

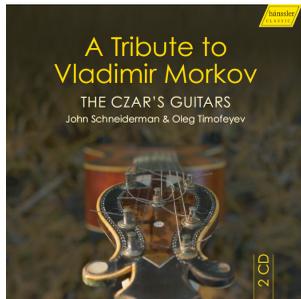
New Discoveries & Old Chestnuts for the Russian Guitar

ELLWOOD COLAHAN

A Tribute to Vladimir Morkov

The Czar's Guitars (John Schneiderman & Oleg Timofeyev)

Hänssler Classic HC20018, 2020, 2 compact discs



MUSICOLOGIST-GUITARIST Oleg Timofeyev is on a mission. Since completing his 1999 dissertation on the Russian seven-string guitar (the most complete treatment of the topic available in English), he has devoted himself with rare diligence to resurrecting and advocating for this strange and wonderful Eastern variant of the six-string instrument so ubiquitous in Europe and the Americas. In collaboration with fellow guitarist John Schneiderman, under the name The

Czar's Guitars, Timofeyev has recorded the 2006 disc, *Music of Mikhail Glinka*, the 2011 *Souvenirs of Russia*, and the monumental seven-disc 2016 anthology, *The Russian Guitar 1800–1850* (reviewed in these pages by Stanley Yates in 2017). The present disc is a continuation of this series of recordings.

Yet that is not all: Timofeyev's solo efforts with the Russian instrument include the 1999 *The Golden Age of the Russian Guitar*, a second volume under the same title the following year, and in 2004, *Guitar in the Gulag: Guitar Music by Matvei Pavlov-Azancheev, 1888–1963*. In 2007 he took a small side excursion with *Shavlego: Guitar Music by Georgian Composers*. He has also formed a quartet of players of Russian guitar, releasing in 2016 *A Tribute to the Mighty Handful*. His essays into mixed chamber music have strayed only slightly from the path, with 2002's *Music of Russian Princesses from the Court of Catherine the Great*, 2005's *A Tribute to Stesha: Early Music of Russian Gypsies*, and 2007's klezmer-influenced *Rhapsody Judaica*.

Schneiderman, too, has an impressive discography, if not focused in the same way as Timofeyev's. In addition to his work as one half of The Czar's Guitars, he has produced respected recordings of Coste, Mertz, and Adam Darr, even duets transcribed from Beethoven; his recordings on Baroque lute thankfully eschew the greatest-hits approach and have helped to elevate the profile of lesser-known composers such as Falckenhagen, Kropfgans, Kohaut, and Hagen. And for those who find such fare too unusual, he has also recorded a disc of Weiss.

MANY READERS may be less than fully conversant with the Russian guitar. Because of its triadic tuning (D2 G2 B2 D3 G3 B3 D4), probably derived from the so-called "English guitar" (really a type of cittern) at the end of the eighteenth century, it is implacably idiomatic, much like the five-course Baroque guitar whose music is so tricky to adapt to the modern instrument. To be sure, Russian guitar music can be transcribed for the Western guitar tuned in fourths, but it is no simple matter. It requires an effort comparable to the transcription of Baroque lute music, which was also composed for an instrument tuned to a chord. (One significant pioneering effort in this direction was that of the late Matanya Ophee with his collection *The Russian Guitar*.)

The difference between the two instruments is not limited to the tuning. Timofeyev explains that the Russian guitar uniquely has a detachable and adjustable neck as a standard part of its design; he suggests that this feature made it easier to adjust the playing action of the instrument in a large country where skilled luthiers were not to be found outside a few cities. He has also called attention to the convex fingerboards on early examples, a feature which made it easier to stop strings with the left-hand thumb, and shown that while Western guitars moved early to a pegbox design, Russian guitars retained a peg plate much longer, while developing unique adjustable-friction pegs that were nonetheless simpler than mechanical tuners with worm gears.

