

Phil's Classical Reviews

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Slava, Rus A Russian Tribute

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"Power Players," Russian Opera Arias
Ildar Abdrazakov, bass
Delos

Curiously, Ildar Abdrazakov (pronounced *ahb-drah-ZHA-koff*) didn't start out singing the great basso roles in Russian opera. Early-on, his elegantly smooth bass-baritone voice made him more of a natural for the Franco-Italian repertoire in which he then specialized. Over the years, his voice has gradually deepened to the point where it carries the greatest authority. He displays it in the Russian repertoire he explores in "Power Players." At the same time, his voice retains the beautiful cantabile quality that first gained him fame and recognition.

Fortunately, too, the Russian opera has been kinder to bassos than has been the case in the west, where they have mostly been relegated to the supporting roles, especially villains. In the Russian repertoire, they have often been the power brokers: legendary heroes, tsars, defenders of Mother Russia against her ancient foes. On this album, we have him in unforgettable portraits of heroes of legend such as the title characters in Borodin's *Prince Igor*, Rachmaninoff's *Aleko*, and Glinka's *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, typically vowing to avenge a humiliating defeat and win back a beloved sweetheart who has been taken captive by the victors.

In *A Life for the Tsar* (Glinka), he does a magnificent job portraying the peasant Ivan Susanin, who has disguised himself as the young Tsar to draw his enemies away. As his foes close in on him, he wonders what daylight will bring. He has gladly sacrificed his own life, and now he wonders whether it will be in vain. A darkly brooding cantilena gives way to a remarkably expressive aria that allows Abdrazakov ample opportunity to display his beautifully smooth cantilena.

And so it goes, through a very rich repertoire drawn from operas by Tchaikovsky, Rubinstein, Prokofiev, and Rimsky-Korsakov, culminating in the grand Coronation Scene from Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, in which Constantine Orbelian and the Kaunas City Symphony



"Russian Songs"
Margarita Gritskova, mezzo-soprano; Maria Prinz, piano
(Naxos)

Margarita Gritskova, a native of St. Petersburg, Russia and currently a rising star of the Vienna State Opera, takes time off from a busy repertoire of roles from Baroque to Bizet and from Monteverdi to Rossini to record songs close to her heart. With superb support from her recital partner, pianist Maria Prinz, the mezzo-soprano sings a program of Russian songs that benefit from the depth and sensual beauty of her voice. Additionally, they reveal a keen intelligence at work engaging with poetry of real literary substance. It enables Gritskova to hold back the full flow of emotion in a song text until the optimal moment, thereby making full use of the wonderfully expressive quality of her voice.

That is particularly true of the Tchaikovsky songs, but it also relates in equal measure to those of Rimsky-Korsakov and Rachmaninoff, the other two luminaries whose songs are heard on this program. The nine Tchaikovsky selections include such recital favorites as "I wish I could take all my sadness," to a Russian translation of Heinrich Heine (I would pour out my sorrows all in a single word, and let the wind carry them away), "And was I not a little blade of grass," the understated, regretful lament of a young girl whose parents have married her off to an old man whom she does not love, and "If I'd only guessed," after a poem by Aleksei Tolstoy that tells the story of a girl whose lover rides by on the hunt, and how she might have waited for him in the evening by the well. So many of these songs are tender laments for lost happiness, perhaps reflecting Tchaikovsky's own disappointments in love. The best-known is probably Goethe's Mignon song, *Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt* in a Russian translation (Only he who knows longing) with its sadly lilting, drooping measures.

The songs by Rimsky-Korsakov are often suffused with a vividly atmospheric Orientalism, as in Aleksei Koltsov's "An Eastern Romance" (A rose has charmed a

Orchestra of Lithuania with the Kaunas State Choir lend yeoman support. If you acquire no other recording of Russian music this year, get *this* one!

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nightingale) and Pushkin's "Upon the Georgian Hills, there lies the haze of night." The Rachmaninoff songs include such as "I fell in love, to my own despair," "O beauty, do not sing to me the sad songs of Georgia," (Pushkin), and, of course, the wordless "Vocalise" whose sheer beauty would make any language superfluous.

