

▼ **RUSSIAN PIANO GEMS—ROMANTIC to AVANT-GARDE** • Elena Dorozhkina (pn) • NAVONA 6576 (47:25) Reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

**MOSOLOV** Piano Sonata No. 4. **GLINKA** *A Farewell to St. Petersburg: The Lark (No. 10)*. **SCRIABIN** *Études in G*, op. 65/3; in cT, op. 42/5. *Prelude in cT for the Left Hand*, op. 9/1. **TCHAIKOVSKY** *Dumka (Russian Rustic Scene)*, op. 59. **RACHMANINOFF** *Morceaux de fantaisie*: in g; in eI, op. 3/1. *Preludes*: in gT, op. 32/12; in c, op. 23/7.

This review is slated to appear in the magazine's May-June issue (47:5), but readers will already have been introduced to Elena Dorozhkina and this, her debut album, in an earlier online NOT TO BE MISSED preview. Her program of *Russian Piano Gems*, purporting to feature composers Romantic and avant-garde, contains but a single work by a composer who falls into the latter category. That would be Ukrainian-born Alexander Mosolov (1900–1973), whose musical leanings led him, predictably, to the negative notice of the Soviet-era arbiters of all things cultural and politically correct. Mosolov found himself stripped of membership in the Composers' Union and shipped off to imprisonment in a forced labor camp known as the Gulag.

Mosolov actually composed a fair amount of music—five completed symphonies, four operas, a number of concertos and sonatas for various instruments, a handful of chamber works, and lots songs, one of which is about a child torturing a cat. They didn't lock him up soon enough. And yet, a fairly representative sampling of his music has been recorded and reviewed in these pages, including the Piano Sonata No. 4, which has received at least its sixth recording here, courtesy of Elena Dorozhkina,

That said, Mosolov's name continues to be inextricably tied to the *Iron Foundry*, the first movement from his ballet suite titled *Steel*. It's said to be an example of Soviet "furturist music," a future that was already in the past before it was out of the crib. Still, the dual ideas of industrialization and mechanization, as expressed through pervasive ostinatos (a trademark of Mosolov's music), corrosive dissonance, and metallic hammering (as in the anvil chorus from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*) was not entirely owned by Mosolov. George Antheil had composed his *Ballet mécanique* in 1924, two or three years before Mosolov fired up his Soviet ironworks, and his signature work no doubt had some influence on Prokofiev's Fourth Symphony of 1930.

A description of the Piano Sonata No. 4, another one of Mosolov's cocktails, is easy to conjure. It's made up of the nuts and bolts that fell off the tunnel-boring machine as it rolled off the assembly line.

As for Scriabin, his later piano works, might have qualified him as one of the avant-garde composers on this disc, but his synesthesia, along with his absorption in metaphysics, theosophy, and the Russian Symbolist movement led him into the realm of non-serialized atonality, extreme dissonance, and likely a mental instability that expressed itself in delusions of grandeur. And so, Scriabin ultimately escaped the charge of avant-gardism by reason of insanity or mental defect. But before he ascended the Himalayas to proclaim the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to end all *Gesamtkunstwerken*, he composed much gloriously beautiful music that's deeply indebted to Chopin.

By the time he wrote his three *Études*, op. 65, in 1912, Scriabin was already pretty far gone. He would live only another three years, dying in 1915 at the age of 43, presumably from sepsis brought on by an untreated bacterial infection.

Reaching back to 1903 and the *Étude in CT Minor*, op. 42/5, we find ourselves in Scriabin's "golden age" of piano music, when he was most strongly under the spell of Chopin.

This is a gorgeous piece, and as spun out by Elena Dorozhkina, its radiant beauty is fully revealed.

Earlier still in Scriabin's output is his Prelude in C# Minor for the Left Hand, a piece that dates to 1894 when he was 22. The opus is actually comprised of two pieces, the first being the Prelude and the second titled Nocturne, which is op. 9/2. They can be played independently of each other, but interestingly, the Nocturne is in D# Major, D# being the enharmonic equivalent of C#, giving rise to some speculation that he may have been completing a graduation exercise belatedly after leaving the Moscow Conservatory without a degree in composition because of poor relations with his teacher, Anton Arensky.

