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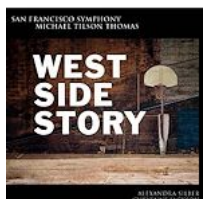
### REVIEW

Some items to consider

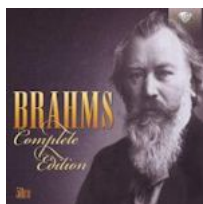
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**Russian Gems Piano Rarities**  
**Julius ISSERLIS (1888-1968)**  
 Fairy Tale (Skazka) in F Major, Op.6 [3:11]  
**Nikolai MEDTNER (1880-1951)**  
 Sonata No.1 in F Minor, Op.5 [30:18]  
**Sergei TANEYEV (1856-1915)**  
 Prelude and Fugue in G-Sharp Minor, Op.29 [7:06]  
**Sergei RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)**  
 Waltz and Romance from suite No.2 for two pianos, Op.17 (transc. Vladimir Leyetchkiss) [13:18]  
**Mily BALAKIREV (1937-1910)**  
 Islamey (Oriental Fantasy), op.18 [8:42]  
**Nikolai RAKOV (1908-1990)**  
 Russian folk Song (transc. Grigory Ginzburg) [2:01]  
**Ludomir RÓZYCKI (1883-1953)**  
 Waltz from the opera *Casanova* (transc. Grigory Ginzburg) [3:59]  
 Sandro Russo (piano)  
 rec. Oktaven Studios, New York City, USA, 3 October, 19 December 2012, 28 January 2013.  
**MUSICAL CONCEPTS MC 150** [68:37]

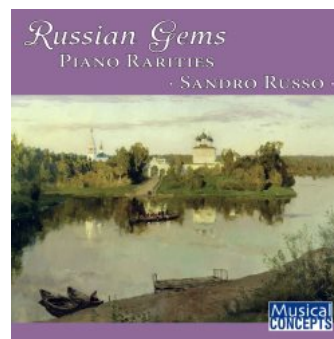
This is a brilliant disc with a really arresting programme though with a couple of anomalies. I'm sure that *Islamey* is too well known to be considered a rarity while I trust the same can be said for Medtner's *Sonata No.1*. As admitted in the booklet notes, Rózycki is not Russian, but these are small quibbles. While these works could have been replaced with other *real* rarities perhaps we can hope for more discs of such repertoire. Reading pianist Sandro Russo's own notes later I see that he has pointed out that the Medtner Sonata is better known these days but only following recent "rediscovery" as he puts it and that *Islamey* is "widely performed".

The disc opens with a true rarity in the shape of *Skazka* or Fairy Tale by Moldavian-Jewish composer Julius Isserlis (grandfather of cellist Steven Isserlis). I had never come across his music before and it is truly delightful but at a mere three minutes leaves you with all kinds of questions not least of which is 'When can I hear some more?'. The answer lies in a disc only released in January 2014, Julius Isserlis: Piano Music played by Sam Heywood (piano) and Steven Isserlis (cello). It's [Hyperion CDA68025](#). The piece is charming, dreamy and elusive, evoking in my imagination a sparkling and gently flowing waterfall.

With Medtner I am in the musical equivalent of seventh heaven. When I listen to his piano music I always feel transported. He is one of my piano music heroes and his first piano sonata is one of my absolute favourites. It is the longest and most substantial work on the disc. Medtner began writing it while he was still studying at the Moscow Conservatoire under Taneyev and Arensky. He completed it, aged 23, in 1903, a staggering feat since the music is so mature in concept and execution. The opening *Allegro* is toweringly majestic and tempestuous demanding some thunderously played passages. Add to this an extremely memorable theme. The brief *Intermezzo* relieves the tension somewhat before the *Largo divoto* reveals the serious nature at the heart of the work with elements of spiritual reflection. With some plangent and pellucid moments you can almost 'see' into the composer's soul. The finale marked *Allegro risoluto* draws the themes and ideas together and indeed resolves them as well as the conflict within them. Taken as a whole this sonata is quite extraordinary in its breadth of ideas and the emotional depths it plumbs. It is an example of a work that is pretty well perfect without a note too few or too many.