This is at least the twelfth time I've reviewed Mussorgsky's masterpiece *Pictures at an Exhibition*, in one form or another, since January, 2014, and I could almost write a review of it standing on my head. So what does this latest offering from Russian conductor Dmitri Kitajenko and the venerable Gürzenich Orchestra of Cologne, Germany have to offer that's new and refreshing?



Mussorgsky: *Pictures at an Exhibition*
Rimski-Korsakov: *Invisible City of Kitezh*.
Liadov: *The Enchanted Lake* - Dmitri Kitajenko, Gürzenich-Orchester Köln (Oehms)

Actually, little from the viewpoint of interpretation, but a great deal in the way of total commitment and vibrant playing in a middle-sized ensemble that consistently performs as if it were a much larger world-class orchestra. That is particularly the case as regards the brass section, the lower brass in particular, which makes its presence felt in such tableaux as the world-weary *Bydlo* (The Oxen), the darkly ominous *Catacombes*, the bleak, doom-laden middle section of *Baba Yaga* (The Witch), and of course the various occurrences of the Promenade theme that serves to connect the picture tableaux in a meaningful sequence.

Elsewhere, Kitajenko, who has made the incredible number of some 250 recordings during a distinguished career, shows the master's hand in expressing the poetry and profound sadness of *The Old Castle*, the deep peace and solitude of "From the Dead in a Dead Language," and the excitement mounting through several stages, of the grand finale, *The Great Gate of Kiev*.

Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh, an opera by Rimsky-Korsakov, is presented next in the excellent concert suite by his pupil Maximilian Steinberg that plays like a symphony in four tableaux. It captures all the essentials of the story: a lovely portrait of the maiden Fevronia dwelling in seclusion amid woodland bird-calls, her marriage to the hero Vsevolod in a procession with a joyous folk character and chiming bells, the gallant, doomed defense of the City of Kitezh against an invading horde of Tartars by Vsevolod and his companions, and finally Fevronia's reunion in death with the slain Vsevolod and their return to the paradisaical woodland.

Lastly, we have *The Enchanted Lake* by Anatoly Liadov, in a performance that does full justice to its subject. There are no trumpets, trombones, or tuba in the delicate scoring of this work, only muted strings and quiet woodwinds, as befits the subject. It is a portrait of nature in itself, without the passions and sorrows of any human presence.

"Rachy" and his Friends



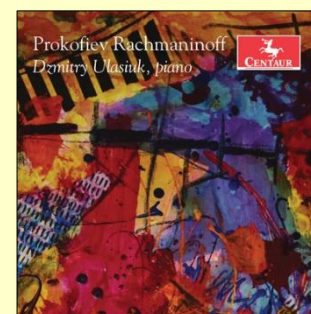
"Grand Russian" Piano Sonatas by Tchaikovsky (Op. 37), Rachmaninov (Op. 28) - Albert Tiu (Centaur)

Albert Tiu, a native of Cebu in the Philippines, gives a distinguished and timely account of neglected



Rachmaninov: *The Complete 24 Preludes for Piano* Boris Giltburg (Naxos)

Moscow-born Israeli pianist Boris Giltburg has lived with the Preludes of Sergei Rachmaninov for a long



Prokofiev: *Ten Pieces from Romeo and Juliet* + Rachmaninoff: *Études-tableaux, Op. 33* - Dzmityry Ulasiuk (Centaur)

Dzmityry Ulasiuk has been quite the world traveler since he received his early education, culminating in a

works by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Sergei Rachmaninov. In recordings made August 9-13, 2017 in the Concert Hall, Yang Siew Toh Conservatory of Music in Singapore, we are given Tchaikovsky's Grand Sonata in G Major, Op. 37, and Sergei Rachmaninov's Sonata No. 1 in D Minor, op. 28. As Tiu recounts in his program notes, the parallels between these two works are utterly fascinating.

To begin, both are large-scale works with symphonic implications (though to my knowledge no one has yet attempted to orchestrate either). Tiu does not find this fact surprising, as both were written immediately after their composers completed massive symphonies (Tchaikovsky's Fourth and Rachmaninov's Second). For a time, the latter even contemplated making a symphony out of his D minor sonata but wisely dismissed the idea because of its purely pianistic style.

