

Russian Rarities
Larry Sitsky

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RUSSIAN RARITIES

Larry Sitsky | piano

CD 1

ANTON RUBINSTEIN (1829-1894)

VARIATIONS Op. 88 *

- 1 Theme: Lento, Moderato 2'25"
- 2 Variation I: Allegro Moderato 2'20"
- 3 Variation II; Andante con moto, tempo rubato 3'16"
- 4 Variation III: Tempo di Marcia 3'02"
- 5 Variation IV; Andante con moto 3'20"
- 6 Variation V; Moderato assai 4'11"
- 7 Variation VI; Vivace 2'20"
- 8 Variation VII; Moderato assai 3'12"
- 9 Variation VIII; Moderato con moto 6'07"
- 10 Variation IX; Moderato 5'19"
- 11 Variation X; Moderato, patetico 3'28"
- 12 Variation XI; Allegro 2'36"
- 13 Variation XII: Allegro moderato 9'37"

VLADIMIR SHCHERBACHEV (1887-1952)

- 14 SONATA No.2 in B flat minor, Op.7 18'28"

VLADIMIR DESHEVOV (1889-1955)

- 15 REL'SY (1926) 1'14"

ARTUR LOURIE (1892-1966)

FORMS IN THE AIR

- 16 I 1'59"
- 17 II 2'28"
- 18 III 2'51"

CD 2

SYNTHESES

- 1 I 0'50"
- 2 II 1'23"
- 3 III 1'58"
- 4 IV 1'32"
- 5 V 0'52"

NIKOLAI ROSLAVETS (1881-1944)

- 6 SONATA No.2 (1916) 13'36"

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- 7 No.1 Andante affettuoso (1919) 1'21"
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- 10 No.4 Lento (1922) 1'40"
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ALEKSANDR MOSOLOV (1900-1973)

- 12 SONATA NO.1 in C Minor, Op.3 11'51"

3 PIECES & 2 DANCES, Op.23a

- 13 No.II 0'40"
- 14 No.III 0'44"

LEONID POLOVINKIN (1894-1949)

EREIGNIS VII:

- 15 I: Pressentiment, Andante tranquillo 1'28"
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- 18 Preparing the Lesson 0'53"
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3 PIECES FROM MELOMIMIQUES, Op.15 (1889)

- 25 The Devil's Amusement 0'55"
- 26 The Faun 2'11"
- 27 In the Forest 1'56"

NIKOLAI OBUKHOV (1892-1954)

REVELATION (1915)

- 28 The Tolling from Beyond 1'50"
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- 30 The Void 3'09"
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- 33 Truth 1'15"

TWO PIECES

- 34 The Temple is Measured: The Spirit is Incarnate 3'00"
- 35 Peace for the Reconciled: Towards the Source of the Chalice 3'45"

* live performance on the Rönisch piano



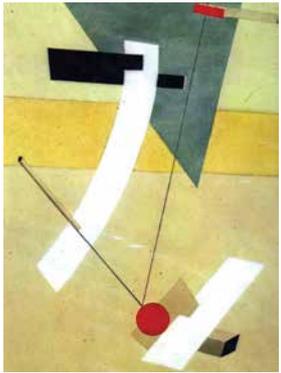
The Rubinstein Variations are performed on the Rönisch piano at a concert held in Lewellyn Hall, Canberra School of Music, 30 September 2006, and recorded by Kim Wilson. All other pieces are performed on a Steinway RR3 and recorded by Michael Grafton-Green. Preparation for CD and mastering by Martin Wright. Move Records gratefully acknowledges the

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The works that appear on this 2-CD set are the result of research and performance into a particular era of Russian music. Although the musical distance between the Rubinstein Op.88

Variations and the

other later Russian works is often vast, the chronological time is actually fairly short. Rubinstein represented the end of the romantic era in Russian piano music, but an era in which he personally chose to ignore the nationalistic school and the ethos of the Mighty Five group of composers, who wished for a truly patriotic school of composition based on Russian folk music; Rubinstein, instead, used European models for his own work, moreover models who represented the more classical aspects of European art (Mendelssohn is a fine example) rather than the more progressive composers such as Liszt. The musical upheavals in Russian music began less than a decade after Rubinstein's death. Were it not for the eventual Stalinist suppression, the group of composers represented on these CDs could well have led and surpassed their European counterparts in their sheer audacity and exuberance. I have written about this period and its composers in *Music of the Repressed Russian Avant-Garde, 1900-1929*.



