**FEATURE REVIEW by**[**Colin Clarke**](http://www.fanfarearchive.com/indices/itop/reviewers/h1_048.html)

**SCRIABIN 9 Mazurkas,**op. 25. **Piano Sonatas No. 5; No. 7,** “White Mass”; **No. 9,** “Black Mass” **•**Dzmitry Ulasiuk (pn) **•**CENTAUR 39:12 (60:53)

I very much enjoyed Dzmitry Ulasiuk’s disc of Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff, reviewed in *Fanfare*42:6, describing him as “something of a find for Centaur.” The present disc confirms these thoughts. Whereas in that disc he successfully showed the different voices of two composers, here he shows different voices of the same composer. The Mazurkas, op. 25, of Scriabin are a universe or two away from the late sonatas, with only the Fifth Sonata as something of a “bridging experience.” Intelligent programming as well as intelligent playing, then. As if that is not enough, Ulasiuk writes his own booklet notes, and highly insightful they are, too.

The set of Nine Mazurkas that comprise op. 25 date from 1899, when the composer was a young professor at the Moscow Conservatoire (remember, Scriabin was born in 1872). Ulasiuk captures the individual nature of each mazurka (some are closer to post-Chopin than others), but he simultaneously conveys the idea of a trajectory through the set. As Ulasiuk says, each emerges as an elusive “sketch” or “mini tone-poem,” positing that they are embryonic “Poèmes.” It is a persuasive argument when each is handled as carefully and penetratingly as this.

It is interesting to look through the lists of recordings and see the relative paucity of complete traversals of op. 25. Ulasiuk’s understanding places him in a direct line to Samuil Feinberg and Yakov Flier, no less, and convinces the listener that op. 25 is without doubt a work of genius.

The Fifth Sonata positively flies off the blocks: and just when one thinks gesture is all, Ulasiuk brings us full-on into Scriabin’s fragrant hinterlands before offering us rapid-fire music that seems to be a prolongation of the finale of the Fourth Sonata. It is heady, satisfyingly discombobulatory and, when once listens with deliberately analytical ears, remarkably performed. Textures are supremely delineated; melodic lines that span octaves and octaves make the sort of sense Webern does in the hands of a good interpreter. More, the impetuosity which is so vital a part of this music (and which a studio can mercilessly steal) is retained *par excellence*, achieving a cumulative effect that moves in waves.

The notorious “White Mass” and “Black Mass” Sonatas form the apex of Scriabin’s piano output. Both include pronounced occurrences (vertically and horizontally) of Scriabin’s so-called “Mystic Chord” (which can be written as a procession of fourths). If it is true that the subtitle “White Mass” is something of an exorcism from the Sixth Sonata, it too links to the composer’s Theosophical beliefs. This is music of the highest order, but it needs a performer who understands how to deal with what might be construed as its excesses. Ulasiuk is one such (that lineage I referenced earlier speaks loudly here). While the “Black Mass” is relatively frequently performed and recorded, the “White Mass” seems to be less so. (Although I would love to hear a recording reviewed in *Fanfare*18:4 on Zuma Ama performed by Salvatore Moltisanti, which places the Seventh Sonata straight after a set of seven keyboard sonatas by Cimarosa!). Ulasiuk’s Scriabin Seventh finds veiled bells behind walls of sound; he finds lines even in ecstatic climaxes. I like, but am not completely convinced by, Ulasiuk’s contention that the subtitle comes from the composer’s use of all types of chords and that, given Scriabin was synesthetic, the “whiteness” comes from the color combinations, white being a combination of all colors. Whatever; technically many pianists cannot resist the temptation to over-depress the sustaining pedal in this music, giving us a monochromatic haze. Ulasiuk knows far better; staccato can give rise to Mephistophelean, post-Lisztian piano laughter.

Hitting the nail on the head, Ulasiuk posits that “if the Seventh Sonata exorcises demons, the Ninth Sonata lifts them out and re-examines them.” Although less than 10 minutes in duration, this sonata presents universes in microcosm in which Ulasiuk offers the contrasting theme (described by the composer as “dreaming saintliness”) with a most beguiling innocence. Certainly this “Black Mass” performance outclasses those of Melnikov (Harmonia Mundi, reviewed by myself back in *Fanfare*30:2) and Lubimov (ECM). I referred to Melnikov as a fine player, but not “transportative” to other realms. In contrast, Ulasiuk is very much capable of this. In a mere 10 minutes we traverse worlds, the final gesture asking the question, “What next?”

This is a massively successful disc, certainly on a musical level. Technically, Ulasiuk is a giant, but it is his interpretative prowess that is most impressive. The recording is a clear winner, even if the recording could be finer: it could offer more depth and body. But do not let that put you off. Dzmitry Ulasiuk is the real deal. **Colin Clarke**

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