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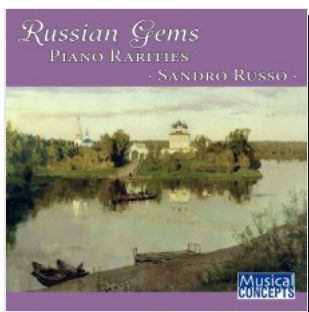
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## A Russian Recital by Sandro Russo

Review by: Jed Distler



*Artistic Quality: 8*  
*Sound Quality: 8*

As pianist Sandro Russo readily admits, not all of the "Russian Gems" compiled for his recital are "Piano Rarities". Certainly not Balakirev's frequently recorded Islamey, or even the less frequently recorded Medtner First Sonata and Taneyev Prelude and Fugue. More importantly, however, the selections add up to an interesting and well-contrasted program, and Russo commands the technique and temperament to make it work.

The opening Skazka by Julius Isserlis might be described as Edward MacDowell à la Russe. In contrast to Sam Haywood's gentle, rounded off

interpretation on Hyperion, Russo animates the middle section with sharper accents and bolder dynamic contrasts. His assured and colorful Medtner Op. 5 yields nothing to Marc-André Hamelin's reference recording, and arguably surpasses it in the Allegro risoluto finale in terms of more varied articulation in the busy opening pages and more ferocity in the climaxes.

Russo's masterful unfolding of Taneyev's difficult Prelude and Fugue in G-sharp minor is the best I've heard since Vladimir Ashkenazy. He matches the older pianist's suavity and clear voicing of the Fugue, while intensifying the Prelude's long-lined melodies with dynamic surges and emphatic accents that contrast to Ashkenazy's softer-grained introspection. While we miss the spatial effect and conversational repartée of Rachmaninov's two-piano writing in the Op. 18 Suite's Waltz and Romance—reduced to 10 fingers by Vladimir Leytchkiss—Russo compromises nothing in the way of tempo, and his double notes are as smooth as silk.

Although Russo nails Islamey's swarms of notes and unrelenting big chords, I miss Gary Graffman's steel-cut fingerwork and driving momentum, not to mention Michele Campanella's more playful, supple, and textually lean version (once credited to Joyce Hatto). It's nice to hear the Gregori Ginzburg Rakov Russian Song and Rózycki Waltz transcriptions revived. On the other hand, Ginzburg's old recording of the latter abounds with carefully sculpted inner voices and a sophisticated foreground/background interplay that Russo's relatively uniform and less thoughtfully structured reading lacks. A very attractive disc, overall.

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### Recording Details:

**Album Title:** Russian Gems Piano Rarities

**Reference Recording:** None for this collection

Works by Isserlis, Medtner, Taneyev,  
Rachmaninov, Balakirev, Rakov, & Rózycki

Sandro Russo (piano)

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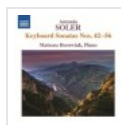
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