

The Russian Guitar 1800-1850: Oleg Timofeyev and John Schneiderman Brilliant Classics 95405, 2016. 7 CDs.

This review-article considers the 7-CD set of recordings featuring Oleg Timofeyev and John Schneiderman (7-string guitars), with Etienne Aberlin (violin), Anne Harley (soprano), Dan Caraway (guitar) and Kenneth Slowik (fortepiano).



The past 40 years have witnessed a significant reappraisal of the historical guitar repertoire. Through the release of a multitude of facsimile editions of collected works, along with several survey recordings and a number of academic studies, the music of figures such as Mertz, Regondi, Coste, even Giuliani and Sor (whose music we thought we knew well), along with others whose music we were not so long ago happily oblivious to, is now well appreciated. The same can be said for much of our seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century repertoires (though certainly not all of it). All of this refers to the Western European guitar. While one remaining gap in our general knowledge of the European repertoire lies in the appraisal of the music of the late 18th century, a further even lesser known and perhaps even more deserving repertoire still awaits our broad appreciation: that written in Russia during the early to mid-nineteenth century for the guitar with seven open-tuned strings.

The Russian repertoire is interesting for a number of reasons, not least of which are its unique musical-expressive qualities and highly idiomatic approach to guitar music making. While almost always the case in the West, the Russian guitarists only sometimes based their originally composed solo music on pre-existing instrumental models (usually pianistic, much less so violinistic or string-chamber-orchestral). Quite unlike Western guitarists of the period, however, the Russian *semistruniki* (7-string guitarists) devoted themselves to an almost relentless pursuit of a highly idiomatic use of the instrument, something not seen in the West since the five-course guitarists of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. And this, perhaps more than anything else, is what has kept this remarkable repertoire out of the hands of modern players and far from the ears of their audiences. While this music can in many cases be effective on a conventionally tuned six-string instrument, it can never be as effective as it inevitably is on the open-tuned and idiomatically-fingered seven-string instrument for which it was conceived—sonority and texture were essential compositional considerations for those who created this music; once the idiomatic layer has been lost, so has a good deal of the expression.

Many of us are by now fairly well acquainted with the music of the main protagonists of the Russian guitar, the patriarchal figure Sychra, the brilliant improviser Vysotsky and, to a lesser extent, further second generation figures such as Morkov, Aksionov, Vetrov, and Sarenko. The championship of this repertoire by the publishing house of Editions Orphée, the numerous scholarly articles of its editor Matanya Ophee, and the comprehensive PhD dissertation and extensive recording catalogue of Oleg Timofeyev (one of the two principal performers on this recording) introduced us to the emotional depth and brilliant technical approach of the Russian guitarists. We have even programmed some of this music in our own concert performances. But what this seven-disc recorded anthology provides is a much richer, more direct realization of the musical qualities and stylistic breadth of the repertoire. Here we have a comprehensive recording from two highly expert and accomplished practitioners of the instrument and their collaborators. Guitarists Oleg Timofeyev and John Schneiderman (also a highly accomplished lutenist) bring a refined, expressive, and often brilliant approach to their seminal interpretations. They have, of course, been dealing with this music for quite some time now. But for the rest of us, this recorded anthology presents an invitation for our own explorations that can hardly be ignored. The contributions of their accomplished chamber collaborators, Etienne Aberlin (violin), Anne Harley (soprano), Dan Caraway (guitar) and Kenneth Slowik (fortepiano) only add to the embarrassment of riches.

The collection surveys the development of the Russian repertoire from its earliest music through the patriarchal figure Sychra, his students, their students, and their contemporaries. In some cases they freely adopted one another's ideas and, in others, broke with their mentors and adopted new approaches. It's a fascinating history, explored in detail in Timofeyev's dissertation and referenced in his extensive liner notes to this collection. It is something that contrasts with a much less clearly interconnected development of the guitar and its music in the West during the same period.

Just as interesting as the uniquely Russian repertoire itself, is the relationship that existed between the Western five- and six-string guitar and the Russian seven-string guitar, both at the outset and throughout the period. In addition to the repertoire-defining minor-mode variation sets based on decidedly non-Western Russian material, intermixed with the various adaptations of Western repertoire and intriguing mixture of stylistic elements (even within discreet works), with these recordings we are also exposed to an originally composed Russian repertoire

framed in the cosmopolitan European high classical and early romantic styles. In addition, we are able to directly discern the intermixture of influences that occurred between the Russian guitarists themselves and, in some cases, the almost reactionary developments that occurred within the repertoire as it moved from a Western cosmopolitan classical style through Sychra's 'harp-guitar' and Vysotsky's brilliant improvisational style to a mainstream romantic yet still somewhat idiosyncratic miniaturist style during the 1840s, at the close of the Russian instrument's Golden Age.

