

RUSSIAN CELLO

Zoe Knighton
Amir Farid

move



RUSSIAN CELLO

Zoe Knighton | cello
Amir Farid | piano

Filled with luscious melody after luscious melody by Russian composers who really knew how to tear at the heart strings. This program ranges from well-known pieces and familiar composers through to some fresh discoveries including a rare gem in the Gretchaninov sonata.

move

© 2015 Move Records
move.com.au

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

1 Vocalise, Op. 34: No. 14 ... 3'46"

Reinhold Glière (1875-1956)

2 12 Album Leaves: Album Leaf No. 5 ... 3'42"

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

3 Chanson Russe (Russian Maiden's Song) ... 4'01"

Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936)

4 Chant du ménestrel, Op. 71 (Minstrel Song) ... 4'10"

5 Elégie, Op. 17 ... 10'15"

Alexander Gretchaninov (1864-1956)

Sonata for violoncello and piano, Op. 113

6 i. Mesto - Allegro agitato ... 7'06"

7 ii. Menuetto Tragico ... 6'13"

8 iii. Finale ... 8'40"

Nikolay Sokolov (1859-1922)

9 Preludium, Op. 26: No. 1 ... 3'25"

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Sonata for violoncello and piano, Op. 119

10 i. Andante Grave ... 12'44"

11 ii. Moderato ... 5'44"

12 iii. Allegro ma non troppo ... 9'07"

Russian composers are stereotyped by soaring melodies that combine nostalgia, poignancy and desire. As Australians, it is hard to imagine what those long, cold dark winters must be like but the stark terrain and beautifully harsh landscape that shines through this music is a way for us to experience Russia, its people and its way of thinking. The composers on this CD are all connected in some way – a delightful discovery that was not unexpected. There is a lineage that can be traced from Tchaikovsky through Taneyev and Rimsky-Korsakov through the Russian revolution and well into the twentieth century. All but one of these composers left Russia for various reasons. A longing after creative freedom being a common thread. What one hears in these compositions is an optimism that comes from seeking a better life in a foreign place, along with an intense nationalistic flavour and pride of the Russian homeland.

Sergei Rachmaninov's *Vocalise* is a piece that is played by practically every instrumentalist at some stage of their career. Originally written in 1912 as the last of a set of 14 songs, it was conceived without words, hence the title. The other songs in the cycle were set to poems by famous Russians – Pushkin, Polonsky, Korinfsky and Shaginyan. Critic Richard Wright famously wrote of the *Vocalise* “as a metaphor for nostalgia, homesickness, and erotic yearning, nothing says it better”.

Reinhold Glière lived alongside Rachmaninov (just two years his junior) and taught Prokofiev. Glière was taught by Sergei Tanyev and praised by Glazunov. He is the one composer on this CD that never visited the West. Written in 1910, this is the fifth of *12 Album Leaves*. The term “album leaf” is a curious one, and was originated with composers writing a piece with a particular dedicatee in mind. The dedicatee would then insert the piece into their album or autograph book. These days, that connotation has all but disappeared and it simply refers to a group of minor compositions.

Igor Stravinsky is best known for his *Rite of Spring* and *Firebird* but his success as a composer seems to have overshadowed his abilities as a pianist – he was often touring and performing which was a far cry from the family expectation of him studying law.

The *Russian Maiden's Song* is also known as *Chanson Russe* and was originally the opening aria of his one act comic opera *Mavra* (1922). This song is a “scene setter” with the central character Parasha embroidering in her living room. Stravinsky wrote this while residing in France. He had been doing some research into some Russian folk songs around the outbreak of WWI and was unable to get back onto Russian soil before the borders closed. The war and Russian revolution meant he didn't return to Russia until the 1960s. Stravinsky eventually moved to the United States and died there in 1971. Famously, he had strong associations with some of the world's greatest artists including Coco Chanel, Diaghilev, with his artistic creativity inspiring many – not just musicians.

