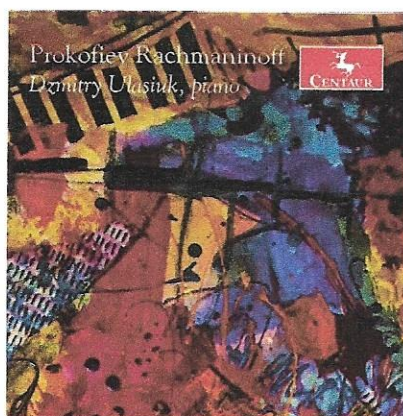
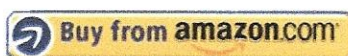


Focus on the Images: An Interview with Pianist Dzmitry Ulasiuk



Prokofiev: 10 Pieces from Romeo & Juliet, Op. 75; Rachmaninoff: Etudes-Tableaux, Op. 33
AUDIO CD
Centaur Records



For pianist Dzmitry Ulasiuk, performance is the space where the performer should be as honest and natural as possible. Perhaps that familiarity with performance is the result of his upbringing, or the result of his academic work—both as a student and as a professor—but in that dedication to authenticity, Ulasiuk removes the pressure of having “to perform” and simply lives in the music.

Originally from Minsk, Belarus, Ulasiuk currently lives in Fort Worth, TX, where he is studying for his doctorate in piano performance at the University of North Texas. Since his debut in 1998, Ulasiuk has performed widely throughout Europe, the U.S., China, Japan, and Costa Rica. He has completed and won several international piano competitions, and most recently he was the 2018 Grand Winner of the Kaleidoscope International Music Competition in LA. He will also be a jurist for the International Keyboard Odyssey and Festival in Fort Collins, CO and the LA International Liszt Competition. I asked him about his album of selections from Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff, his work as a jurist for piano competitions, and his plans after completing his degree.

To start, I wonder if you would tell me a little about your background and how you first became interested in studying the piano.

I come from a family of musicians. Both my parents were performers in a theater orchestra (viola and clarinet) and my older brother played cello. So I was raised in a musical environment, backstage at rehearsals, watching performances of ballets, seeing and listening to live performances of all kinds. I wanted to be a pianist. My first year of school was in a regular music school. My piano teacher recommended

me for the school for gifted and talented children. I passed the entrance exam, but when I enrolled there the next year they said my hands were too small to play piano, so they accepted me as a vocalist instead. Fortunately for me, however, all students had to take piano lessons at this school. I was a singer until my voice started changing, and then I had to decide on something else. My father liked jazz and so I played the saxophone until the teacher left. Because I no longer had a teacher, I returned to the regular music school and studied with a new piano teacher, who was ambitious and strict. He introduced me to his former professor at the Belarus State Academy of Music, Liudmila S. Shelomentseva; she was impressed and became my teacher for many years.

This album is a wonderful showcase of your skills and repertoire. How did you decide to focus your debut album on études and shorter pieces from Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff?

I had this idea to play some Russian ballet music, like Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Tchaikovsky. I wanted to do Russian composers because I grew up on this music and understand it; I feel very close to this music. I love the Prokofiev because it was the first ballet my father introduced me to. The Rachmaninoff *Études* is another work by a great Russian composer that shows not just technical skills, but different character pieces all within one work. Both are beautiful pieces of music. It was an easy decision to make.

From your website, I learned that you have competed in and won many international piano competitions (congratulations, by the way). What's the secret to succeeding in these competitions? Or, how do you prepare and approach what must be fairly stressful and rigorous tests both of your nerve and skills as a performer?

I never considered competition as a competition. I can't say that I wasn't nervous, but I have always thought that a competition is just an opportunity for me to perform on stage, to present music that I like and for which I have worked hard to present to the public. You need to be honest and play music that you like. If the audience (the judges) likes my playing and wants to hear me again, that's good. I never worry about winning a prize or which place I'm in; for me it's the chance to perform on stage. It's about me: Am I happy about my performance? It's not about the judges or being better than other performers. When I am very pleased with my performance, I do well in the competition. I have never experienced a competition that was unfair, in my mind. That is my approach to competition. I also think that competitions are a great way for students to not just hear other performers' repertoire and interpretations, but to meet people from all over the world. You meet different people, with different personalities, different cultures and languages, and of course different approaches to practicing and playing the piano. It is a great opportunity to learn about people, to meet people.

I ask about your expertise with piano competitions because you will soon be a jurist for a couple of upcoming competitions: the International Keyboard Odysiad & Festival and the Los Angeles International Liszt Competition. Will your previous experience as a competitor help you judge the performers of these competitions? What will you be looking for in a winning performance?

What I look for is definitely the person who can create an atmosphere on stage, one that I can be captivated by. It is very rare, actually. When you hear so many pianists, one after another—and they are usually all very good—you look for that one who makes a connection with the music and a connection with me as the audience. Maybe they don't perform 100 percent perfect technically, but they create something special in their performance.

On your website, you also have some lovely videos and recordings of past performances. You have a video of your performance of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, op. 18. The video quality isn't the best, but it is an emotive and colorful performance, and I highly recommend our readers to watch it for themselves. Where was this video made/recorded? Do you hope to release more concerto performances or recordings in the future?

Oh, thank you for those comments! It was recorded in Minsk, Belarus in 2008, at the Belarusian State Philharmonic Hall. They don't have the means to videotape all performances, but someone in the audience recorded it and sent it to me. Yes, of course, I would love to record all my performances, but the reality is that it is much more expensive to do a video recording with an orchestra, especially a professional one. Last year I performed Chopin's First Piano Concerto with an orchestra, and it would have cost several thousand dollars to have a video recording made. One concerto I would like to record is the First Piano Concerto by Emil von Sauer. It is never performed any more, and I'm working on finding an orchestra that would be willing to work with me on a performance. It hasn't been played here in the United States for over 110 years, and was only performed in a few major cities. I do have other videos, but I don't feel the need to flood my website with them. I am particular about what I put up for the public to see.

