

Adagio, Romance and Beyond

Stas Venglevski's new CD is a solid contribution to what is becoming an interesting career. The young Moldavian bayanist, now living in Milwaukee, has built upon his technical skill and is achieving greater maturity and depth. His last CD, *Accordion Illusions*, was a fine work—in fact, a favorite of mine; I called it *fisarmonica pura*. It was simple, direct and moving. The accordion sound and playing were something only an accordion could deliver and the effect was intimate and timeless, like warm-hearted folk music. *Illusions* was totally comprised of Stas' own compositions arranged as solos and duets (with Mike Alongi); there were numerous, thoroughly convincing musette tunes, tangos and Moldavian waltzes. It was a significant accomplishment for a young composer—he displayed a solid talent for melody in creating illusions as satisfying as a French soiree, an Argentinian café or late night in a lonely hut on the Russian Steppes. Also, there were heartfelt tributes to friends and family, as well as a lovely children's suite delivered as a series of well-crafted miniatures suggestive of mice, monkeys, elephants and birds.

While *Illusions'* music was evocative and emotionally satisfying, Stas' playing was greatly improved. He was always a technical whiz (this strength may have been his weakness), but on *Accordion Illusions* he began to reach beyond what was natural and easy; he slowed down, got *within* the pieces and began to find depth. His phrasing started to breathe more easily and he got closer to the emotional and biological center of music.

Proceeding in reverse order: the album before *Accordion Illusions* was *The Nutcracker Suite*; it was a finely transposed and expanded version of the Tchaikovsky ballet in concert form. Stas' performance was thorough and stirring and it could be a perennial favorite for any accordion enthusiast. Now, since we're re-winding Stas' CDs we should note that the *Nutcracker* demonstrated a distinct improvement over his very first CD *Stas!* The CD *Stas!* featured him both on solos and with a quartet (two violins, cello and piano). He was good with the ensemble, though there was a tendency to disappear; the solos were often rushed and misleadingly superficial because of their dash and the lightness of his touch. However, it was easy to tell he was a young man of promise and that this initial CD was just a beginning for someone who may have something significant to offer. What I remember best on *Stas!* was *Por Una Caba-za* (though the bayan part seemed minimal),

Bach's *Toccatà & Fugue in D Minor* (a bit academic, as if Lips was hovering), Astier's *Miss Karting*; crisp and deft, but too flippant and without the necessary admiration and irony intended for la femme. Also included were a number of accordion classics (*Bumble Bee, Jolly Caballero, Flight of the Angels, Carnival of Venice*, etc.). They were all well played, sometimes flashy, but they seemed like earnest student performances. Now, consider this—by the time I first heard his CD I had heard him at a recital and he had already become a better player than was represented on the recording. But don't get me wrong; he wasn't bad on the CD and it's still worthwhile listening (the quartet is excellent), but in terms of Stas' playing, it remains a signpost along the way.

In the middle of the recording resides a nice Children's Suite - it comes as a break, giving the CD a structure. Stas and Mike play the suite beautifully — the mimetic movements representing birds, elephants, mice, cats, the circus, etc., emerge with humor, virtuosity and artistry. Stas' suite is not (nor does it intend to be) a giant-killer in child's clothing like we've heard from Semenyov, Schedrin. Stas' latest CD *Adagio, Romance and Beyond* is his best work to date—and I'd call it a maturing work, because it contains both fulfillment and promise. The album features three new pieces composed especially for the bayan—two by Stas himself. New works dedicated to our instrument are always good news and the fact that they're excellent is great news. It's important for composers (especially accordion/bayan players) to write directly for their instrument. A dedicated repertoire will establish our artists the way composers have defined the piano, violin, etc.; the way Piazzolla defined a genre relative to his instrument (which even had a crossover effect on all instruments and music itself).

Parenthetically, Piazzolla worked for a long time in various tango orchestras, wrote arrangements for them and dreamed of composing classical music. He studied with Ginastera and pursued a lifelong fascination with Bach, Stravinsky, Bartok and Prokofiev and remained conflicted, if not embarrassed, about the tango. He won a contest for a classical composition and in 1954 took advantage of the prize, which was a year's study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger—famous as the teacher of Copland, Thomson, Piston and many others. Piazzolla hid the fact that his instrument was the bandoneon. He wrote his exercises in harmony and counterpoint and did as little as possible at the piano. One day she asked him what his instrument was and he confessed. #

She told him to go back to his apartment and get it. When he played for her, she told him that the bandoneon was his natural instrument and that the music he imagined for it should be his *métier*. Boulanger's "permission" released Piazzolla from his inner conflict and his creativity flourished.

In an analogous way, Stas is searching for his *métier* in his two new works, *Adagio* and *Romance*. They are solid pieces, revealing increased depth—while still remaining linked to his feelings for ethnic music — and they seem to want to be more. The first, longer piece, *Adagio*, is elegiac in feeling, introspective and contains a central section that is a fugue. It's his longest composition to date and a good one comprised of several moods. As he deepens his composing talent I would expect a work like this to find greater complexity, more development of its fugal potential and a denser contrapuntal layering. Some of the shifts in mood could become subtler and more discrete in transition, but all in all, *Adagio* is excellent, reminiscent of his previous *Always and Eternity* and absolutely worth listening to repeatedly. Playing it, he reaches well into the piece's emotional center. Moreover, he's beginning to find a greater facility with silence (not rest) as a musical component. If and when he is able to hang onto notes a few micro-seconds longer, he will have it all. Of course, "hanging onto notes" isn't so much of a criticism here as a hope. The only accordionist I've ever heard hang onto notes with the technique of a Casals or Heifetz was Christine Rossi and from a recent CD I've heard, I don't think she does any longer — perhaps because of influences from the Russian school. But while it lasted, she possessed an astonishing facility that was almost unique among accordion players. Stas is almost there throughout this CD — and that's very good.

His second original piece, *Romance*, is a poignant waltz with nice development as the melody turns upon itself. As it becomes more complicated it has a quality almost like one of Chopin's little gems. Then, there's a fast Astier-like development before it returns to the opening theme—a fine miniature, achieving a great range of feeling in a short time. Throughout this CD I particularly liked the way Stas used *rubato*: holding back (mostly), rushing ahead (just a little and with appropriate taste — accordionists usually cut time horribly); throughout the CD he accomplishes beautifully expressed *diminuendi* and *crescendi*.

Listening to the opening number, *Concert Fantasy on Russian Themes* by Eugene Debenko, I thought the control Stas had over his instru-

ment is the best I've heard him achieve and better than many other bayanists. He's not huffing and puffing notes out the grill, he's finding a voice and singing for us. Also, no matter how fast he's playing now, there's spaciousness within the phrase. I don't want to make exaggerated comparisons, but let me say just by way of explanation: what always impressed me about Glenn Gould's playing was no matter how fast the tempo, it was never rushed, forced or without spaciousness—that's the vocal essence of music. I'm finding a similar spacious quality throughout Stas' playing now and it's thrilling to hear; I can only hope for its continued deepening and development as his repertoire expands. He's getting to the point where he only needs to focus and aspire to a certain kind of material (hopefully including his own compositions) and make it his own, the way Gould did with Bach and Rubinstein did with Chopin. McDowell's *Witches' Dance* is good, but *déjà vu* in a way; Stas is facile, fast, displaying controlled bellows shakes, blistering runs. It's the kind of piece he used to do in an appealing, if superficial way; however, even on something like this he shows maturity.

His Mozart is exceedingly good; clean, clear, impeccably done. He seems to have a definite feeling and a gift for Mozart's music. Twelve Variations on "*Ah vous dirai—je Maman*" K300e (K.265) is based on what we call, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." The melody and harmonic structure are simple and brief; it's not a theme as full of potential as Goldberg's aria or Paganini's *Capriccio #24*. Also, the first three minutes gets a little cloying—the music, not the performance. Mozart is far too slavish to the melody—although that may have been his point: to display how many ingenious, minute variations he could find in the tune. The work has a feel of him showing off his facility and wicked playfulness, rather than reaching for art. However, after the three minute mark it gets more complicated and interesting, gaining in contrapuntal density and perhaps glancing back over its shoulder at Bach, though never reaching that level (or intending to). I think it was a work meant to tickle the fancy of children and/or amuse the court. Stas gives it a brilliant reading. He seems to find the heart of each variation and reveal its voice with a perfect feel for Mozart; I think a devotee of Wolfgang's of any musical instrumental persuasion would find it convincing. The only comparison I will make is that in listening to Lips play Mozart's *Andante* and *Allegro Fur ein Orgelwerk in einer Uhr* (KV594), Lips seems to miss the mark. The music composed for an "organ in a clock" sounds both unlike Mozart and more in keeping with a giant pipe organ in #

ceeded his teacher.

a gothic cathedral. Stas is a superb Mozart performer here and in my estimation has exceeded his teacher.

I find *Bayan and Beyond* by Dan Lawitts an intriguing piece. The First Movement is percussive and tense, seeking through chromatic runs and dissonance for some kind of center or hope. It's fleeing and fleeting — tension building, with a hint of Russian themes behind a curtain of modernist pretensions, yet melodic. Even the use of the bayan's air release is not just a gimmick. This is a live recording and not without some flaws for not having been done in a controlled environment, but I think it's all the more exciting for being live. The chamber group is good, even if there's some bunching up of acoustics in the hall. I think Janet Millard did an excellent job pulling a complicated piece into an integrated experience. Stas is superb. The bayan soars above the orchestra without fear or reticence and takes its place as a clear solo instrument without need of footnotes or excuses. I was thrilled and listened to it over and over. Lawitts has created a fine vehicle for the instrument and for a player like Stas. The Second Movement, called *Tangoesque*, has a Piazzolla flavor, but an integrity of its own; homage without sycophancy. It develops poignancy, too, as Stas and the orchestra survey a Nuevo Tango milieu. The Third Movement continues the Piazzolla mood as Ballad. It's reflective, a bit haunting, not as strong as the second movement, but the meditation is worthwhile. The Fourth Movement returns to the percussive urgency of the First. Again, there is nice tympani and xylophone work playing against the bayan — this is a surprisingly good sound; it creates a sense of interplay and tension and the sharp percussive attack allows the bayan's plaintive qualities to stand out and avoid the tonal redundancy of so many compositions that try to fit a bayan/accordion into an orchestral setting and end up sounding like free reed mush among the strings. *Bayan and Beyond* is direct and forthright; sometimes it's in your face and sometimes it's poignant — it's not afraid to shout or weep. I thought the concept of the orchestration, its mix of sounds, exploited the bayan's potential wonderfully as the solo instrument played with, against and soared above the ensemble.

This is a worthy CD and a solid move in Stas' development. It's satisfying in and of itself and full of the promise of things to come. I was impressed with Stas' greater maturity and depth and I certainly recommend it.

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