Alexander Glazunov apparently took quite a dislike to Stravinsky and the modern approach he was taking with his compositions. “No talent, just dissonance” is how he described the work *Fireworks*. In turn, Stravinsky said of Glazunov that he was the “most disagreeable man I have ever met”. This came after Stravinsky had looked up to the “perfection of musical form and ease and assurance of his writing”. Later on Glazunov did admit that Stravinsky had a real gift for orchestration. They shared the same teacher in Rimsky-Korsakov yet obviously took their creative output in entirely different directions. These two small compositions

(*Élégie* and *Chanson du ménestrel*) are not monumental works, yet they have attracted many instrumentalists and enjoyed a great popularity. *Elegie* – a work written as a lament for a deceased person – is typical of other works of the same title (all cellists will know the *Elegie* by Fauré). It shows the entire set of emotions associated with grief. *Chanson du Ménestrel* (*Minstrel song*) was written in 1900 before he began to adopt a more formal and academic approach to his composition.

The name Sergei Tanyev is noticeably absent from this disc but his legacy is heard through his pupils. Rachmaninov, Glière and Gretchaninov all benefitted from his tutelage and encouragement. **Alexander Gretchaninov** was a late comer to music and only began studies at age 14. His father had no idea of his musical exploits and like Stravinsky, he rebelled against the family, causing them great disappointment at not carrying on the family business. Awarded an annual pension in 1910 by the Tsar in recognition of his contribution to music, he stayed for a few years after the Russian revolution before moving to France and eventually becoming a US citizen, dying at the age of 91 in New York City. The *Sonata Opus 113* was written while Gretchaninov was in his early '60s in 1927 in Paris. It holds that dichotomy between looking forward and looking back. The language is intensely personal and one might even go so far as to call it idiosyncratic.

As a little sorbet between sonatas, we have the *Preludium* by **Nikolay Sokolov**. Sokolov was also a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov and a teacher of Shostakovich. Some muse that he was the first choice to write the music for Dhiagalev's *Firebird* before he settled on Stravinsky. Sadly, he has been swept into obscurity and his three string quartets, his piano trio, not to mention his vocal works are very rarely played. This little gem gives an indication as to his gift of melody and the brilliant use of unexpected harmony.

Mstislav Rostropovich was responsible for championing the works of many composers and none more so than **Sergei Prokofiev**. They collaborated on this sonata after Prokofiev heard Rostropovich premier Miakovsky's second sonata and he felt inspired to write the *Sonata Opus 119* for him and they worked together on the score. In his workings with Prokofiev, Rostropovich made the comment about "how narrow yet unbridgeable, is the gap between the mundane and the sublime". The first performance was with Richter and Rostropovich in 1950 in the presence of Shostakovich who was very appreciative. It was a work written after the instigation of the Resolution of Formalism in music and while composers were being forced to toe the party line with their compositions. This work was approved for performance, however one still feels like it is a composer's true voice, there

is no sense of dilution of musical ideas. After the questioning opening, the grandeur of C major engulfs the finale. The scales that mark the end of this piece have always had me questioning their meaning. Their almost forced positivity reminds me of a story that a Russian friend once told me about citizens being beaten on the legs and told "your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing". That said, that triumphant feeling at the conclusion of this piece is immensely satisfying.

Recorded at Move Records studio on 17, 18, 25 November and 2 December 2014.
Recording and editing: Vaughan McAlley
Mixing and mastering: Martin Wright
Liner notes: Zoë Knighton
Photography: Sarah Walker
Cover treatment: Benjamin Thomas
© 2015 Move Records
move.com.au



Zoe Knighton and **Amir Farid** debuted at Melbourne Recital Centre in 2009 and have released four CDs on the Move label (Mendelssohn cello, Argentine cello, French and Beethoven cello), performed in the ABC Sunday Live series, the Saturday Sessions (ABC), the Port Fairy Spring Music Festival and throughout regional Victoria.

"... a well-balanced partnership indeed."
Clive O'Connell, The Age

"... the phrasing is remarkably sensitive ..."
D. Moore, American Record Guide

"... Knighton and Farid make a sensitive and attentive duo."
Phil Vendy, 2MBS Fine Music Magazine

