

Russian Fantasy – CD Review

This is an excellent CD, which has at its heart seven variations on Russian themes (as duets) that capture the fire, melancholy and joy Stas and Misha (Mikhail Litvin) created in a series of concerts. There are also six originals by Stas. Stas and Misha include two solos and there is an intriguing duet with Theresa Sanchez. It's a generous and satisfying collection, and the elements are heartfelt enough to be like a great Russian film where you fall in love, laugh and cry along with the characters.

The CD opens with *Lara's Theme*. It's a reflective and meditative prelude. It made me recall *Zhivago's* interlude when Yuri and Lara shared their wintry passion. I could imagine the luminous presence of Julie Christie and Omar Sharif. While it is a perfect way to start a concert with living performers and our expectations visually stimulated, the piece exists in audio space here and a more stand-alone (less languid) approach was needed. But ignore my quibbling, *Lara* ends with a lovely ritardando and diminuendo and I can easily imagine a hush falling over an audience.

Following a curtain-raising *Lara*, we turn to *Oh Ti Zimushka Zima* (Russian Winter). It starts softly, as if Lara lingered. Stas quietly anticipates the approach of snowfall with hints of the wind gusting across the Steppes—soon we're struggling in the clutches of winter. Stas and Misha face the elements, bear up under it, until at midpoint—after the wind returns—they can no longer contain themselves and break into a dance that celebrates life in spite of life—a quintessentially Russian virtue.

The arrangements by Shalaev, Detal, Tzigarikov, Derbenko, Diniky and Andreyev are excellent, and the players inhabit them passionately. These melodies are heartfelt and speak volumes about an entire culture, and the variants lay bare the joy and melancholy of the Russian soul.

Folk theme & variations is an interesting form when essayed by master musicians as it is here. It creates an illusion that we're sharing more than a beginning-middle-end experience. We're concelebrating a collective experience. There is a pulse that's both centrifugal and centripetal when we harmonically navigate these themes—it's an emotional vortex. Stas and Misha gather star power as they ring-around harmonic centers; it's similar to the way actors are illuminated by playing characters in a dramatic context, or how jazz artists create gravitational pull as they orbit in an expressive universe. A concentric effect happens when the theme material is taken from common songs, folk songs and familiar dances that bare the soul of a people; we have preexisting emotional bonds. The bonding creates a different experience than when we hear *The Goldberg Variations* or the numerous variations of Paganini's *Capriccio*—we have deeper, lifelong psychological associations. An analogy: the American Songbook stirs our emotional roots and the jazz variants essentially tell our collective stories—the story may be simple, complex and open to interpretation, but it is fabricating (viz. Latin fabricare) meaning. I interpolate stories in this review to try to convey (as best words can) some of the dimensions of the music and performances.

Misha plays a beautiful solo of *Tonkaia Riabina* (Mountain Ash). The control, passion and directness of his playing are heartbreaking. When a sophisticated and accomplished artist speaks so simply, it has tremendous impact.

I don't have to elaborate on Stas' talent; he's a brilliant artist and his performances are excellent here. Also, I felt Misha inspired him (& vice versa). He is impassioned, always involved in the inner life and meaning of the music, and by turns supportive, competitive and deferential—without contradiction. The duets are heated and affectionate dialogues.

The duo confirms *fusion* with *Korobeiniki*. The aesthetic bonding that began during the last half of *Winter* immediately reintroduces itself via a series of heraldic chords. The artists have tapped

into each other on the intuitive level and are playing beyond notes, instruments and separate identities. Misha calmly states *Korobeiniki's* theme and they begin a poetic adventure; it starts and stops, builds, bounces back and forth, accelerates — until it inscribes a circle of pure joy.

When I first heard *Intermezzo* played on a solo accordion, I was skeptical about a 6/8 rhythm that suppresses the last two beats. Misha's mandolin fills the phrases nicely and I better understood the effect: a lingering tension suggesting pathos. Stas and Misha question and answer and play over & under each other perfectly. I really liked the inquiring quality of the second theme.

Chance Acquaintance is a waltz that seems as much French as Russian, but it's compatible with our titular "fantasy." I liked the antiphonal interplay between the bayan and mandolin—it created a sense of two people dancing. The rhythmic flow was exquisite; the dynamics of the phrasing perfectly done.