The anthology follows a broadly chronological course, beginning with two discs devoted to Sychra's Moscow period and the music of his students (and, in turn, their students), the 'Moscow School.' Disc 3 surveys the earliest music for the Russian guitar—music dating from around 1800. Vysotsky's music is surveyed in disc 4, while disc 5 returns to Sychra and the St. Petersburg School in the form of chamber music for two guitars and for guitar with violin. The music of the "true Romantics," Alexandrov, Sarenko, and Zimmerman, follows, and the anthology concludes with a survey disc devoted to further chamber music with the guitar (adding to that which appears elsewhere in the collection). What follows here amounts only to an overview of a comprehensive project that contains many high points. If reviews of CD recordings routinely included titles (as concert reviews in newspapers usually do), I would be titling or subtitling this one *A Sleeping Giant Roused*.

* * *

The music of Andrey Sychra (1773–1850), the instrument's omnipresent figure, receives a good deal of attention and is accorded two discs as well as being heard at further points throughout the anthology, both in his own music and in the influence he exerted on the music of virtually all other Russian guitarists who came after him. Sychra's harp-inspired textures, sophisticated cross-string ornaments, elaborate arpeggios, delicately balanced forms, and wistful mood are explored over several variation sets, including the iconic "Troika" and the brilliant, often dramatic, and always nostalgic "In the Valley." Of particular interest, we at last have a complete recording of Sychra's deceptively titled *Practical Rules of Playing the Seven-String Guitar in Four Large Exercises*. Consisting of a mixture of high-classical, early romantic and *alten* (old) styles, each movement of this intriguing twenty-seven-minute four-part cycle progresses through a series of texturally defined modulating sections, each giving the impression of a compilation of several etudes developed and combined into a homogeneous larger whole. The Parisian five-string guitarists had tried something along similar lines in their

sets of Preludes and Etudes but without coming close to the quality or ambitious scale of the *Four Practical Rules*. Further pieces by Sychra, directly inspired by Western music, are also represented, not least in his adaption and augmentation of the Viennese pianist Henri Hert's well-known variations on *Weber's Last Thoughts* and his settings of the famous aria "Di tanti palpiti" from Rossini's *Tancredi* and a Rode concerto polonaise, adopting in these pieces a somewhat more generic Western use of his instrument.

The music of Sychra's St. Petersburg years, following his move from Moscow, is dealt with in a disc of chamber music (music for two guitars and for guitar and violin) shared with his accomplished student, the nobleman Vladimir Morkov (1801–1864). Sychra's music for guitar and violin is represented by a pair of minor-mode polonaises, one originally composed and unusually melancholic, the other adopted from the aforementioned Pierre Rode violin concerto. Sychra treats the instruments equally, the guitar parts being particularly ornate. Two further polonaises, taken from the piano music of Michal Kleofas Oginski, are scored for two guitars in more conventional, not particularly harp-like settings. This is also somewhat the case with the extended 16-minute *Variations on Two Songs*, a piece that provides an opportunity for us to compare Sychra directly with his Franco-Italian contemporary Ferdinando Carulli, who used one of these themes in his equally brilliant and extended two-guitar variation set, *Deux Airs Russes, Op. 110* (c. 1817).¹

Morkov's particularly refined guitar-duo music is represented by arrangements of music written by his friend Mikhail Glinka, the most important Russian composer of the period. Pieces taken from Glinka's iconic opera *A Life for the Tsar* and the orchestral work *Kamarinskaia* provide an analogy to the Viennese two-guitar genre, substituting for the Viennese *terz-guitar* tuned a third higher than usual a *quart-guitar* pitched at a fourth higher for the principal guitar part.

With the disc dedicated to the music of the students Sychra left behind in Moscow, the "Second Generation" of Aksionov, Vysotsky and Vetrov, we are able to discern the continued influence of the patriarch as well as additions to and departures from his finely balanced style.

Semion Aksionov (1784–1853), the dedicatee of Sychra's *Practical Rules*, developed a more articulate instrumental style than that of his teacher, employing less overtly harp-like textures and adopting in places a slightly more Western approach to the instrument. At the same time he added to his variation sets on Russian songs an extended rapid legato technique once described as "luxurious legato"

¹ This work may be heard in my recent recording with Karl Wohlwend, *Guitaromanie* (vol. 2): *Music for Two Guitars by Ferdinando Carulli* (dbMusic/CGS, 2016).

