

Dumka – Russian Rustic Scenes – Op. 59 (1886)

P. I. Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) - Gay

During Tchaikovsky's lifetime, homosexuality was illegal in Russia, and sadly that is still the case today. The former USSR and modern-day Russia have made efforts to suppress the truth about the composer's sexuality for years and it is only recently that uncensored letters and memoirs describing his true identity have come to light. Tchaikovsky knew he was gay from a young age but sought to hide these feelings for fear of negative backlash. In his writings he expresses both joy and excitement over being with other men like him, and anxiety and depression over not being able to live publicly as his true self and the possibility of exposure.

The word 'dumka' is of Ukrainian origin and means 'thought' or 'ruminations.' In Slavic folk music traditions, Dumky are epic ballads that feature many changes in character. In Tchaikovsky's Dumka I personally hear the story of a melancholic gay man. It begins slowly and sadly in one of the angriest keys-C minor, and the melody is broad and lamenting, introducing our main character. The melody repeats in a lower register with light sixteenth notes floating above which I hear as the falling of snow-not only is he gay and depressed, he's cold! Suddenly we shift to E-flat major with a warm and flirty declaration that develops into a dance of excitement. I call this section 'hot boy summer.' Every few measures this flirty theme gets put through a new and more exciting variation-this is our boy at the pride parade. Unfortunately summer has to end, and a new melody appears in G minor-a reminder that the gay community is insular and the rest of the country is not as accepting. Our boy expresses his frustration in a wild, sweeping cadenza that pours into a passionate outcry. The mood gets more and more agitated until we run out of energy in a suspenseful pause – and the original lamenting C minor melody returns as a funeral march.

Zes Préludes voor Piano (1917-18)

Henriëtte Bosmans (1895-1952) - Bisexual

Henriëtte Bosmans was a Dutch composer and pianist who, while revered in her own time, is largely unknown today. She was a fascinating person who lived a storied life, and her music deserves much more attention than it currently receives. Though European society at the beginning of the 20th century was not friendly to the idea of women being composers-especially ones that were openly bisexual-Bosmans had a thriving career before World War Two. Many of her musical collaborators were also romantic partners, including cellist Frieda Belinfante, violinist Francis Koene, and soprano Noémie Pérugia. After the Nazis took control of her hometown of Amsterdam, Bosmans was forced to step out of the spotlight. Because of her Jewish ancestry she was banned from performing and having her works performed, but because she was only half Jewish she was otherwise left alone by occupying forces. Her mother, however, being fully Jewish, was arrested many times by the Gestapo. To fund the cost of her mother's bail, Bosmans would hold secret underground concerts called 'Dark Nights.' After the war, Bosmans' career picked up once again until her death in 1952.

This set of six preludes is a testament to Bosmans' transparency regarding her identity. Despite cultural tensions surrounding her ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, Bosmans was open, honest, and proud of who she was. These preludes behave much the same way-while they are complex and intriguing, they are transparent. They say what they have to say very succinctly, but remain bold, unique, and captivating.

Sonata No. 2 in C# Minor, "Geistinger Sonata" (1877)

Ethel Smyth (1858-1944) – Lesbian

Dame Ethel Smyth is known not only as the first female composer to be granted damehood, but as a leader of the women's suffrage movement. In fact, one of her most famous compositions was the suffragette anthem "The March of the Women," which was performed by choirs not only at rallies and concert halls, but by suffragette prisoners in Holloway Prison conducted by Smyth herself with a toothbrush.

While studying in Germany, Smyth became smitten with the soprano Marie Geistinger, the dedicatee of this epic sonata. While Smyth's first and third piano sonatas stay close to the pianistic idiom and are very comfortable to play, her second sonata is incredibly orchestral—almost as if it were a piano reduction of an opera. This was entirely deliberate, as Smyth drew inspiration from the types of operas Geistinger was famous for, such as the works of Strauss and Orff. The first movement features a long concerto-like introduction followed by a brooding march that cracks open to reveal a sweet, bubbly theme. This long movement undergoes so many harmonic twists and turns characteristic of Smyth's writing. The second movement is a beautiful and romantic aria inspired by Geistinger's showstopping performances. The last movement is a wild adventure based on a theme from the first movement.