



RACHMANINOFF Prelude in c#. *Russian Rhapsody* in e. Suites Nos. 1, "Fantaisie (Tableaux)," and 2. *The Rock*. Romance in G. *Polka Italienne*. *Six Morceaux for Piano Four-Hands*, op. 11. *Capriccio bohémien on Gypsy Themes*. *Symphonic Dances* • Genova & Dimitrov Pn Duo

At the core of piano duo music, particularly in Russia, stand three works by Rachmaninoff, the Suites Nos. 1 and 2 and the *Symphonic Dances*. The writing is so completely pianistic, so glittering and virtuosic, in these works that you have to remind yourself that they come from very different periods in the composer's life. Suite No. 1 was completed in 1893, the year he turned 20, and the *Symphonic Dances* 47 years later in 1940 in Hollywood, becoming his last major work. Unless you take an intense interest in Rachmaninoff, these are the duo piano scores you know, disregarding that he might have written others that linger in obscurity.

Even the two Suites were relatively unknown in the West before Decca recorded them with Vladimir Ashkenazy and André Previn around 1980. Having listened to all the music that Rachmaninoff composed for two pianos or piano four-hands, thanks to this convenient collection from the Genova and Dimitrov Duo, I feel fairly confident in saying that no hidden masterpieces linger in the shadows. The three main works are the masterpieces. They have been recorded by stellar pianists on the order of Martha Argerich, Nelson Freire, Emanuel Ax, Yefim Bronfman, Evgeny Kissin and James Levine (on YouTube there's a spectacular performance by Daniil Trifonov and his one-time teacher Sergei Babayan), so finding room for one more rendition seems like adding to an already loaded shelf.

Happily, Aglika Genova and Liuben Dimitrov deserve a special place, beginning with the fact that they are an established duo, which gives them an advantage over star pianists who join forces for an *ad hoc* recital. As a duo, Genova and Dimitrov don't simply play with accurate ensemble—no easy feat, for example, when it comes to the dazzling *moto perpetuo* that is the second piece in Suite No. 2. They form an artistic whole, making you believe that one musical mind has created a real interpretation, as fully thought through as a solo pianist alone. Both have a lovely touch, sensitive phrasing, and solo-quality technique. One of the most basic things

about these performances happens to be important to me: the piano action isn't noisy and intrusive. Knowing the versions of the two Suites recorded by the pianists mentioned above, I can attest that I've never heard the music played with so little clatter.

Add the vivid, lifelike recorded sound from CPO, which manages to be close without magnifying the pianos' mechanism, and the result is eminently worth hearing even if you take no interest in anything but the three main works. Russian piano culture has focused on piano duos far more than in the West. Josef and Rosina Lhévinne performed and recorded as a duo, and when the chess grandmaster Mark Taimanov lost crushingly (6–0) to Bobby Fisher on his meteoric rise to the world championship in 1972, Taimanov wryly commented, "I still have my music." He was half of a famous piano duo with Lyubov Bruk—they were recognized in Philips' *Great Pianists of the 20th Century* series.

Pieces I have little familiarity with, like the very early, pleasantly Tchaikovskian *Russian Rhapsody* from 1891 and the gypsy-flavored *Caprice bohémien* from 1894, are enduring repertoire at home—all the more, I imagine, when it comes to much more popular works like the Prelude in C# Minor arranged for two pianos and *Polka italienne*. But I was most struck by the two-piano arrangement of *The Rock*, Rachmaninoff's atmospheric symphonic poem from 1893 that sounds to me like a trial run for *The Isle of the Dead*, although far less gloomy. The orchestral version barely hangs on to the standard repertoire in the West, but the piano duo arrangement feels as if the piece was originally composed for that format. The writing seems to fit perfectly into the style of Suite No. 1 and is very much worth hearing.

With so much going for it, I can strongly recommend this release even to collectors who feel that the two Suites and *Symphonic Dances* are enough. The beautiful playing by Genova and Dimitrov more than justifies looking a little deeper. **Huntley Dent**