You have also posted a video of selections from Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet, which includes "Young Juliet," "Masks," and "Mercutio" from the album. I tremendously enjoyed this video, not only for your skillful performance (you move your hands so beautifully across the instrument), but because the performance seemed to be so fun for you, a chance to play and dance. Prokofiev's music demonstrates the complex narrative capabilities of the piano, but it also gives space for the ballet he intended to accompany with his music. How important is the element of "play" to your performance? Is your physical approach to the instrument—posture, position, movement, etc.—a conscious effort to interact with the music, or is it more of a subconscious activity?

Definitely this is subconscious. I don't rehearse motions or facial expressions or any type of movement when I play. It is all natural and comes from feeling the music. When I'm playing, I'm dancing, I'm having fun, I'm crying, I'm laughing, I'm living life through the performance of the music. I think the most important thing is to relate to the audience through the pieces. You have to live through the music you perform. You can't practice movements in front of the mirror as to how to be on stage. You have to be as natural as possible on stage, and dedicate all of yourself to the music during your performance. It's definitely subconscious.

The parallels between Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet and Rachmaninoff's Études-Tableaux are quite nice—each require similar intentions and technique, each are groups of short expressive pieces that evoke images of movement and shape, and each offer narratives of human interactions (both physical and emotional). Is it helpful to think of images or shapes when you perform these pieces or are you more focused on the music itself?

When performing these pieces, I'm focusing on images from the music. Because of my parents, who were musicians in a theater orchestra, I was backstage a lot and saw the real images of *Romeo and Juliet* on stage. It impacted me enormously. This is program music, so it is easier to approach in many aspects. This is not just music; this is movement, this is dance, these are people in the story. This applies to the *Études-tableaux* as well. These are descriptive works: These are images of human nature, of people, of their emotions. This is not absolute music in this case—this is ballet, this is tableaux or pictures, so naturally I have to focus on the images. You cannot separate the music from them.


You are also studying for your doctorate at the University of North Texas. When you complete your degree, do you hope to continue performing or to teach more? Teach and perform! Performing is a little bit selfish. I mean, if you have this ability to perform, it means you should share your experience, your soul, with the audience. My performing has more purpose—it's not just me being a star on the stage. I like to perform to teach. In the context of teaching, my performing becomes learning for my students, a teaching tool. You have to be able to perform in order to teach and to encourage students, and to show them what you're talking about. Through my performances I try to encourage people to dive deeply into the emotional aspect of the music and bring it out into the open. I hope to get a teaching position at a university or college where I can teach and continue to perform as much or as often as I can.

Aside from your future work as a jurist for piano competitions, what are your next or upcoming projects or concerts?

This summer I will record another CD, one of all Scriabin works, including some mazurkas and the late sonatas. I have some concerts being scheduled in Atlanta, Cleveland, and a few places in Texas, and probably in November for the Fryderyk

Chopin Society of Texas, but I don't have all the details secured yet. As they are scheduled and confirmed I put them on my website, so anyone can see when and where I will be performing. I also need to finish my dissertation. It is on the Emil von Sauer Piano Concerto; Sauer was a student of Liszt. I have also been asked to consider recording a CD of Ravel's chamber music with a violinist whom I've worked with before. That would be a great project for both of us. I manage to stay busy, but always I'm looking for opportunities to perform.

Thank you so much, Jacqueline, for your time and questions. I appreciate any opportunity to talk about great music and playing the piano.

 **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)**

This debut by young and up-and-coming pianist Dzmitry Ulasiuk plays to his strengths—both his physical dexterity and incredible showmanship. Ulasiuk's decision to perform shorter pieces by Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff showcases enough variety within his arsenal of talent and skill (it is certainly not limited or constrained by the form of these pieces) to keep me hoping for a release of something longer, to demonstrate a bit of his sustained strength.

Prokofiev's 10 Pieces from *Romeo and Juliet* is both a considerable work for solo piano and a kind of remnant of the ballet he originally wrote in 1935. Performed by Ulasiuk, these pieces recall the ballet, or at least the piano's capacity for mirroring the flow, speed, and gracefulness of ballet dancers. Listening to music (at least for me) is a highly imaginative, visual sort of exercise and so, to be clear, the movement I imagine is also inspired by the narrative of the play (and the titles of the pieces). For the pianist, sound is shaped by movement. But for the ballet dancer, sound is the impetus for taking shape and movement. And for Ulasiuk, sound is a result of movement and intention. That intention creates such dynamic and compelling sound: warring Capulets and Montagues, the potential of a young girl, the wizened surety of a trusted advocate.

With Rachmaninoff's *Études-Tableaux*, Ulasiuk derives a similar relationship between intention and sound creation. These pieces are not titled with anything more than descriptions of tempo, and yet they exist as sonic images (if you will)—samples perhaps of ideas and themes built of sound. Without giving these *Tableaux* descriptive titles, Rachmaninoff gives the pianist room to interpret these landscapes, to shape them specifically. For Ulasiuk, he seems to settle a bit more into the pedal, creating sustained passages that feel warm and glowing. He is

perhaps less concerned with mirroring the shape of human movement and instead outlining the nuances, or complexities, of an instrument that is so percussive and yet also capable of such lyricism and tonality.

I am eager to hear more from this artist of sound and intention. Listen for his care and consideration for shape, movement, and the perplexing duality of the piano. **Jacqueline Kharouf**

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