which will give full expression to my tenderness and the tragic destiny of my child...The wild and furious energy with which I am tackling this task matches the depth of my grief, and I will make something powerful, grandiose and strong...Perhaps one who has suffered every grief, every bitterness, every anguish, may be able to ease and console the sufferings of others – that is the role of the artist...

That he felt compelled to write such a moving, heartfelt masterpiece is no mystery. How he managed to write it is another matter. His eyesight had deteriorated further from glaucoma, so his method of composing by writing huge noteheads on enormous staff paper with the aid of his younger brother René must have been even more arduous than in the past. A year later even René would be lost to him in the war.

Vierne lived another twenty years, carrying out his duties at Notre Dame, teaching at the Schola Cantorum and the Ecole Cesar Franck, even going on performing tours of England and North America. He extended and expanded on Franck and Widor's work with the genre of symphony for organ alone, writing six masterpieces that remain central to the solo organ repertoire. Even his own death was a notably tragic event; he had a fatal heart attack in the middle of a recital, sitting at the console of the Notre Dame organ.

- Gabriel Rice

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