CD 1

ANTON RUBINSTEIN (1829-1894)

VARIATIONS Op. 88

One of the most famous and influential pianists and composers of the nineteenth century, Rubinstein was also the founder of the St.Petersburg Conservatory and thus the foundation member of the Russian tertiary education system for musicians. Immodestly, I refer readers of these notes to my book *Anton Rubinstein*, and here concentrate on some information of the work recorded for this CD set.

The Variations Op.88 are Rubinstein's largest single work for the piano. He wrote prolifically, if not always critically, and his output includes everything from miniatures to four substantial sonatas. These Variations figured in the repertoire of some of the great pianists, and was often compared favourably with similar scale variations by Brahms and Beethoven. My curiosity about this work was also piqued by the fact that the great Ferruccio Busoni had it in his repertoire. Finding the music was not easy, and there ever was only the one edition.

The performance here is live (unlike the other studio recorded works) and is in a sense historic because it was performed in Llewellyn Hall on a Roenisch 8' grand especially commissioned by Nicholson's

Music (the well-known Australian firm) for the Great Melbourne Exhibition. It is an important part of Australian music history and the fact that the piano survived all those years and is still in a playable condition is a minor miracle in itself. The date of the piano and the date of the Rubinstein composition are almost identical. The work was performed in a special concert celebrating the acquisition of the piano by the Australian National University, for the growing collection in the Piano Institute housed within the School of Music. The work is set out in a very classical way:

- 1 Theme: Lento, Moderato** 2'25"
- 2 Variation I: Allegro Moderato** 2'20"
- 3 Variation II; Andante con moto, tempo rubato** 3'16"
- 4 Variation III: Tempo di Marcia** 3'02"
- 5 Variation IV; Andante con moto** 3'20"
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- 12 Variation XI; Allegro** 2'36"
- 13 Variation XII: Allegro moderato** 9'37"

The last Variation also encompasses a grand restatement of the original theme. XII is the largest of the Variations and features a toccata-like treatment of the thematic material. The other large-scale Variation is VIII, in E Flat Minor, with

grand arpeggios sweeping over the entire keyboard. Rubinstein was a virtuoso in the grand manner, with an extravagant and metrically free style of playing, all of which are evident in this work. If the listener occasionally hears echoes of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff, it is well to remember that Rubinstein preceded these composers (indeed taught a whole generation of Russian composers and pianists).

VLADIMIR SHCHERBACHEV (1887-1952)

14 SONATA No.2 in B flat minor, Op.7 18'28"

This composer is probably the most conservative of the early 20th century group represented here. The Sonata No.2 is a gorgeous essay in late Romanticism, and a worthy companion to the sonatas of Rachmaninoff and Scriabin. Shcherbachev's principal contributions to the Russian school were his experiments with structure. In my book, I titled the chapter on him *Old Wine in New Vessels*. The language is unashamedly tonal and the choice of the key of B Flat Minor immediately sets the mood of the work.



Although based on the classical sonata form, the composer here manages quite often to burst out of the confines of a rigid structure; the result is a work both intensely emotional and highly logical. The Lisztian model of the one-movement sonata is ever present, as is the very tight thematic control. The Sonata was composed in 1914.

VLADIMIR DESHEVOV (1889-1955)

15 REL'SY (1926) 1'14"

Deshevov, although often writing experimental music, was largely a theatre composer and so his purely concert output is not huge. He is here represented by a little but showy machine-music piece, which means 'Rails', as in trains. This Bartok-like piece was at one time a popular show piece. "Rel'sy" was a play, described as an "industrial melodrama". A fairly exotic mixed ensemble was the original scoring for the incidental music, including a prepared piano. The play was staged in 1926 and this solo piece was drawn from the original score.

ARTUR LOURIE (1892-1966)

FORMS IN THE AIR

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- 17 II 2'28"
- 18 III 2'51"

CD 2

SYNTHESES

- 1 I 0'50"
- 2 II 1'23"
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Associated with the Futurist school of Russian writers, Lourie experimented with microtones and 12 note complexes as early as 1912. In this same year he composed his *Forms in the Air*, a prototype of graphic notation, with fragments of music scattered over the



pages and with no indication as to how to connect them, nor it what order. The work is dedicated to Pablo Picasso. These three mobiles of music reflect the harmonically austere style of the early experimental period, which was rich in dissonance and favoured the use

of chordal combinations with half-tone tension.

