



Sergei RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)
 Complete Works for Piano Duo
 Genova & Dimitrov Piano Duo rec. 2018/19
CPO 555 326-2 [2 CDs: 144:33] [RCH]

Marvellous playing and a couple of rarities to boot.

Sergei RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)

Complete works for piano duo

- Prélude in C sharp minor Op.3 No.2 (1892; Two pf arr. 1938) [3:20]
- Russian rhapsody in E minor, TN ii/23 for 2 pianos (1891) [9:03]
- Suite No.1 Fantaisie (tableaux) Op.5 for 2 pianos (1893) [20:27]
- The Rock, symphonic poem Op.7 for piano 4 hands (1893) [11:58]
- Suite No.2 Op.17 for 2 pianos (1900-01) [23:15]
- Romance in G, TN ii/20 for piano 4 hands (1894?) [1:57]
- Polka Italienne, TN ii/21 for piano 4 hands (1906?) [1:43]
- 6 Morceaux Op.11 for piano 4 hands (1894) [24:06]
- Capriccio bohémien on gypsy themes Op.12 piano 4 hands (1892/94) [14:59]
- Symphonic dances Op.45 for 2 pianos (1940) [32:38]
- Genova & Dimitrov Piano Duo
 rec. 2018/19, WDR Funkhaus, Köln
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There are many recordings of Rachmaninoff's works for two pianos or of his duos, and many a mix-and-match collection as well. Unless you count the composer's two piano versions of the Piano concertos or the Piano duo version of the First Symphony, the Genova & Dimitrov Duo has indeed recorded here the complete works for two pianists at one or two pianos.

The famous *Prelude in C sharp minor*, from the early set of *Morceaux* op.3, may have been the bane of Rachmaninoff's life (he said that he often wished he had never written it) but there is no sense of that in this version. All the pathos of the original and an even more virtuosic central section flies over the keyboard with abandon in this enthusiastic performance. The arrangement was published in 1938 by Charles Foley in New York and the booklet couples that date with the 1937 Marx Brothers film *A day at the races* in which Harpo wrecks the piano playing this *Prelude*; the suggestion is that Rachmaninoff may have used this arrangement to secure his creative property rights.

The performances of the two suites are as good as any I have heard, joyous and exuberant in the more virtuoso movements and as delicate and lyrical as you could wish for in the opening *barcarolle* of the first suite. Nestled between these, is the composer's representation of Lermontoff's poem *The Rock* and a scene from Chekhov's *Along the way*. Tchaikowsky was so impressed by this work that he offered to take it with him on his next European tour; alas, this was not to be. The orchestral premiere was given in March, 1894 by Vasily Safanoff (1852-1918) some months after Tchaikowsky's death. This duo version is what Tchaikowsky heard on a September evening played by Rachmaninoff and Sergei Taneyeff (1856-1915) alongside the Suite op.5 and he was "enthusiastic over its colourfulness". It certainly contains some vivid scene painting; we can see the golden cloud that had rested on the rock "airily playing in the breeze" in the dancing triplets of the opening and the craggy rock left behind "deep in thought as it quietly drops a tear into the wilderness" is amply portrayed by the dark bass notes at the end.

Two short duets close disc one; the familiar jaunty strains of the *Italian polka* are preceded by beautiful miniature, the *Romance in G*, written around the same time as the six *Morceaux* op.11 for piano duet but without the grander canvasses that those short pieces inhabit. The six *Morceaux* are a marvellous collection; a *Barcarolle* redolent with the heady warmth of the opening of the movement of the first suite, the tripping, playful *Scherzo*, the *Thème Russe*, dignified and noble. The *Valse* is puckish in its moods whilst the yearning struggles of the *Romance* stir deeper waters than the earlier *Romance in G*. The closing *Slava* with its theme *Glory to the sun*, used by Beethoven, Arensky and Mussorgsky, is a grand finale full of driving rising harmonies and the sounds of joyous bells ringing out over the rich paean.

The other rarity here is the duo version of the *Capriccio bohémien on gypsy themes*; this version brings clarity to the writing although the piece is still rather long for its material and it doesn't sound as natural in its writing as *The rock*. There are no such concerns regarding late *Symphonic Dances*, Rachmaninoff's final opus and for me one of his best orchestral works; both the orchestral and the two piano version recorded here are masterful, the colour of the original transferred to the notes of the piano with assuredness and imagination. The Genova & Dimitrov Duo make as strong an impression here as on the rest of the disc and if I might ask for a touch more nonchalance in the *tempo di valse*, that is an extremely minor quibble. With this piece, the discs have come full circle (no pun intended) from his last arrangement to his last work and the Genova & Dimitrov Duo sign off with a grand show of fantasy and drama in this kaleidoscopic work.

The notes to this disc, in German and English are comprehensive – the English section alone comprises 14 pages of small print with a two-page biography. It is interesting reading, though I have to say it takes some concentration; it travels chronologically, interweaving Rachmaninoff's life with his work but there are occasional flashbacks, many quotations and some convoluted sentences.

The Genova & Dimitrov Duo, comprising Aglika Genova and Liuben Dimitrov, formed after a serendipitous meeting at a piano competition in Korea and have a rich discography under their belt, from Bartok and Babin to Schnittke and Shostakovich. This is a worthy addition to this repertoire and to the Rachmaninoff discography.