This seven-string guitar co-existed in Russia with six-string guitars tuned in fourths, becoming dominant in the first half of the nineteenth century but gradually being eclipsed by the latter instrument, especially after the advent of the Polish-born six-string virtuoso Marek Sokolovsky. According to Timofeyev it disappeared after the 1917 revolution. Ophee has attributed the death blow to Segovia, crediting him with a seven-month campaign of conversion during his 1926 Soviet Union sojourn that successfully supplanted an existing guitar culture with an imported one. The instrument lived somewhat underground in the era of Stalin, and certain seven-string players were even victims of political purges; the guitarist Pavlov-Azancheev, to whose music Timofeyev has devoted a solo disc, was one of these. It is only since the end of the Soviet Union that the seven-string instrument has begun to re-emerge and bring its vast culture and repertoire to the attention of the non-Russian speaking world.

HOW, THEN, does Vladimir Morkov (1801–1864) fit into this picture? Morkov was the preeminent St. Petersburg disciple of Andrei Sychra, the Lithuanian-born Czech harpist-turned guitarist and the Russian guitar's quasi-mythic patriarch. Sychra first



Vasily Tropinin (1776–1857),
*Guitarist (Portrait of the
Virtuoso Guitarist Vladimir
Morkov)*. Oil on canvas.
The Virtual Russian Museum,
<https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/>.

established himself in Moscow, founding a school of playing there among his students. Sometime after Napoleon’s Russian invasion and the burning of Moscow, he relocated to St. Petersburg, where Morkov became his greatest pupil. Moscow players like Askionov and Vysotsky embraced the folk influence of Roma musicians and eventually cultivated a style of playing with more emphasis on left-hand slurs, a style Sychra disdained. In St. Petersburg Sychra’s legacy was a more “classical,” harp-like approach. Morkov was the central figure in this circle, an aristocratic amateur and man of letters known for his *salons*. Despite holding posts of authority in the government, he found time to publish books on the history of the St. Petersburg Russian Opera and the life of Orthodox priest and sacred composer Piotr Turchaninov, as well as a method and around forty compositions and arrangements for guitar.

Morkov’s music shows deep engagement with Western musical currents of his day, especially opera, but equal devotion to native Russian idioms, especially through the music of Glinka. While his transcriptions and arrangements tend to be fairly literal, he engages in enough revision to make it clear that his choices are deliberate, and he is not afraid to apply his own musical judgment, compressing or expanding the contours of pieces as he sees fit. A singular contribution of Morkov was to take the duet of unequal guitars—guitars in different sizes and pitches—a medium to which Sychra turned late in his career, and develop it into the signature ensemble of the Russian guitar. Where Viennese guitarists like Giuliani, Diabelli, or Mertz composed a few duets, both for equal guitars and for guitar with *terz* guitar, tuned

a minor third higher, Sychra and to an even greater extent Morkov concentrated on duets for guitar and quart guitar, tuned a fourth higher. These unequal duets abound in their repertoire, and equal duets are rare. Of the forty pieces on this two-disc set, exactly two thirds are duets for guitar and quart guitar. (Schneiderman plays all of the quart guitar parts on the record, and also plays the standard-size instrument in some solos.)

THE PIECES ON THIS RECORDING are drawn partly from Morkov's published works, and partly from two hitherto little-known manuscripts. One of these is a set of part books from 1858 that found its way anonymously into the hands of Moscow guitarist Vladimir Markushevich, and the other is a somewhat larger manuscript Timofeyev himself turned up, unindexed, in the Russian State Library in Moscow. These finds, part luck and part persistent primary-source research, make this recording not just a long-overdue exposition of Morkov's known contributions, but also a record of new discoveries.

The pieces fall into several types, but most are arrangements or variation sets, with Morkov's original works being represented by character pieces, preludes, and *divertissements*. Morkov's love of opera is eloquently expressed in a series of arrangements, ranging from the vanishingly brief "Lyudmila's Aria" from *Ruslan and Lyudmila* to an extended fantasia on themes from *A Life for the Tsar*. For all its brevity, the former is an excellent place to hear the *campanella* scales that are characteristic of Morkov's harp-like compositional style. *A Life for the Tsar* was a significant inspiration for Morkov, who also wrote a separate *potpourri* on the same work. Two more contrasting arrangements are from Rossini: the melancholy "Willow Song" offered by Desdemona moments before her murder by Othello, and Berta's light-hearted aria from *Barber of Seville*, mocking all the drama around her.

