

Dance of Shadows • Roman Mints, violin

Sound recording, which caused such a revolution in the performing arts, has also led inexorably to their crisis. Before recordings existed, there were only rare opportunities to hear any given piece, so comparing performances was no easy matter. A contemporary of Brahms's would have been able to hear his symphonies only a few times during his life. Now anyone can listen to any of Brahms's symphonies without leaving his house, in hundreds of different versions, with two clicks of a mouse. Before, a person would go to a concert expressly to hear a particular work; now he goes so he can tick off yet another interpretation of a work he has heard a hundred times.

Since sound-recording began, the professions of performer and composer have diverged enormously and the performer, not being a genuine creator, naturally enough feels a constant need to prove his existence to himself and to others – and it is recordings that provide the fundamental platform for such proof. Every “self-respecting” violinist is determined to leave his versions of the concertos of Tchaikovsky, Brahms and Sibelius to posterity, and thus over the past century the market has been glutted with recordings of the “gold reserves” of the violin repertoire. (The violin is my personal example; the piano repertoire is of course vastly more extensive.) Given over a hundred interpretations, any possible interest must surely be sated for years to come, if not for ever. Naturally in most of them similar performance decisions have been made, not only because “that’s the way it’s done” but also because it is rather foolish to diverge from the composer’s wishes and the natural flow of the music simply in an attempt to be original. The last time I heard something new in the 3rd Movement of the Tchaikovsky concerto was on YouTube in a *bayan* (Russian accordion) performance by Alexandr Khrustevich: what was new was precisely that it was played on the *bayan*, and it struck me that, had such expertise on this instrument existed in Tchaikovsky’s day, he might well have written this music for the *bayan* – which suits it much better.

So now we have reached the point where new recordings of mainstream repertoire are basically of interest only to the performers themselves and their hardcore fans. A few years ago, an executive of one of the largest recording companies told me with horror that the new recording by a well-known violinist of the Tchaikovsky concerto had sold only a comical 500 copies. But if my collection includes Oistrakh and Heifetz, how many more recordings could I possibly want? Could there conceivably be anything new to hear in them?

I have been pondering these matters for ages, and I have concluded that to have a moral right to make a recording it must be one I would want in my own collection. I need to be sure I am offering the listener something no-one has offered him before. Up to a point this can be accomplished by performing new music – that’s clearly the easiest solution. But contemporary classical music is going through its own crisis – a subject large enough for a number of books, most of which have already been written by the Moscow composer Vladimir Martynov. Basically there is just not enough good new music to occupy a performer as hungry for pieces to perform as I am. Then there are further possibilities afforded by rarely-performed pieces and, finally, by well-known compositions where I can find something new to say.

The present disc contains a number pieces, each close to my heart for very personal reasons. I will mention a few of them here.

The story of this album begins during my college days, when I was studying with Professor Felix Andriyevsky; my Teacher and I were working on the interpretation of Eugène Ysaÿe’s Sonata No. 2, a piece I had never been really happy with my performances of. Over the years I would occasionally return to it (at home, not in concerts), trying to pin down something specific I felt but could never manage to express on the violin – something I had always also found lacking in the interpretations of other violinists, of which I had listened to

many. I was particularly exercised by the beginning of the first movement, *Obsession*. Ysaÿe famously quotes Bach's Preludio from the Partita no. 3; this is the soil from which the obsession of the first movement grows, and at the end Bach's theme mingles with Ysaÿe's own material. It was obvious to me that the appearances of the "delusion" – the Bach theme – should create the feeling of delirium or hallucinations in the mind of the protagonist, who is throughout in a state of extreme excitement. But making this happen without using "special effects" seemed impossible. Then one day it came to me that instead of fruitlessly slogging away trying to create the effect of sounds coming from somewhere far off, it was the source of the sound *itself* that needed to move – and each time move to a different place. This could be done using a montage effect, rather like a cinematic montage. I put my idea to the sound engineer Maria Soboleva, and thanks to her talent and expertise we finally got there in October 2012 in Studio No. 1 of GDRZ in Moscow. I moved around the studio, clambered up onto the balcony and the choir stalls and so on, and managed to produce the exact effect I had heard in my mind's ear for many years. I should add that while working on this sonata, the piece became so much "mine" that I allowed myself here and there to interfere with the written notes. I hope I will be forgiven this sin; as everyone knows, solo violin playing always involves a certain freedom with the composed text.

As soon as I got this idea for performing the Ysaÿe sonata, I realised I should adopt the same approach with another piece in my repertoire, Schnittke's *A Paganini*. This piece which I think encapsulates the myth of Paganini much more effectively than the music of the "Devil's violinist" himself explodes at its climax with a collage from Paganini's *Caprices*. Since I feel this collage represents another sort of delirium, using this "spatial orchestration" (as I called the method) seemed entirely appropriate.

Dobrinka Tabakova's piece *Spinning a Yarn*, for violin and *kolesnaya lira* (Russian hurdy-gurdy) is for me the most personal of these pieces, since

Dobrinka wrote it as a present for my two then unborn twins, Eva and Ilya. The *kolesnaya lira* is a simple version of the western hurdy-gurdy; in Russia it was most often used to accompany the singing of spiritual poetry by beggars and vagrants. For one of my birthdays my fiancée Anna gave me a *kolesnaya lira* specially made for me by the Moscow craftsman Alexandr Zhukovsky, and on this recording I play both instruments using multi-tracking.

There were two starting-points in preparing Piazzolla's Etude No. 2: firstly the composer's markings *Anxieux et rubato*, and secondly the many recordings made by Piazzolla himself, in which he never exactly follows his own text. We placed the microphone so as to produce a more "pop" than "classical" sound – whatever that means.

The programme ends with Silvestrov's *Postlude*. What interests me with this composer is that he writes very precise directions for the interpretation he wants. Every note carries a dynamic and rhythmic mark; this method might be a result of his early "serial" period. After several attempts to faithfully observe all the written markings, you attain a new level of *rubato* playing – achieving freedom through complete self-control. Since the composer himself characterises his music as an echo of something already written ("My music is a response to and an echo of what already exists"), in this recording we placed the violin as far away as possible in order to create the right effect.

For each piece, then, we tried to find the right sound, not only through how I played, but also by using different placings of the microphone in each piece. During the editing process I realised we had accomplished what we wanted when our editor Elena Sych asked me whether I had actually used different instruments in the various pieces.