

Large Stage Live!

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A Russian Treasury in Music

Magnificent riches from seven great Russian composers are presented for our enjoyment in the newest album from the Cheng²Duo, entitled *Russian Legends*.

It's hard to imagine a more comprehensive collection covering the Russian repertoire for the cello and piano -- or to imagine one played with more care and thought. The Duo, consisting of Bryan Cheng (cello) and Silvie Cheng (piano), take us through this diverse and challenging repertoire with equal measures of imagination, insight, tonal beauty, and structural power.

The foundation of this remarkable 2-CD album is formed of three great sonatas for cello and piano by Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich, and Prokofiev. Surrounding these major masterworks we find a selection of shorter pieces from these composers, as well as from Glazunov, Tchaikovsky, Arensky and Scriabin.

The very first track in the album sets the standard. We hear a lush, deeply romantic cello-piano version of the love duet *Adagio* from Prokofiev's last ballet, *Cinderella*. Such is the range from intimacy to grandeur of Silvie Cheng's playing and the sweeping arc of the lyrical line under Bryan Cheng's bow that one scarcely misses the full orchestra.

Immediately afterwards, though, the Duo launches into Prokofiev's *Cello Sonata in C Major, Op. 119* -- and we enter a different world. The Chengs relish the ambiguous tonalities, the fierce pizzicati, the dark, ponderous chords of the *Andante grave* introduction. The innate lyricism of the composer's late period emerges in the main *Moderato animato* section, along with animated passagework, but the dark colour is never far away.

The *Moderato* scherzo movement brings a performance which captures the sardonic, tongue-in-cheek air of the music entirely -- Prokofiev thumbing his nose at Zhdanov and the Kremlin bureaucracy (who didn't understand that they were the butt of the joke). Silvie Cheng's pointing up of sforzandi in this movement is ideal -- just enough, but not overdone. The same is true of Bryan Cheng's pizzicati and swirling arpeggios. The soaring cello line in the central section is beautifully played, but not with anything approaching the ardour of the *Cinderella Adagio*. That kind of overt romanticism would definitely be out of place here.

The more energetic melodic lines of the final *allegro ma non troppo* are highlighted and offset by the quiet, monochrome playing from both artists in the slower central section. Bryan Cheng's feather-light passagework just before the return of the main allegro theme is a delight. Both piano and cello build up quite a head of steam in the sonorous final peroration.

Shostakovich's *Cello Sonata in D Minor, Op. 40* opens in a gentle, reflective vein with Silvie Cheng's piano chording lightened up to a gentle *pianissimo* which yet remains clean and clear. The music develops more passion as the first movement proceeds, yet retains a sense of chamber intimacy, of reflection, of a conversation between the instruments.

The second movement scherzo, marked *allegro*, shoots off like a rocket launching with furious up and down scales from the cello and fierce staccato chords from the piano. The curious central section pushes the cello up into the high harmonics with comical effect.

The *Largo* slow movement (a favourite tempo marking of this composer), opens in the quietest of half-tones from the cello, with the piano lightly touching in the deep chords. The Chengs here make much of the contrast between the sweeping cello line and the peculiar -- not to say indeterminate -- harmonies. The powerful central climax remains deeply uncertain and unsettling.

The finale opens with a perky, ironic march of a type often heard in Shostakovich's music. The piano motif starts with a clear triad but the harmony then becomes much more relative -- as does any sense of connection between the keys of the two instruments. Despite a couple of almost Beethovenian outbursts from the piano (played by Silvie Cheng with considerable élan) the music retains its playful character right to the finish line.

The best-known and the most substantial of the three major works is the *Cello Sonata in G Minor, Op. 19* by Rachmaninoff. The allegro of the first movement is outstanding, the tempo comfortable without rushing, the piano part carefully judged to match the cello in weight, and the legato of the cello's long, singing melody is sheer delight. The slackening of tempo into the second theme is beautifully executed, while the second theme proper is presented with a well-judged degree of rubato, neither too slight nor too excessive. Throughout this movement, the balance between the instruments is well-nigh perfect, and the musical partnership is strong and unmistakable -- even in the powerful climactic buildup before the final reiteration of that second theme, and in the final frenetic coda.

The allegro scherzando second movement (a long-time favourite of mine) is simply masterly. The music opens crisply, with the quietly thrumming bass notes in the piano as clear as the cello's pizzicati -- and not nearly as overplayed as some rival versions. The movement in general pays more heed to the "scherzando" than many, with an air of playfulness sustained in all the fast passages. The slower contrasting melody brings more sweeping romantic playing from Bryan Cheng's cello along with clear arpeggios in the piano, another spot where muddiness can sometimes seem the rule. Silvie Cheng generates an almost shocking contrast at the cascade of arpeggios before the return of the main theme -- her playing here momentarily turns into a cadenza of symphonic concerto proportions, and none the worse for that. I feel sure Rachmaninoff would have approved.

The third movement andante finds both players capturing the song-without-words character of the piece. Of all the three sonatas, this is the moment when the cello sounds most like a human voice, soaring above the accompaniment. But the piano remains songful too, even when the emotional temperature rises in the heart of the movement.

The lengthy finale launches with considerable energy and power. Rachmaninoff's lyricism is again to the fore in the contrasting second theme. Towards the end, the tone of reminiscence and sadness in the slower music before the coda is noteworthy. Overall, I've always found this movement to be discursive and somewhat lacking in musical interest as well as being heavily overwritten for the piano. The Cheng²Duo certainly make out as good a case for this music as I've ever heard.

Among the shorter pieces on the album, Glazunov's *Chant du menestrel*, Op. 71, brings a wistful, nostalgic tone from both performers in a brief character piece. Tchaikovsky's *Pezzo capriccioso in B-*, Op. 62. is granted an insightful performance which respects the darker colour of the slower sections while relishing the virtuosity of the faster passages.

A delightful rarity comes with the *Two Pieces for Cello and Piano*, Op. 12, by Anton Arensky. Salon pieces these may be, but they are given here with much affection. The *Petite Ballade* swings gently along in triple time, flowing easily from start to finish. The *Dance Capricieuse* is treated to a bouncy performance which allows the cellist full scope for his high-speed acrobatics (especially in the high register) while remaining a dance, and not trying to become anything bigger.

Alexander Scriabin's *Romance for Cello and Piano* (originally written for horn and piano) is a student work, completed while he studied at the Moscow Conservatory. A simple, mournful melody is floated gently above a restrained chordal accompaniment.

The album finishes much as it began, with another ripe piece of musical romanticism -- the well-loved *Vocalise, Op. 34, No. 14* by Rachmaninoff. Thanks to the insightful playing of these artists, even this warhorse (the one true "pop classic greatest hits" candidate in the entire collection) emerges sounding newly minted, its evergreen beauty renewed and refreshed.

The entire album runs to slightly more than 2 hours of music. The recorded sound from Audite, in the Jesus-Christus-Kirche in Berlin (long famed as a recording venue) is warm, realistic, and clear in a resonant background space. Detailed programme notes in the package, translated from German originals into English and French, give a comprehensive overview of the evolution of cello playing and teaching in Russia, and place each composition in context of musical and historic contemporary events.

A desert-island album if ever there was one.

Posted by **Ken Stephen** at 16:26



Labels: **audio**, **cello**, **Cheng²Duo**, **classical music**, **piano**