Two Bellini melodies are treated to variation sets: One is an aria from *The Pirate*, for which variations were also composed by both Clara Schumann and Pietro Pettoletti, an Italian guitarist resident in St. Petersburg roughly contemporary with Morkov. The other is an aria from *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, wherein Tebaldo sings his innocent love for the distraught (if he only knew why!) Giulietta. In both of these compositions, Morkov squares off and domesticates the theme, which in the original is subjected to repeated dramatic interruptions. Other intriguing variation subjects include the second movement of Anton Rubinstein's Piano Trio op. 15 no. 1, a rarely performed but exquisitely Russian gem, full of power and pathos, and Haydn's patriotic hymn *Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser*, as set in his String Quartet in C, op. 76 no. 3. In the former, Morkov substitutes a single, suitably guitaristic variation for Rubinstein's violin pyrotechnics. In the latter, his treatment of the theme itself is especially interesting. He heightens the drama of Haydn's material by modifying the theme to present the second phrase, a repeat of the first, in a higher register, then simplifying the fourth phrase by removing certain melodic appoggiaturas so that when it is repeated in the fifth phrase with the appoggiaturas re-inserted, the effect is one of intensification.

In addition to these unusual variation sets we also hear Morkov's treatment of the old favorite, *Carnival of Venice*, which fits right into the tradition of Paganini, Arban, and all the rest.

A number of song arrangements help us appreciate Morkov's craft in setting material for the guitar. Two songs by Glinka, *Tell Me Maiden* and *Romance*, will be familiar to fans of the Czar's Guitars' *Music of Mikhail Glinka* recording, where the first was recorded in a different, anonymous arrangement under the title *Why Are You Crying, Pretty Maiden?*, and the second was recorded in the same arrangement by Morkov. The fact that the artists have recorded *Romance* anew for this disc, rather than just recycling an existing recording, speaks to their conscientious approach. They have done the same with other pieces that were on the Glinka disc, including "Lyudmila's Aria" mentioned above. (And they have followed the same practice elsewhere; after recording a fine interpretation of *Kamarinskaya* – by Morkov after Glinka – on their *Music of Mikhail Glinka* disc, they re-recorded the same piece for *The Russian Guitar 1800–1850*.)

Alexander Varlamov's song *The Angel* tells of an angel singing love and inspiration into the soul of a child about to be born. Morkov's transcription is quite faithful, with only a few harmonics added in a flourish at the end. It is interesting to note, however, that the guitar version exposes some passing dissonances between the melody and accompaniment that are much less noticeable in the piano-vocal original. Dargomizhsky's *I Turned Sixteen* is based on a Russian version of a German text set by other composers including Schubert, for his song *Phidile*. It tells of the romantic awakening of a young girl encountering for the first time a youth from beyond her isolated village and, signaled by the turn to the minor in the middle, her regret at the missed opportunity of returning his affection. Morkov's treatment is again quite literal, with the result that Dargomizhsky's short piano ritornellos are assimilated into the vocal melody, eliminating the dialogic dimension of the original.

Several instrumental arrangements stand along with the vocal arrangements as miniature jewels. *Tell Her* is by Elizaveta Kochubei, an aristocratic dilettante St. Petersburg composer known for this one piece, which was popular enough to be transcribed for several instrumental settings. This piece is unique on the disc, as a solo for quart guitar, ably executed by Schneiderman. *Marie* is a piano nocturne by Henry Brinley Richards, a pupil of Chopin. Morkov's arrangement repositions some parts of the melody to a higher octave; his version is so natural that the original sounds like an arrangement by comparison. The original of Albert Jungmann's *Nostalgia for the Motherland* is titled variously *Longing for Home* or *Nostalgia: Nocturne de salon*, depending on the edition. Though it is called a march in the notes, Schneiderman's reading is more waltz-like than martial.