Misha plays guitar on *Summer Sunshine*, and Stas supplies a harmonic background of sustained basses. I'm not fond of sustained basses, but Stas chose his registers well, avoided automated overload and played nicely under the guitar. It's essentially Misha's solo and he sustains a lingering mood—we're lost in the dreamlike suspension of a summer's day—with an undercurrent of transience in the second movement.

Summer Sunshine's Return is a shapely solo by Stas. It's a happy, carefree waltz that suggests people coming out of their houses after a rainy day; it has the innocence, sweetness and natural sing-song quality of children playing.

Two-Step takes the eponymous dance and begins formally, as if introducing village dancers, then brings to life a feast day full of happiness and vodka. When the variations become more complex and the volume and tempi increase, I could easily imagine the men and women expanding in athleticism until Stas' bellows-shaking chorus brings the Moiseyev troop onstage.

Tango Commander is a "march" tango. Theresa Sanchez performs beautifully on the piano and it's an interesting addition to the program. The piece seems alternately emotional and serio-comic with some nice note bending by Stas. The music weaves a complex mood of passion, sophistication and nostalgia, along with the entanglements of self-mockery and a broken heart. Glissandi and pounding sound clusters combine with simulated cannons. There are some abrupt changes, surprises, but the phrasing is always impeccable and the dynamics superb. Both players are excellent and I've never heard better expressiveness from Stas. The more I listened the more I liked it—and it ends with a quizzical bang.

Travushka-Muravushka starts with a big intro, which sets up Misha's poignant performance of the theme. Some of the variants are sad, others coy and flirtatious; the movements varied from ballet *en pointe* to abandoned folk dancing. The diversity cast a wide emotional net and I liked how finely etched each impression was; it was like a series of short stories by Babel.

Vidu Ya Na Rechenku is a solo by Misha. It's beautifully played and encompasses an emotional arc of vulnerability that is especially powerful when we come full circle and he restates the theme — it seems like an anthem to simplicity.

Spring Dance opens with a sense of pathos, a lingering, almost Jewish lament before racing into a quick stepping dance that has a thread of oriental tonality (& syncopation), and then abandons ethnicity and any memory of winter as the players race faster and faster (in unison) towards rebirth and forgetfulness.

When I first played the CD and *Midnight Waltz* began, I thought, "This is a fine, old Russian waltz." I forgot it was Stas' composition. It's beautifully played, and rhythmically perfect; it breathes like

our lungs and beats like our hearts—it flows as naturally as the confession of a soul. Misha adds a great deal of emotional depth. The interplay is lovely. It conjures up an image of a late night in a Russian cafe. Everyone is tired; most have left. The orchestra plays one last number for a couple; it's a last dance—they're soon to part. They slowly waltz around the sawdust-laden floor unable to contemplate the moment when the song will end. When Misha reaches into the lower registers, it's like the man's lament and he answers an octave higher like a woman's tears. It's lovely.

Stas' and Misha's duets end with probably the most famous Russian song: *Bright Shines the Moon*. The duo is in complete emotional sync, pushing the envelope, nearly overreaching, but not quite. Their interweaving voices race and challenge each other, all the while turning up the tempo in that wonderful Russian tradition of heartfelt extravagance. It's a beautiful climax and they leave the stage in flames. (*A minor glitch: an abrupt edit at the end of Moon cuts the resonance of the final notes, but doesn't diminish the fireworks.*)

The last selection, *Fantasy*, is an original composition by Stas and a solo. It begins with a haunting theme played on the bass against a repetitive treble tremolo that instantly creates a mood, a sense of separation and distance, a feeling of contrast, light and shadow—a sense of nostalgia and loss, the slipping away of time. There are several arresting movements, each developing a fantasy, a sense of story. The work is reflective and moving. Stas has a rare talent for being able to establish emotional impressions with just a few notes. The final fading tremolo is lovely and I found myself returning to this piece many times.

I like this CD. Stas, Misha and Theresa perform all of the selections with joy, respect and wonder—and their talent and enthusiasm have been captured forever.

Dr. Paul Allan Magistretti,
The Free-Reed Journal, Inc.