CD REVIEW: (cont.)

(something not approved of by Sychra, who felt it to be “bad gypsy style!”). Aksionov also more fully introduces us to the free approach that Russian guitarists sometimes adopted when arranging material from other instruments. In this case, the source material was a setting of the St. Petersburg-resident pianist John Field’s variations on *Kamarinskaia* (itself an appropriation of Russian material by a Western composer).

The music of Aksionov’s brilliant student Mikhail Vysotsky is also introduced on this disc. Along with a programmatic march “On the Escape of the French Troops from Moscow,” there are a couple of brilliant, ingeniously fingered, improvisatory variation sets on the Russian peasant and “gypsy” songs, “Stop Singing, Oh Nature’s Friend” and “I Love Pear.”

Before looking more fully at Vysotsky’s music (which is given a later disc to itself), however, we should mention the music of his student, the medical doctor Alexander Vetrov (c. 1812–1877). In addition to a quite Western-sounding variation set on the ‘gypsy’ tune “You Won’t Believe” (a piece that borrows directly from his teacher), we are treated to three of Vetrov’s études for the guitar. These are interesting, effective pieces that, with their lute-toccatà-like *alten Stil* sequences, intermixture of Italianate passagework, and interesting modulations (analogous to Sychra’s *Practical Rules*, though on a much smaller scale), combine a typically Russian mixture of styles, both within and between items. These pieces, along with an Aksionov *Exercise* found on the same disc (and further pieces included in the anthology), remind us that when dealing with études and other short free-form pieces the Russian guitarists are unvaryingly interesting.

Mikhail Vysotsky (1791–1837), a student of Aksionov and a serf whose unusual musical ability led to his release from serfdom, maintained an association not only with the upper classes of Russian society but with gypsy guitarists as well, the influence of each making itself felt in his music. While strict formal procedures were not a primary feature of this brilliant improviser’s style, his music remains inventive, dramatic and virtuosic (especially in his variation set finales). Although Vysotsky studied with Aksionov only, we nevertheless detect many of Sychra’s technical ideas in his music. In addition to a half-dozen archetypical minor-mode variation sets on Russian themes such as “Ah Mother I have a Headache” and “Go Home, Dear Cow” (titles whose humorous literal English translations belie the serious and dramatic mood of the music), we are also presented with a decidedly Western-sounding approach in sets such as ‘I Loved a Rose’ and even the ubiquitous *Troika* and *Cossack*, regardless of mode. Also included are two of Vysotsky’s most idiosyncratic works, his *Fantasia* on themes from Cramer piano études and his arrangement of *Contrapunctus*

III from J. S. Bach’s *Art of Fugue*. As is the case elsewhere in the Russian repertoire, rather than adhering to any sense of literal transcription these “observations” on the music of Western composers amount to new compositions. Vysotsky appears to be the first in a very long line of guitarists to become fascinated with the music of J. S. Bach. With his adaptation of the *contrapunctus* we are presented with a celebration of sophisticated contrapuntal texture which, at the same time, dispenses with any real sense of the fugal aspect of the music; Vysotsky was far more interested in the sophistication of contrapuntal texture and the profound mood of Bach’s music than in its formal construction. Vysotsky’s few chamber works are represented by his variations on the minor-mode Russian song “I Loved a Rose,” a further polonaise taken from the piano music of Oginski (this time of the well-known “Farewell to the Fatherland”), and the aforementioned “Ah Mother I have a Headache” (presented, in an effort to augment Vysotsky’s limited output in the genre, with an effective second guitar part recently composed by the Ukrainian guitarist Vladimir Polinov).

CD3, the disc dedicated to the “Earliest Music for the Russian Guitar” would, on the face of it, perhaps threaten to be the least interesting of the collection. It turns out, however, to be the quite the opposite. Almost all of the music here is cast in a convincing cosmopolitan style that affirms the starting point of the Russian guitar repertoire as thoroughly Western European. We are treated to solo works (a Rondo and a Polonaise based on *La Marseillaise*) by the important Bohemian guitarist and cittern player Ignatz von Held (1766–1816), an early Polonaise by Sychra, and the sole surviving work by Sychra’s much lesser known brother, Ludwig (a three-movement Allegro-Polonaise-Rondo *Fantasia*). We also hear early settings of Russian source material in A. Sviensky’s c.1803 variation sets on the iconic Ukrainian *Kozak*, an untitled *Air Russe* (identified by Timofeyev as a well-known folk song, “The Landlady”), and a variation set for two guitars. Of particular interest, is the Sonata for Violin and Seven-String Guitar (1799) written by the little-known Joseph Kamensky. If we didn’t know any better, we would imagine ourselves listening to a defining example of late-1780s Parisian chamber music intended for the *Concert Spirituel*. The cosmopolitan Parisian style continues in the Sonata for Two Guitars by Kamensky’s student, Prince Vladimir Lvov (some of which is taken from the sonata by his teacher). Music for guitar and voice is represented by a group of French chansons and Italian arias taken from an 1808 manuscript compiled by one Piotr Naymanowsky, among them a setting of Domenico Cimarosa’s “Se m’abandoni” (Cimarosa was yet another influential European composer who spent time in Russia).