The one musical term of expression that comes to mind as I listen to this Prelude is *doloroso*. It's hard to know what composers Scriabin looked to for inspiration in writing this piece. Clearly, it wasn't Arensky, but it doesn't seem to have been Chopin just yet either. Scriabin's Chopin phase came just a bit later than this. The writing is already quite chromatic and the textures intricate, though not so dense as to not let light penetrate. Dorozhkina brings out the melancholy mood of the music in a way that haunts this listener.

At just shy of nine minutes, Tchaikovsky's *Dumka* ("Russian Rustic Scene") is like nothing else he wrote. It has always struck me odd that the composer who penned the piano competition killer and one of the most popular piano concertos of all time, composed comparatively little for solo piano, and how little of what there is of it is not top-drawer.

Tchaikovsky wasn't a student just out of school when he wrote this piece in 1886. He was 46 and suffering from what we'd call today "burnout." Behind him were his *Manfred Symphony*, a number of his operas, the Piano Trio in A Minor, his first four symphonies, the *All-Night Vigil*, the Violin Concerto, *Swan Lake*, *Francesca da Rimini*, *Romeo and Juliet*, the *1812 Overture*, and much, much else.

By 1885, he needed a rest and time to decompress from the crises and stresses he'd experienced, not least of which was the seria-comedy of his marital breakup with a besotted former student who said, "I do," at the altar, then cried "please do," in the boudoir, when Tchaikovsky couldn't bear to bed her. Biographer Anthony Holden wasted few words when he wrote, "In truth, Antonina was as much the right woman for Tchaikovsky as any other. It was marriage which was the wrong institution."

So, the composer repaired to the tranquility of the countryside north of Moscow to recharge. It was there that he wrote to Nadezhda von Meck, "I love our Russian countryside more than any other, and for me the Russian landscape in winter has an incomparable charm... It's a marvelous day, sunny, the snow is glistening like myriads of diamonds and is thawing slightly, my window gives me a wide view right into the distance. It's wonderful and spacious, you can breathe properly in these immense horizons." And it was there that he wrote the *Dumka*.

True to the form and format of the genre, it begins in a mood tinged with sadness, and is not lacking for the composer's passionate, Romantic melody. But at the point where gravity turns to gaiety, as is customary for the *Dumka*, Tchaikovsky kind of loses it. The music swings wildly between a sort of clumsy, drunken dance and a thorough thrashing of the keyboard. Perhaps this was Tchaikovsky expressing his sense of freedom with a loud, untamed whoop for joy that no one living more than a mile away could hear. I'm sure, though, that it must have given the cows in the pasture quite a start.

There have been quite a few recordings of the piece, many of them by "name" pianists, such as Vladimir Ashkenazy, Yefim Bronfman, Yevgeny Sudbin, Peter Donohoe, and Lang Lang among them. I wish I had one or more of them to compare to Dorozhkina's performance, but

hard as it may be to believe, her recording is my first time hearing this piece that I can recall. It's quite a technical tour-de-force, which Dorozhkina meets head-on and never for an instant, falters. I can't say this is going to the top of my list of favorite Tchaikovsky works, but considering his relatively modest output of solo piano music, and the circumstances under which he composed this *Dumka*, it's surely a piece worth knowing, especially in this spectacular performance of it.

Back in more familiar territory, Dorozhkina concludes her program with four numbers by Rachmaninoff, all of which I expect are well known. The Prelude in G<sup>T</sup> Minor, in my opinion, is an especially attractive gem, its bell-like sonorities evoking imagery of the sun's rays playing on the surface of the water. The piece is not too far removed in style from Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau*, written in 1905, five years earlier.

In Elena Dorozhkina's playing I find absolute technical control and command of the keyboard. In her touch, tone, and emotional engagement with the music—insofar as I'm able to discern what emotional content exists in a work such as Mosolov's Piano Sonata No. 4—I find Dorozhkina's poetry, where the poetic holds sway, and her sensitivity always to the moods and moments of the music before her, to be most compelling. While I, personally, could have done without the Mosolov, I believe there is enough here even without it to warrant a strong recommendation. **Jerry Dubins**

Four stars: A program of which it can be said, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts"