

Three generations of composers, one Russian tradition

The most substantial work on this CD, Rimsky-Korsakov's Quintet in B flat, is entirely in the tradition of the Russia of the Tsars and the divertimento by Paul Juon was also written before the Revolution. The works by Ippolitov-Ivanov and Vasilenko were composed during the first decades of the Soviet Union. The establishment of the Soviet regime was a cultural turning point as well as a political one, so that the four works on this CD might seem to represent two entirely different worlds. But even though Ippolitov-Ivanov and Vasilenko were certainly influenced by cultural and political changes, the level of continuity is greater than one would expect. The main reason for this is to be found in the conservative idiom of these two composers. In addition, we are dealing with a strong tradition, one which was not easy to break with and which later turned out to be politically useful. On the present CD that tradition is represented by three generations of a "family" of composers. Rimsky-Korsakov taught Ippolitov-Ivanov, who in turn was the teacher of Vasilenko. Despite stylistic differences, Paul Juon can be considered a distant musical cousin of Vasilenko. Not only were they precisely the same age –both being born in March 1872– but they were contemporaries at the Moscow Conservatory.

The compositions of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) can be divided into four different periods. Prior to 1873 he concentrated mainly on symphonies, but in about 1878 he commenced a series of impressive operas. During the intervening five years he produced only a few piano works, a string sextet and the quintet recorded on this CD. Shortly before, in 1871, Rimsky-Korsakov had been engaged to teach instrumentation and composition at the conservatory in Saint Petersburg. This appointment was a compliment to Rimsky-Korsakov because he still had much to learn where theory was concerned. He himself was perfectly well aware of his lack of knowledge, as is shown by the works he produced during this period, which include many fugues for piano. The quintet was written for a competition in 1876. In his *Chronicle of my musical life*, Rimsky-Korsakov described with some bitterness how the first prize went not to him but to the now forgotten Napravnik. The various compositions were played to the jury by performers who had not had an opportunity to practise them. The winning piece was given a splendid performance by a trio which included the legendary pianist Leschetizky, while Rimsky-Korsakov's quintet was performed by players who were so bad at sight-reading that they had to stop playing. A performance in Saint Petersburg shortly after was more successful.

The first movement immediately catches the listener's attention with its powerful rhythms. It is cast in sonata form, with the energetic opening motif being followed by a more flowing melody, first in the clarinet, horn and bassoon. The contrast between the two themes was probably what Rimsky-Korsakov had in mind when he referred in his memoirs to this movement as being in the style of Beethoven. The movement closes just as stormily as it began, with a lively coda. A horn solo opens the second movement, and the melody is then taken up by the other wind instruments. Halfway through the movement there is a fugato for the winds. Rimsky-Korsakov probably wished to demonstrate his compositional expertise in the same way as he did in his contemporary piano fugues. He was in any case happy enough with these passages that he emphasised them in his memoirs. The Rondo starts in a frolicsome manner –a playfulness that reminds us of the opening movement. Each of the wind instruments, except the bassoon, is given the opportunity to shine in a short solo, separated by piano arpeggios.

While working on the quintet, Rimsky-Korsakov published two collections of Russian folk songs, and indeed folk elements were to become one of the main characteristics of his work. It was precisely in this period that Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov (1859-1935) came to him for composition lessons. The way in which Ippolitov-Ivanov made Rimsky-Korsakov's ideas his own soon became apparent in the folk music character of his overture *Yar-Kmel* (1883). After finishing his studies, Ippolitov-Ivanov worked

for a time in Georgia, where he immersed himself in folk music. In 1893 he began to teach composition at the Moscow Conservatory, becoming the director in 1905. It was in Moscow that he composed his *Caucasian Sketches* –by far his best-known work– in 1894. After the revolution, Ippolitov-Ivanov retained his position as director of the Conservatory, which suggests that the new regime considered him to be reliable. The titles of some of his works, for example the *Hymn to Labour* (1927), suggest that he had accommodated himself to the new Russia. However, the Russian avant-garde accused him of adapting the style of the “good old days” to make it fit the new political reality. The fact that these “modernists” were not entirely wrong is demonstrated by “*An Evening in Groesjnie*” (*Georgia*), a work which Ippolitov-Ivanov completed in 1926 but which fits in perfectly with the world of the *Caucasian Sketches*, composed thirty years earlier. This short work starts with a vague and typically Russian wistfulness, aroused by memories of a fine summer evening. The melancholy is well expressed in the oboe solo, which is supported by accompanying figures in the other instruments. The atmosphere becomes more lively halfway through the work when a dance element is introduced which is reminiscent of Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov. The calm atmosphere later returns and the oboe solo reappears.