The chronological survey ends with music written in the 1840s by the Romantic miniaturists Alexandrov, Sarenko, and Zimmerman, stopping short of the era in which the Russian guitarists added even more strings to their instruments. These were accomplished professional men—the last students of Sychra—who broke with tradition by almost completely ignoring native source material and embracing instead a European Romantic miniaturist style. Nevertheless, the presence of their teacher is never far away; after all, they contributed to, compiled, and saw to the publication of Sychra’s *Theoretical and Practical Guitar Method*. The music of Nikolai Alexandrov (1818–1884) is represented by ten unassuming yet charming miniature character pieces along with nine exercises and études in the form of largely minor-mode, often poignant figuration pieces. The evocative music of Vasily Sarenko (1814–1881), a medical doctor and highly decorated military man, is represented by the melancholy “Song without Words,” the fantasia “At the Seashore,” a light-hearted major-mode “Ukrainian Dance,” and four captivating, mainly minor-mode études. The remaining composer represented here is the landowner and legendary improviser Fiodor Zimmerman (1813–1882), described at the time as the “Paganini of the seven-string guitar” and often compared with Vysotsky. Along with two short caprices and two waltzes, one a lively *Tyrolean Waltz* with passages of yodeling-inspired harmonics, are three short pieces for two guitars which make a rare return to more quintessentially Russian-sounding material.

CD7, the final disc, provides a period-wide chamber music survey, adding to the numerous chamber items found elsewhere in the anthology. For guitar and violin, we hear Sychra’s arrangement of Rossini’s well-known aria “Di tanti palpiti” from *Tancredi* along with an 1809 arrangement by the little-known A. Sazanoff of a witty, cosmopolitan Sonata for the two instruments by Antoine de L’Hoyer (this well-connected French five-string guitarist, an associate of the Empress Elizaveta Alekseevna, was himself resident in Russia between 1803 and 1812. His music was transcribed by several Russian guitarists). Music for guitar and fortepiano is represented by Piotr Naimanowsky’s light, cosmopolitan variation set on the popular French song “Que le jour me dure” (the two instruments are equally active) and two items by Morkov: the decidedly Russian-flavored *Potpourri of Russian Folksongs* (with a guitar part reconstructed from the composer’s version for two guitars) and a further Western guitar adaptation: the Polonaise from Mauro Giuliani’s Third Concerto. Morkov’s addition of legatos, glissandi, and harp-like textures in this piece testify to the one-way adaptability of this music from West to East, something that rarely occurred in the opposite direction. Music for guitar-accompanied voice is provided by a set

of three Russian songs (1806) by Maflovsky (with an editorially added violin part), the second and third of which are nevertheless thoroughly Italian major-mode ariettas; and by three songs scored by von Held for the unusual combination of guitar, fortepiano and voice, again in the style of the Italian arietta (despite their minor modality and Russian texts).

The sound quality of these recordings is excellent. Timofeyev’s liner notes are detailed and informative, and the interpretations are highly effective. All of this should be more than enough to get our attention. Certainly, we owe it to ourselves to take the opportunity to become more fully acquainted with the repertoire this project provides. As comprehensive and ambitious as this anthology is, however, let’s not be fooled into thinking that the Russian repertoire has nothing further to offer. The Krivoy Rog edition of Sychra’s music alone runs to well over 400 items, from which such works as the *Freischütz Fantasie*, *Two Rondos and a Divertimento on Russian Songs*, and *Ludoiska Overture* immediately spring to mind. Vetrov’s *Sonata* and Beethoven arrangements, Morkov’s *24 Preludes in All Major and Minor Keys*, Sarenko’s Chopin arrangements, along with numerous operatic fantasias and pots-pourri also come spontaneously to mind. And there remain, of course, many Russian guitarist/composers whose music isn’t touched upon in this anthology. Nevertheless, with these recordings a sleeping giant has been more than roused.

—STANLEY YATES