The most intriguing arrangement from an instrumental model is Morkov's version of Joseph (Johann) Kaspar Mertz's *Agathe*. Mertz based his piece on a popular song by Franz Abt that was transcribed widely in its day. Abt's straightforward original was subjected to extensive transformation by Mertz, who inserted expansions and

developmental interpolations, and added a whole section in the parallel minor. Morkov's version is unmistakably based on that of Mertz, but he pulls Mertz's exuberance back just a little at key points, cutting the first four of the last eight bars, for example, as well as the last three measures before the dominant cadence at the end of the minor section. As wonderful as Mertz's version is, Morkov's revision is, for me, an improvement.

Morkov's compositional output of character pieces is represented by two Spanish titles, *Zapateado* and *Andalusian Jota*, and the Alpine *A Tyrolean*. *Zapateado* is in a more lyrical triple meter than the faster 6/8 *zapateados* by composers like Rodrigo or Sainz de la Maza, or for that matter the famous examples by Sarasate and Granados. Morkov's *jota* emphasizes the graceful, waltz-like character of this Spanish dance and vocal genre; it is much more relaxed than Tárrega's *Gran Jota*. *A Tyrolean* is a kind of a folk waltz, with gestures that reminded me of yodeling. Its exuberant use of harmonics is characteristic of much of the repertoire presented here.

Four of the pieces on the disc are versions of etudes: two for guitar, by Carcassi and Sor, and surprisingly, two for piano, by Henri Bertini. All are transformed in some way in the process of translation to Russian guitar. The first Bertini etude, in C major, is an arrangement of the pianist's op. 26 no. 4, originally in B \flat . It has a texture that works well on the guitar, and Schneiderman takes it with a more rubato approach than he uses on most of the album. For me it was unexpectedly one of the most perfect gems on the recording. The second Bertini etude, in E minor (after op. 32 no. 26), was clearly chosen for its guitaristic texture as well. In Morkov's version, the section in the dominant key is transposed down, rather than up; while this may have been done for purely technical reasons, it gives the section a darker, more introspective feeling than the piano original. Pianists generally take this somewhat faster, but I found Schneiderman's tempo appropriate to the character of the piece. Morkov's version of Carcassi's Etude op. 60 no. 11 (remember, the original could not be played directly on the Russian guitar because of the difference in tuning) is generally quite faithful to the original but displays the Russian's excellent musical judgment in an added four-bar chordal coda, which is oddly effective in balancing the scale fragments and arpeggios that make up the rest of the piece. His version of Sor's Etude op. 35 no. 17 (Study no. 6 in the Segovia edition) is more daring: after following the original for the first sixteen bars with only minor melodic embellishments, Morkov inserts a full measure of cadenza and then an eight-bar section that turns toward the relative minor. It is a testament to his craft that the added material blends stylistically with the rest. One suspects that Sor would have heartily approved.

The five movements from Pergolesi's *Stabat mater* that Morkov transcribed for two guitars are the most unexpected encounter on the disc, maybe even a bit weird, but next to the *Divertissements*, they are my favorite listening. The challenge of transcribing a work for orchestra and vocal soloists and rendering it with the tonal resources of two guitars is not inconsiderable, and Morkov relinquishes a few details in the process, including some of the vocal imitation and a bit of the melodic ornamentation. The

most difficult challenge seems to be with the alto solo in *Eja mater fons amoris*, and he resorts to some interesting tactics to make it work. The first entrance of the vocal part is in the proper register but thereafter he moves it higher, to a register where it is easier to distinguish it from the accompaniment. Later he moves it back down again, as though to show he has not forgotten where it really belongs. This is understandable; in some places where he keeps the notes of the vocal line in their original lower register, they are obscured by the accompaniment in a way that simply does not happen between voice and orchestra. Timofeyev's notes point out that Morkov has rearranged to his own liking the order of the movements he has selected. Another way to look at this is to notice that he begins with the penultimate movement and ends with the last one; in between he visits selected movements from elsewhere in the piece to fill out the experience. The overall effect feels a little experimental, but since the original material is sublime and Morkov treats it with respect, a substantial portion of success is the reward.