The *Syntheses* are more structured: written out unambiguously, with time indications, tempi and dynamics. The language (1914) is similar to the earlier work, but now more dense and more controlled, not just 'floating'. I have sometimes played these works in my composition classes and asked students to guess the year or period from which they emanated. Inevitably, the students say it is from the avant-garde of post World War II! These pieces are sometimes quoted as examples of 12-tone music in Lourié's output, but it is simply not so. True, some passages tend to be chromatically saturated, and are inclined to contain a large number of the twelve possible semi-tones, but the semitones are far from equal, and through repetition and dynamics, Lourié gives prominence to the notes he wishes to emphasize. Given his background, it seems to me that at his wildest, Lourié is still moving along the path of the symbolist impressionist decadent, where the fatigue and lassitude, the world-weary atmosphere, had now extended to an almost total negation of tonality. There is much that is gestural cohesion and much that is strictly thematic; as well, Lourié often picks rhythms that are an additional cohesive force to hold his pieces together.

NIKOLAI ROSLAVETS (1881-1944)

6 SONATA No.2 (1916) 13'36"

FIVE PRELUDES

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Roslavets in sometimes described (erroneously) as "the Russian Schoenberg". He certainly used a particular system in his work, but it was not Schoenbergian, nor twelve-tone, but rather an outcrop of Scriabin's system of a synthetic scale

and new 'synthetic' chords, forming new modal worlds. The 2nd piano sonata, from 1916, is a case in point. Like his contemporary Shcherbachev, Roslavets was quite content to use the one movement Lisztian-Scriabinesque model; unlike Shcherbachev, he wished to experiment not with the possibilities of form, but rather with the actual language. Quite often he gives the mode of a particular passage, printed in small font over the actual music, so keen was he to explain the basis of a new 'synthetic'

music, as befitted the new revolutionary age. He exercised strict control over his raw material, and the Sonata is never allowed to become rhapsodic or improvisatory. Pianistically, under the fingers it feels closer to Scriabin than to Liszt. Quite often, by superimposition of two modes, Roslavets enters a world where all 12 tones of the octave sound close together, hence his identification with Schoenberg. His pedal marks are very exact and specific in this Sonata and are used to define where the used mode begins or ends.

The Five Preludes are simpler, more lyrical examples of Roslavets' writing; yet again, the direct ancestor is obviously Scriabin, but the textures are more open and the melodic writing simpler, more direct.

ALEKSANDR MOSOLOV (1900-1973)

12 SONATA NO.1 in C Minor, Op.3 11'51"

3 PIECES & 2 DANCES, Op.23a

13 No.II 0'40"

14 No.III 0'44"

Mosolov, once world famous for his *Iron Foundry*, left four sonatas for the piano (one seems lost, as there were originally five listed). The one recorded here, No.1 is actually the second one composed chronologically. It too comes from the Liszt-Scriabin archetype, in which the opening tone-row-like material is presented in both tranquil and ferocious

aspects. This ‘tone-row’, heard at the very start, is the germ of what is to come. The designation of the Sonata as in C Minor seems to me purely nominal; the chords and lines derived from the ‘row’, a cell of tritons and minor seconds, is what colours the music. Since Mosolov is fond of sequences, he often picks transpositions of the cellular material which give him complexes tending to contain all 12 notes of the chromatic scale. Mosolov is the composer most easily linked to the Constructivist art movement. He is fond of ostinati and these give him blocks of sound which he piles next to and top of other blocks.

There is also an ironic twist that rears its head quite often in Mosolov, and this can be heard very clearly in the two tiny pieces from Op.23a. I used these as encore pieces when I first presented these Russian avant-garde works in recital.



LEONID POLOVINKIN (1894-1949)

EREIGNIS VII:

- 15 I: Pressentiment, Andante tranquillo** 1'28"
- 16 II: L'Action, moto tranquillo** 2'19"
- 17 III: Souvenir, Allegro** 1'50"

I regard Polovinkin's series of Ereignis' ('happening') pieces as the most significant in his prolific output. It is clear that they were not only written for himself to perform and to take the place of what might perhaps have been string quartets in most composers' outputs; that is, they represent Polovinkin at his most serious and introspective. They are obviously highly personal utterances without the sonatas' extrovert glitter and large scale construction, and certainly without that desire to please which seems the basis of much of his lighter music. These pieces embody a strange totality of atmosphere created from familiar components, but assembled in a new way. Polovinkin's disdain for stylistic purity allowed him here to mingle gestures from different styles in one work. Ereignis VII contains an early example of 'prepared piano', so that the sound is altered. In the second piece a postcard is placed in certain strings to change the natural sound of the piano. A valuable recording venture would be the complete Ereignis series.

VLADIMIR REBIKOV (1866-1920)

MUSIC FOR CHILDREN

- 18 Preparing the Lesson** 0'53"
- 19 Strolling Musicians** 1'07"
- 20 Dance of the Little Ones** 0'47"
- 21 Cradle Song** 0'58"
- 22 The Lame Witch Roaming the Forest** 1'14"
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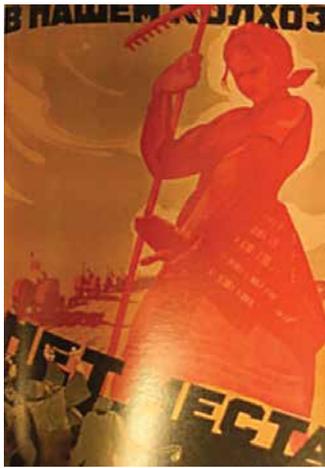
3 PIECES FROM MELOMIMIQUES, Op.15 (1889)

- 25 The Devil's Amusement** 0'55"
- 26 The Faun** 2'11"
- 27 In the Forest** 1'56"

Rebikov is the oldest composer from the group of avant-gardists represented here. His writing for the piano is generally in the form of pieces meant for children, or else fairly short miniatures. But this is not to devalue what he achieved within such a framework. Although many of the pieces have a pictorial or programmatic basis, Rebikov nevertheless achieved an impressive amount of experimentation within these confines. Often, a quasi-Bartokian flavour is present in these early works. Thus, *Preparing the Lesson* has a 'false start' and then a very



abrupt non-tonal ending; *Strolling Musicians* features a hypnotic and unresolved minor 7th in the left hand; *Dance of the Little Ones*, *Cradle Song* and *The Devil's Amusement* stay within the one whole-tone scale and never resolve. The latter was composed before the turn of the century! Other small pieces such as *The Lame Witch*, *The Bear* and *In the Forest* boast unresolved bitonality. Rebikov felt neglected later in life, feeling that he didn't get due credit for all his acoustic discoveries, and that composers such as Debussy and Scriabin stole his thunder. Unfortunately, although he did compose and theorize about operas, he never had that sense of large-scale structure essential to a composer, and is now remembered as an innovator within the world of the miniature.



NIKOLAI OBUKHOV (1892-1954)

REVELATION (1915)

- 28** **The Tolling from Beyond** 1'50"
- 29** **Death** 1'18"
- 30** **The Void** 3'09"
- 31** **Immortal** 2'42"
- 32** **The Distress of Satan** 0'35"
- 33** **Truth** 1'15"

TWO PIECES

- 34** **The Temple is Measured: The Spirit is Incarnate** 3'00"
- 35** **Peace for the Reconciled: Towards the Source of the Chalice** 3'45"

These two pieces were among the very few that achieved publication during Obukhov's lifetime: the Paris company of Durand issued them. The actual date of composition seems unknown. Obukhov left a mass of works in manuscript, often undated. Serious work on his archive located in the French National Library is yet to be carried out. An altogether strange personage, Obukhov's mysticism was intense and totally self-absorbing. The mere titles of the pieces performed here testify to his inner self-contained world. Ravel was impressed by him, and



encouraged him in his work. Obukhov is important as a Russian composer who experimented very early with a species of 12-tone organization and electronic sounds, the first attempts going back to 1914, a good ten years before Schoenberg. The music is often misty and beautifully poetic, but is also capable of great savagery. His considerable output for the piano is yet to be comprehensively explored and recorded.

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CANBERRA