The parallels don't end here. Within the next two years, both composers wrote mammoth piano concertos (Tchaikovsky Second, Rachmaninov Third) in the very same keys as the sonatas. Dotted rhythms in the character of a march occur in the first movement of the Tchaikovsky and the third of the Rachmaninov. Both works make passing use of the *Dies irae* theme of which their composers were fond, though in each case they are so carefully subsumed into the lyrical fabric (unusually, in fact, for Rachmaninov, who was known to be obsessed with the death implications of the liturgy-based theme) that the listener may have to attend closely to detect its presence as an unexpected surprise.

And finally, observes Tiu, "this disc opens and ends with the same rhythmic gesture, a magisterial pronouncement in the Tchaikovsky, and a final act of defiance in the Rachmaninov."

Both sonatas require a big, confident technique of the performer. The Tchaikovsky was termed by its composer a "grand sonata," which in its day implied a full-scale four-movement work in sonata form approximating the architectural

time (In fact, he dedicates this album to the memory of his grandmother, a gifted pianist under whose hands he first heard the E-flat Major and G Major preludes as a child). Giltburg, a capable writer as well as a fantastic keyboard artist, compliments his performances with his activities as a blogger, writing about music for a non-specialist audience and adding highly revealing program notes to the present album.

Rachmaninov, it seems, complained to his friends that the writing of the 13 Preludes, Op. 32, which would complete his cycle of 24 preludes in all major and minor keys, was "heavy going for me." He wasn't just kidding. Creating that many perfectly characterized short pieces, each an exquisitely polished miniature that was capable of standing alone as a self-contained musical piece and not just a vignette or album leaf, was hard work indeed. It probably took more out of the composer than would the composition of a whole sonata or concerto. How well Rachmaninov succeeded may be judged by the vivid and highly memorable quality of these pieces. Once you've heard any of them you won't forget them. They will return again as old friends every time you listen to them. Some will even haunt your dreams!

Leading off the program, Giltburg gives a sensitive rendition of the famous (or is it infamous?) Prelude in C sharp Minor, Op. 3, No. 2, which was such a favorite of audiences, who invariably called for it to be encoed, that Rachmaninov almost came to loathe it. Underplaying the sombre chords that too many pianists have reveled in as the epitome of "mad genius" music, the artist does a great job stressing the chromatically descending notes in the middle section and the three-note figure (A - G sharp - C sharp) that occurs again and again.

At the expense of only hitting the highlights, we have a wealth of attractive and compelling music in opus 23 alone, starting with No. 1 in F sharp Minor with its long sustained note at the opening and its desultory progress through a succession of keys, the epitome of mournful gloom.

performance degree in piano from the State Academy of Music in his native Belarus. Since then, he has been awarded Grand Prize in the 25th Fryderyck Chopin International Piano competition (Corpus Christi, TX) among other awards. With degrees from TCU, SMU and an impending DMA from the University of North Texas, he has shown a definite hankerin' to wander in them wide open spaces, pardner. His magic carpet, as always, has been the piano, which he plays with considerable élan and a beautifully centered, symphonic-like tone.

Those qualities serve him well in the Ten Pieces that Sergei Prokofiev wrote in 1937 as a means of getting concert hall exposure for the music of his ballet Romeo and Juliet. That audacious work which then seemed so unsettling in terms of traditional notions about the classical ballet, had been rejected by the Bolshoi Ballet as "undanceable" and was in limbo pending its acceptance by the Mariinsky Theatre of Leningrad. The Ten Pieces, featuring scenes (*Folk Dance, The Street Awakens*), ensembles (*Masks, Montagues and Capulets*), solo dances (*Young Juliet, Friar Lawrence*) and a glorious and deeply moving *Romeo and Juliet before Parting*) were never intended to be performed as a suite of dances in the recital hall, but rather as individual pieces, each with its own distinct personality, from which pianists could pick and choose depending on their needs for choice program pieces and encores.

Ulasiuk's bold, deft characterizations of the Ten Pieces come across handsomely here, as these pieces are symphonically conceived piano pieces rather than mere piano reductions, and that is the way it should be. The climax is clearly *Romeo and Juliet before Parting* with its deep emotions, complex rhythms, and subtly rich harmonies tinged with sadness. Ulasiuk holds back just enough to effectively underscore its poignant mood.

The Études-tableaux, Op. 33 of Sergei Rachaninoff involve matters of a different kind. They are concert études in the manner pioneered by

layout of a symphony. Pomp and majesty alternate with melancholy throughout. The first movement ends in a march with the *Dies irae* motto in the bass, while sorrowful lyricism contrasts with both playful and longing episodes in the Andante. An effervescent Scherzo characterized by jolly syncopations and swelling hemiolas is followed in the finale by a maelstrom of activity surrounding an impassioned central episode.

The Rachmaninov sonata has a comparable emotional range with the Tchaikovsky and is even longer (at 38:14 in the present performance). It makes much of the interval of a falling fifth in the second movement, characterized by an innocent, tender melody that is meant to recall Gretchen in the Faustian scheme employed by the composer. Octave leaps of a third, fourth, and fifth help unleash the fury of the finale, which is doom-laden with Judgment Day implications.

As it was with the Tchaikovsky, the emotional and dynamic range of the Rachmaninov is calculated to take a lot out of both performer and listener. Albert Tiu is obviously an artist who does not shy away from the major challenges of two big and seldom-performed works in need of a champion.

No. 2 in B flat Major pleases with its fanfare-like passages and cascades of double notes, recalling the composer's song *Spring Torrents*. No. 3 in D Minor may be in the tempo of a minuet, but is the mood bitter sarcasm, or is it tongue in cheek? No. 5 in G Minor reminds listeners of a Cossack troop on the march, with a relaxation and harmonic brightening near the end that, for me at least, conjures up the splendor of a glorious daybreak. Gilburg likens this moment to "a very wide horizon [opening] up before us."

No. 6 in E flat Major has a feeling of tranquility seldom encountered in this composer, while No. 7 in C Minor conveys a mood of sheer terror and despair, swooping to a sudden and violent end on the major key. No. 10 in G flat Major ends the Op. 23 set on widely spread chords and in a mood of exquisite nocturnal beauty and charm.

Though I personally prefer the Op. 23 set for its diversity of moods and great inventiveness, most critics favor the 13 preludes of Op. 32, written six years later, as being an advance technically and musically. No. 1 in C Major is characterized by cascades of harmonic progressions, with bell-like chords at the end. No. 2 in B flat Minor is a Siciliana in its swaying rhythm, undercut by restlessness and foreboding.

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No. 4 in E Minor is reminiscent of the composer's setting of Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Bells" in its evocations of the sinister and terrifying. No 5 in G Major is, by contrast, a calm, beautiful song with delicately spun figurations in the left hand over a flowing accompaniment.

No. 7 in F Major is a duet between the hands, by turns wistful, serene, and passionate. No. 8 in A Minor is wild, brilliant, and toccata-like. No. 9 in A Major is grandly conceived in its opening, changing to a succession of bell-like notes over a running accompaniment, and then plunging on a left-hand crescendo to the bottom note of the piano and at last ending on peaceful chords. A slow, mournful theme, sinking by degrees into darkness, characterizes No. 10 in B Minor. No. 11 in B Major is charming and teasing, with no apparent purpose, while No. 13 in D flat Major is dignified and massive in its opening, at length tumbling down like an avalanche to rest on a very dramatic low chord and ultimately ending the Op. 32 set on a note of life-affirming triumph.

Chopin, pieces that addressed technical issues and also evoked distinct mental images. As opposed to his Opus 39 Études-Tableaux, for which he created descriptive titles at the request of Ottorino Respighi as aids in orchestration, Rachmaninoff left those of Opus 33 innocent of descriptions, inviting us to apply own own imaginations. They are, as Ulasiuk terms them, "eight nameless wonders to generate a personal meaning for every listener."

This artist is at pains to make these études as striking as possible. No. 2 in C major in 12/8 time, for instance, seems to be a serious, subdued conversation between two people on a sullen, rainy afternoon, while the rhythms of No. 4 in D minor, marked Moderato, may evoke for the listener an old Russian liturgical chant or a troop of Cossacks on the move.