MORKOV'S COMPOSITIONS display many idiosyncratic features that repay repeated listening. The most curious part of the recording for me is the set of ten preludes for two guitars at the end, and I confess that I came away wondering what exactly to make of them. These are brief (none reaches a minute and a half, and two are less than half a minute), mostly chordal in texture, and in many places have the character of a Lutheran chorale marinated overnight in a strong chromatic sauce. Timofeyev's own notes express some hesitancy about the proper performance practice for these pieces, even questioning whether they were intended to be performed as written, or rather used as a basis for improvisation. Their Russian character is evident, however, in the irregular phrasing that permeates them. Six-bar phrases, ten-bar phrases, two-bar phrases answered by twelve-bar phrases: listening beyond the sameness of texture reveals strikingly unusual designs found only rarely in Western European music of this period, and an interest not evident on the surface.

This same Russian irregularity of phrasing is a prominent feature of Morkov's three *divertissements*, which I found to be the most satisfying listening of the record. At once the most Russian and the most fully developed and original pieces, they are compared in the album's booklet to Glinka's *Kamarinskaya* as efforts to "paint a grand musical canvas using contrasting folk themes." Each one presents two or more themes, each followed by variations, along with original introductory, transitional, and closing material. Divertissement no. 1 begins with an improvisatory-sounding introduction and a straightforward, square theme that is varied twice; this is followed by a second main section with a six-bar theme built of two three-bar phrases, which leads to ten variations. Divertissement no. 2 (I describe them in order, but they are presented out of order) begins with a very serious, operatic-sounding introduction followed by a twelve-bar theme broken into highly irregular phrases of four, five, and three bars. This is varied twice and closes with a restatement of the first phrase of the theme but extended with cadential gestures. After a quasi-improvisatory transition, the rest of

the piece consists of a more regular, four-bar theme with four variations and a short coda. Finally, Divertissement no. 3 begins with a straightforward introduction in a moderate tempo, with a lilting, triple-meter first theme of eight bars. This is followed by a first variation, but then Morkov unexpectedly states the theme again, before proceeding to a second and final variation. The second theme is then twelve bars in AAB form but constructed in such a way that after the B section it *sounds* like it is returning to the A section, before we realize we are in fact listening to the beginning of the first variation. He proceeds through two variations with this slightly strange, “overlapping” sensation, before terminating the section with a chordal coda similar to the one at the end of the first theme of the second *divertissement*. Finally he proceeds to a third theme, jumping from D major to C minor by restating the subdominant harmony of the first key as the dominant of the second, an effect that is smooth and dramatic at the same time. The last theme, like the one before, is twelve bars divided into three four-bar phrases, with two variations and a coda.

These *divertissements*, if they are based on Russian folk themes (I take Timofeyev’s word for that), show this folk idiom as gloriously idiosyncratic in its irregularity of proportion, even while the melodic-harmonic language is overwhelmingly familiar. They make for compelling listening, full of unexpected twists and turns.

A Tribute to Vladimir Morkov is a satisfying follow-up to Timofeyev and Schneiderman’s 2016 set, *The Russian Guitar 1800–1850*. Where the earlier anthology gives a broad overview of the Russian guitar culture of the early nineteenth century, here they dive deeply over the course of two discs into the various facets of the work of a single composer. Some pieces are quite unusual, and their otherness helps us appreciate just how deep and rich was this lost-and-rediscovered Russian past of the instrument. We hope the Czar’s Guitars will continue along these same lines, devoting more recordings to individual composers for the *semistrunnaia gitara*.



About the Reviewer

ELLWOOD COLAHAN is the Music and Performing Arts Reference Librarian at University of Denver. He holds a BM in Classical Guitar Performance, an MA in Music Theory, and an MLIS, all from the University of Denver. His research includes data sonification, information literacy instruction, metric structures in Baroque music, and the bibliography of guitar literature.

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