

Stas & Sam – CD Review

Stas Venglevski, bayanist, and Samantha George, violinist, have given us a different impression of "Winter" and "Summer" from the very well-known "The Four Seasons" by Antonio Vivaldi. "The Four Seasons" is without a doubt the most famous of all the works by Vivaldi, born in Venice in 1678 and dying in Vienna in 1741. Published in 1725, with the additional "Spring" and "Autumn" seasons included, it is a set of twelve concerti wherein each concerto is in the unmistakable form of fast-slow-fast movements. Vivaldi also wrote individual Sonnets to accompany each of the movements. Musicologists and music historians often suggest that listeners also read the words of the Sonnets which are so aptly bound to the music.

Concert goers everywhere have heard numerous arrangements of "The Four Seasons." Since the composer was known to have used many different instruments (some now long disappeared) in performances of compositions by himself and others, he undoubtedly would have welcomed this violin/bayan duo recording of "Winter" and "Summer." Stas Venglevski and Samantha George play exceedingly well together, with technique to spare, and with skillful treatment of the Baroque ornamentations. Vivaldi was the first composer to give the slow movement of a concerto equal importance with the two allegros; this duo also captures the necessary moods required in following the descriptive words of the attendant Sonnets.

It seems entirely appropriate that this recording opens with Vivaldi and ends with Vivaldi while including both older and newer original and arranged music for the bayan with another instrument in between. >Vivaldi was a "tireless experimenter in sound." He was also an ingenious exploiter of what are often called "sound effects," taking an almost childish pleasure in imitating the sounds of animals and birds.

World-class bayanist, Stas Venglevski, is also emerging as an engaging composer and, in this recording, shows his aptitude for portraying the antics of cats, birds, penguins and mice through four pieces entitled: "Cats' Ball, Fluttering Birds, Penguin Parade, and Mice Party Polka" in Selections from "Animal Suite" now arranged even more picturesquely for violin and bayan. These are attractive, fun pieces, reminiscent of Evgeny Derberko's compositions! Both artists play with just the right flair and rhythmic verve.

Alfred Schnittke (1934 – 1998) wrote the "Suite in Olden Style" (Note: Schnittke did not use Opus numbers, others have listed them only as a means of identification.) for Violin and Piano (or Harpsichord) in 1972. There are at least two other arrangements of this special Suite, one for instrumental ensemble in 1991, and one for violoncello and piano. Schnittke actually composed a "Concerto for Accordion and Orchestra, Op. 1" in 1949 as a young boy, but it has been lost. Alfred Schnittke was a prolific composer with many successful film credits. This is a particularly melodic composition, one which the listener will immediately enjoy. The Russian bayanist, Friedrich Lips, has also arranged and recorded music by Schnittke.

"Machine Gun Tango" by Mark Mantel (b. 1961) was written at the request of Stas Venglevski. The composer states, "the Machine Gun Tango provided me with a unique and fun challenge; mainly, to indulge my 'romantic' side, within the context of my current compositional project. In the midst of an ongoing antiwar/pro-peace series of interdisciplinary works (The Machine Gun series) I was able to fuse fragments of melodic lines and harmonies, and specific musical behaviors from the Machine Gun series with the exciting and decidedly more universal language of the Tango. The result is an edgy, quirky, yet sensual work that you could, potentially, dance to!" Mark Mantel is a perfect example of a very busy, contemporary composer who writes for dance, experimental theatre, multimedia, cross-disciplinary collaborations, the orchestra, as well as traditional chamber ensembles, electronic and tape media. It is just the sort of compositional demands placed upon Vivaldi during his lifetime of successful composing, and one more reason why compositions by both Vivaldi and Mantel fit so convincingly on this recording.

Alexander Tzigankov (Tsygankov) is a professor in the Gnessin Academy in Moscow. He is known as Russia's premiere domra soloist. Along with his pianist wife, he has toured widely throughout the world for over 30 some years. Tzigankov is also one of the leading composers of music for the Russian domra and is represented on this CD by his composition, "Two-Step," which also serves as the title for this recording by Stas Venglevski and Samantha George.

One may not recognize the name of Grigoraș Dinicu (1889 – 1948) unless it is associated with the famous violinist, Jascha Heifetz, who recorded his arrangement of "Hora Staccato" with great popular success. Dinicu was extremely popular as a Romanian virtuoso violinist and a composer. On this recording we hear his "Spring Dance," which is just one of his many compositions and one which is extremely suitable for Stas and Sam to include.

Each of the compositions heard on this recording is exciting, interesting, and very well executed. The listener has many different styles in which to enjoy both the music and the performers. Each CD track is engaging, while offering very distinctive views of the possibilities for two exceptional musicians playing a wide variety of composers, compositions and styles. Stas Venglevski has been unfailingly consistent in his search for, and the promotion of, new compositions for the bayan, whether for solo or with other instruments. He has also continued his own numerous activities as composer, pedagogue, and conductor in addition to his career as a performer.

The CD "STAS & SAM" - TWO STEP is now widely available. The number is SV014. It is most certainly recommended.

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