As the liner-notes point out one of the unifying themes of this disc is that all the music is by composer-pianists. They don't come much more so than Sergei Taneyev whose pupils included Isserlis, Medtner, Rachmaninov, Scriabin and Glière and whose teachers were Nikolai Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky. The *Prelude and Fugue in G-Sharp Minor, Op.29* shows Taneyev's devotion to Bach and the baroque in a quite breathtakingly virtuosic work that makes great demands on the pianist as he is driven at

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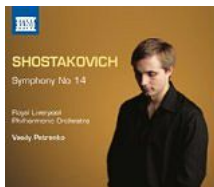


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breakneck speed pell-mell towards its conclusion. It is a surprise that this work is the only significant one he wrote for solo piano. Taneyev's pupil Rachmaninov, the quintessential romantic wrote his Piano Suite No.2 for two pianos. The two extracts here were transcribed for solo piano by Vladimir Leyetchkiss, one of the last pupils of the legendary Russian pianist-teacher Heinrich Neuhaus. They prove to be a wonderful thought-challenging vehicle for the solo pianist. I wondered if Leyetchkiss had transcribed the entire work which it would be great to hear.

Mily Balakirev's *Islamey* is one of those works that have achieved an almost cult status, It is said to be among the most difficult works to play in the entire piano repertoire. The composer himself said there were passages in it that he found difficult to play. As a result it became the showpiece of various lions of the piano such as Nikolai Rubinstein, who premièred it, as well as Liszt and Scriabin, who seriously damaged his right hand while practising it, Moura Lympany, Vladimir Horowitz, Martha Argerich and John Ogdon. Ravel once told a friend that his aim in writing his *Gaspard de la Nuit*, another notoriously challenging work, was quite simply to have composed a piece that was "more difficult than Balakirev's *Islamey*". Cast in three distinct parts it was completed by Balakirev in a mere month in September 1869 which for him was a feat since he was well known for taking years to finish many of his compositions. After a hair-raising *Allegro agitato* with its introduction of a theme Balakirev heard while visiting the Caucasus, the second *Tranquillo - Andantino espressivo* introduces another but this time altogether quieter. This turns out to be the calm before the final storm which comes in the shape of the *Allegro vivo - Presto furioso*. This returns to the first theme for, as the marking denotes, a furious and frantic race to the finish. Many editions exist, several of them easier and some more difficult. It is unclear which this is but it is obvious that Sandro Russo is well up to any of the difficulties it puts in the pianist's way.

The last two pieces are by two little known composers, the first by Nikolai Rakov is a Russian song in which the singer bemoans her parting from her beloved and that a mere day seems like a year. It is a charming little piece that like the Isserlis work simply whets one's appetite for more. Ludomir Rózycki can be said to an interloper since he was Polish but as the notes explain he was well known and respected in Russia and indeed Russia controlled Poland before 1917 as part of its Empire. The waltz from his opera *Casanova* is another delightful little gem transcribed by Russian pianist Grigory Ginzburg, as was Rakov's piece. For anyone who would like to hear more of his music I can recommend two discs of Rózycki's piano music and chamber works that I reviewed a while back, both on Acte Préalable: APO253 and APO263.

American composer Lowell Liebermann is quoted on the reverse of this disc as saying that Sicilian-born Sandro Russo "is a musician's musician, and a pianist's pianist. There is no technical challenge too great for him, but it is his musicianship that ultimately makes the greatest impression". I wholeheartedly concur save to add that after listening he is also, for me, a listener's pianist. The quality of his playing cannot be disputed and listening to the Medtner with Geoffrey Tozer's interpretation on Chandos for comparison I can find almost nothing between them. For me that is praise indeed.

The entire programme was a joy to hear and one I shall be revisiting it often. I hope Russo will be unearthing some more of these gems and if he does I shall be a happy bunny.

**Steve Arloff**



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