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➔ (+++++) 20 FINGERS, 88 TO 176 KEYS

Rachmaninoff: Complete Music for Piano Duo. Genova & Dimitrov Piano Duo (Aglika Genova and Liuben Dimitrov). CPO. \$33.99 (2 CDs).

Rachmaninoff - composer, conductor and famously virtuosic pianist - produced an amazing amount of wonderful and largely unknown music for *two* pianists, either playing separate instruments or performing on one piano, four hands. The neglect of this material seems both impossible to understand and perfectly comprehensible in light of the superb new CPO recording in which the Genova & Dimitrov Piano Duo present all of it. The impossibility of understanding comes from the fact that these pieces span Rachmaninoff's entire compositional life, from his student days until his very last major work: it seems simply unconscionable that these pieces are not better-known. But the neglect becomes perfectly understandable through listening to this remarkable release: these are exceptionally difficult works to play, and it requires pianists who are not only virtuoso performers but also in perfect accord as to the handling of this music to put it across successfully. How many piano duos are there that can do this?

Thank goodness there is at least this one. The near-intuitive way in which Aglika Genova and Liuben Dimitrov present this music is simply wonderful to hear: the performances reach beyond exceptional to the level of remarkable. No matter how familiar listeners are with Rachmaninoff's music, this two-CD set will give them new perspectives on what he wrote, how he wrote it, and what he intended it to communicate. This release is a genuinely enlightening experience.

This is not to say that all the music here is "great," by any means. Most of it dates to the 1890s, when Rachmaninoff was in his 20s and just feeling his way into compositional territory beyond that of Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Arensky. But even the earlier and/or lesser works here are revelatory. *Capriccio bohémien on Gypsy Themes, Op. 12*, shows Rachmaninoff channeling Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, not fully effectively but with considerable sensitivity to what can be done with a single piano played with four hands. The little *Polka Italienne*, also for piano four hands, shows Rachmaninoff delightfully donning the guise of Johann Strauss Jr., as big a surprise as can be contained in a work lasting less than two minutes. And the composer's two-piano version of the ubiquitous *Prélude in C-sharp minor, Op. 3, No. 2* takes that exceptionally familiar work to a new communicative level that displays it in a different aspect from the usual - highly successfully.

There are fascinating contrasts in this release, which shed light of distinct types on Rachmaninoff's thinking about composition and about the uses to which the piano or pianos can be put. The very early *Russian Rhapsody* for two pianos, for example, emerges as a set of variations on a folklike tune that Rachmaninoff apparently composed himself - and in addition to its rhapsodic feeling and variations form, it also displays elements of symphonic construction, with a clear opening section, scherzo-like passages, an *Andante*

portion, and then a finale. Written when the composer was just 18, four years before his Symphony No. 1, this piece already shows Rachmaninoff figuring out his own approach to large-scale musical works - and doing so in a piece that lasts less than 10 minutes. There is a strong contrast between the *Russian Rhapsody* and the version for piano four hands of *The Rock, Op. 7*, written just two years later and one of the more-familiar pieces played by the Genova & Dimitrov Piano Duo. *The Rock* is a moving tone poem that is packed with the sort of dour emotion heard so often in Rachmaninoff's music - and in the piano-four-hands version, the elements that bring forth the melancholy impression of the material come through with even more clarity than in the orchestral version.

Then there are the two suites for two pianos - the earlier from 1893, the later from 1901. Each is in four movements, but the way Rachmaninoff uses the form is quite different in the two pieces and provides considerable insight into the contrasts in his thinking before the disastrous debut of his Symphony No. 1 and after his recovery from the period of compositional aridity that followed that work's first performance. *Suite No. 1 "Fantaisie (Tableaux)," Op. 5*, is straightforwardly pictorial and has some lovely tone painting of a type not often associated with Rachmaninoff. Its movements are "Barcarolle," "Night...Love," "Tears," and "Easter," with the cascading notes of the third movement and the ringing of bells in all registers of the pianos in the fourth being highlights of the many well-chosen effects. *Suite No. 2, Op. 17*, is much more orchestral in construction. Its movements are "Introduction," "Valse," "Romance," and "Tarantella," and the first three of them all fade away instead of ending decisively - a curious and oddly affecting effect that allows the highly extroverted finale to wrap things up particularly clearly.

And there is still more fascination in this compelling release. *6 Morceaux, Op. 11*, for piano four hands, would seem a relative trifle on the basis of its title and the bland designations of its movements: "Barcarolle," "Scherzo," "Thème russe," "Valse," "Romance," and "Glory (Slava)." But while the first three movements are comparatively straightforward, as befits a piece intended as much for amateur players as for a professional recital, the other three are anything but ordinary. "Valse" comes across as a dramatic operatic scene in three parts - all in less than four minutes. "Romance," far from being straightforwardly tender, is eerie and considerably more chromatic than would be expected in the mid-1890s for a work of this type. And "Glory (Slava)" is on an altogether larger scale than the other movements, to such an extent that it somewhat overshadows a work it is intended to complete. The Genova & Dimitrov Piano Duo also treat listeners to another piano-four-hands piece aimed at amateur players, a *Romance in G* that, unlike the one in *6 Morceaux*, comes and goes pleasantly in less than two minutes and does not strive to be more than a salon piece.

And then there is the climactic work offered here: Rachmaninoff's two-piano version of his remarkable *Symphonic Dances, Op. 45*. Hearing this culmination of the composer's creativity in two-piano guise proves genuinely revelatory: the intricacy of the music comes through beautifully, the rhythmic changes and highlights are exceptionally clear, the mood changes throughout the three movements are communicated with tremendous skill, and - not to put too fine a point on it - this version proves every bit as satisfying as the orchestral one, and that is really saying something. Aglika Genova and Liuben Dimitrov are truly exceptional performers and truly exceptional interpreters of Rachmaninoff: the two-and-a-half hours spent with their readings of his works for dual pianists not only provide tremendous listening pleasure but also offer, again and again, substantial insight into the composer and some new and enthralling ways of hearing and responding to his music.