Sergei Vasilenko (1872-1956) was a generation younger than his teacher Ippolitov-Ivanov, and it is not surprising that he was more receptive to the new musical trends around the turn of the century. He was influenced for a time by Debussy, although he did not take on the French master’s more revolutionary aspects. A more significant influence was the folk music of various different regions and the vocal music of the Orthodox Church. The works he produced between 1910 and 1920 display a fascination with eastern exoticism and the music of Central Asia. Party leaders must have valued the fact that Vasilenko attempted from early on to bring music to the people, organising concerts for workers from 1907 and giving performances at factories with his Moscow orchestra. Despite this progressive attitude to musical life, Vasilenko, like his teacher Ippolitov-Ivanov, was little interested in such new movements as constructivism, a-tonality or the mechanistic sounds of Mossolov, preferring to write more accessible music in the great Russian tradition. After years of struggle between progressive and conservative composers, the party decided in favour of the latter in 1932. The arts had to be understandable for the masses and any kind of “formalism” was banned. A decree of 23 April 1932 gave the traditional style free rein and such composers –today almost forgotten– as Vasilenko, Glière and Grechaninov became authoritative figures. Vasilenko’s work is characterised not only by its folk music elements but also by the use of such Russian instruments as the balalaika.

Both the folk music elements and the preference for sober forms are readily apparent in the *Quartet on Turkmen Themes* (1932). This is catchy, finely instrumented programme music. The opening movement is dominated by dark colours, introduced by the bassoon, which initiates a fugato. The second movement opens gracefully and we soon hear the sad waltz which represents lost love. Halfway through the movement there is a short, lively presto. Just before the end the waltz returns briefly and the movement concludes with the motif which introduced it. In the third movement, Vasilenko effectively portrays a sunset, with a splendid solo for the cor anglais. Here too, the contemplative atmosphere is briefly interrupted by a quicker section in which the wind instruments are accompanied by the sharp sound of the drum, but the thoughtful tone returns. The fourth movement is another example of programme music, with the lark being represented –needless to say– by the flute. Its warbling notes are reinforced by the triangle. Vasilenko gave full vent to his love of eastern exoticism in the final movement. Like the preceding movements it is in ABA form. In the opening section, we hear a regular rhythm which represents something of the sound of a caravan passing by. This is followed by a virtuoso section whose clever instrumentation and the use of the tambourine produce an almost orchestral effect. The caravan then returns and the piece dies away to its conclusion.

The odd man out in this –indeed in every programme– is Paul Juon (1872-1940), born in Russia as the son of a Swiss insurance agent. Like Vasilenko, he studied composition at the Moscow Conservatory, but with Arensky and Taneiev. In 1897, he settled in Berlin, living there until the Nazis came to power. His work is difficult to categorise, being neither Russian nor German. Its eclectic nature reminds one of greatly differing composers, from Brahms up to various masters of the first half of the twentieth century. His *Divertimento in F* Opus 51 (1913), the only work on this CD employing the full forces of the Hexagon Ensemble, even seems in places to look forward to the work of Les Six. The divertimento aspect becomes apparent in the opening bars with their jolly, pointed and hammering motif, wittily and memorably answered by the horn. A Russian element is introduced with a series of flowing solos, starting with the clarinet. A short intermezzo –a not very profound but graceful passage– is followed by the long, beautiful lines of the Fantasia, with the piano in particular producing an undertone of passion. The second intermezzo has the charming swing of a waltz. The work closes as lightly as it began, with a lively Rondino. This is a true divertimento!

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