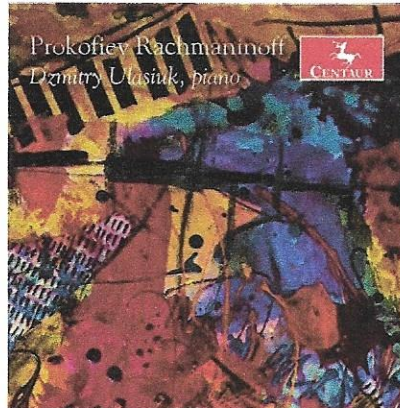


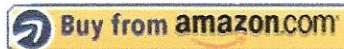
PROKOFIEV 10 Pieces from *Romeo and Juliet*, op. 75: Folk Dance; Scene: The Street Awakens; Minuet; Young Juliet; Masks; Montagues and Capulets; Friar Lawrence; Mercutio; Dance of the Girls with Lilies; *Romeo and Juliet* before Parting. **RACHMANINOFF** *Études-Tableaux*, op. 33 • Dzmitry Ulasiuk (pn) • CENTAUR 3698 (62:12)



Prokofiev: 10 Pieces from *Romeo & Juliet*, Op. 75; Rachmaninoff: *Etudes-Tableaux*, Op. 33

Audio CD

Centaur Records



Piano culture in this country has been enormously enriched by émigrés from the sphere of the former Soviet Union. A performer as young as the very talented, multiple prize-winning Belarusian pianist Dzmitry Ulasiuk may have few if any memories of the old regime, but there is no doubt that the Russian piano school is alive and thriving around the world. A sense of Ulasiuk's innate ability is gained in a passage from his website: "Within one year of professional studies at the State Academy of Music, he made his solo debut with an all-Chopin program in his hometown [Minsk]. A year later, he appeared internationally in the Beethoven Festival in Bonn, Germany, performing Beethoven's Symphony #7 as arranged for piano solo by Franz Liszt."

Ulasiuk left Belarus for advanced studies in Texas. On his debut release for Centaur, a label with a particular knack for finding excellent pianists, he essays two cornerstones of the Russian repertoire with musically satisfying results—in fact, Ulasiuk competes on equal footing with several illustrious pianists who have recorded these pieces in the past.

I'm thinking first of Andrei Gavrilov, whose DG recording of Prokofiev's 10 Pieces from *Romeo and Juliet* was my first encounter with the score. I came to

love the music, but no thanks to Gavrilov's brittle, chilly recording. The ballet had a tortuous birth, involving everything that was wrong under Stalinism—baroque politicking at the Bolshoi and Mariinsky theaters, a pivotal ally being disappeared in the middle of the night, trembling fear over who might be next, controversy about the music among cultural *apparatchiks*, and more. It was five years after its 1935 commission before *Romeo and Juliet* got a premiere inside Russia. (One criticism from a friendly conductor was justified—he urged Prokofiev to jettison the happy ending that was in the first version of the ballet.)

Prokofiev bided his time during the long wait by excerpting three suites from the complete score, as well as the 10 Pieces for Piano. Ulasiuk gives a splendid reading that is sensitive to each of the episodes, something especially welcome since the composer focused on some of the gentler and refined dances. The piano writing doesn't imitate orchestral effects, and its sparseness is a challenge if a performer wants to recreate the emotions conveyed by the dancers. Ulasiuk has the rhythmic suppleness of an inner dancer, and when a number imitates restrained formal movement ("Menuet," "Masks," "Dance of the Girls with Lilies"), he phrases with delicately inserted hesitations and slight rubato. Virtuosity comes out in the soft, rapid finger work of "Young Juliet" and "Mercutio," which he handles with captivating lightness.

In the transcription for piano the absence of orchestral sound is felt only in the heartbreakingly beautiful "Romeo and Juliet before Parting," where you can't help but hear the violins singing plaintively. Yet Ulasiuk has such a pure legato and such emotional connection with the music that the scene comes off with the right emotional impact. The best recording of the 10 Pieces comes from Vladimir Ashkenazy in his prime in the mid-1990s (Decca nla), but I would place Ulasiuk next to the top.

There's much stronger competition in Rachmaninoff's first set of *Études-Tableaux*, op. 33, even though the composer and Sviatoslav Richter, the two greatest exponents of the music, never recorded all eight pieces, and Horowitz apparently recorded only Nos. 2, 5, and 6 in the stereo era. What immediately struck me about Ulasiuk's performance is how easily and fluidly this very difficult music flows under his fingers. Nothing is studied or overly interpreted, and he is never tempted by gloomy undercurrents as many Rachmaninoff interpreters are. No doubt six of the eight *Études-Tableaux* are in minor keys, but there's just as undoubtedly a strain of expressive joy in them.

No. 1 in F Minor is almost rollicking, and Ulasiuk makes its extroverted mood very appealing, but where you begin to notice something special is in No 2 in C Major. Here, Rachmaninoff uses one of his favorite expressive devices (learned from Chopin) of a glittering accompaniment to a melody that floats independently above it. For the effect to work, the pianist must be completely regular and precise

in the left hand while the right hand sings in an easy, improvisatory style. Ulasiuk does it perfectly, both here and when the same technique reappears in *Études* No. 6 (much more noisily) and No. 8, one of the quietest numbers. I also love the lack of portentousness when he plays No. 3 in C Minor, marked *Grave*, where the rumbling left hand is powerful but not morose.

This is Rachmaninoff playing of a high order, not just because Ulasiuk has the technique but because he finds the through-line with sure musical instincts even when there is a welter of notes to execute. I think he's set himself apart and above many other competition prizewinners through the musicality I've tried to describe. The proof of the pudding is in the listening, of course, and I warmly recommend this disc as a great listen. The recorded piano sound is very close up, giving us an intimate sense of the pianist's tone and touch. **Huntley Dent**

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