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NAXOS

Giya
KANCHELI

Ex contrario
Middelheim • Tsutisopeli

Svetlana Makarova, Pavel Vernikov, Violin
Jing Zhao, Cello • Davit Gvelesiani, Vocals
Rustavi Ensemble • Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra
Lera Auerbach

Giya Kancheli (1935–2019)

Ex contrario • Middelheim • Tsutisopeli

Born in Tbilisi on 10 August 1935, Giya Kancheli was one of Georgia's most distinguished composers and a leading figure in contemporary music. His work frequently drew inspiration from Georgian folklore and was mostly conceived dramaturgically with its strong linear flow and an expansive sense of musical time. An artist with an uncompromising artistic integrity, Kancheli was memorably described by his senior Russian contemporary, composer Rodion Shchedrin, as 'an ascetic with the temperament of a maximalist and a restrained Vesuvius'.

Kancheli wrote seven symphonies and a symphonic 'liturgy' for viola and orchestra, *Mourned by the Wind*. His music remained largely unknown in the West before his *Symphony No. 4 'In memoria di Michelangelo'* was given its first American performance – Yuri Temirkanov conducting The Philadelphia Orchestra in January 1978. The advent of glasnost in the Soviet Union brought growing exposure for and recognition of Kancheli's distinctive musical voice, leading to prestigious commissions alongside increasing performances in Europe and America.

Kancheli's unique compositional idiom owes much to his work in the theatre, having for two decades served as music director of the Rustaveli Theatre in Tbilisi. His opera *Music for the Living* (1982–84), which won considerable praise in the former Soviet Union and Western Europe following its premiere in June 1984, was written in collaboration with the Rustaveli's director Robert Sturua. The original collaborators then restaged the opera for the Deutsches National Theatre in Weimar in December 1999, and further revivals have since taken place.

The following decades saw a continuous stream of new commissions by leading players and orchestras – many of the resulting works having been recorded by those artists for whom they were written, thereby making Kancheli among one of the most high-profile composers of his generation. Discouraged by the continuous political and social turbulence in his own country, Kancheli had chosen to reside in Antwerp throughout most of his later years, though he died (partially as the result of a long-term heart condition) in his home city of Tbilisi on 2 October 2019.

Although music for orchestra dominates his overall output, distinction can be made between those from the earlier part of Kancheli's career in the Soviet Union with those he wrote after the collapse of the Soviet state and his relocation to Western Europe. In particular, his seven symphonies chart a steady, although never predictable, trajectory in the emergence of his mature language – the idiom of Shostakovich gradually being enriched with elements from Western Modernism and Georgian traditional music, which reached a culmination in his *Sixth Symphony* (1978–80). Pointedly subtitled '*Epilogue*', its successor marked the close of one of the most significant such cycles in Soviet music and was again championed by the conductor Jansug Kakhidze (1935–2002), who recorded all seven symphonies and other of Kancheli's works.

It was thus around the turn of the new century when Kancheli began to move away from those opulent musical canvases of his earlier orchestral works, toward the more restrained and often inward expression of those that characterised his output thereafter. This was initially evident in his opera *Life Without Christmas* (1990–91), whose four acts – representing 'Prayers' for Morning, Midday, Evening and Night – can also be performed as autonomous works. Also at this time came a number of important pieces for chamber ensemble, notably the piano quartet *In L'istesso tempo* (1997), which opened up new areas of sound and expression that soon fed into his writing for larger forces. Kancheli himself noted these sparser yet more streamlined textures as being evidence of the greater concentration and distillation in his musical means.

Nowhere is this greater refinement of approach more manifest than in *Ex contrario*, *Middelheim* and *Tsutisopeli*, recorded here for the first time – all of which can be taken as typical of his idiom at its most flexible and mature, and which were premiered by musicians often associated with his music.

Ex contrario (2006)

In the case of *Ex contrario*, commissioned by Andres Mustonen and Pavel Vernikov and written at the behest of Studiomusica for the music festivals at Cividale del Friuli and Portogruaro, the first performances were given by Gidon Kremer with his Kremerata Baltica. Its original scoring is for violin and cello, alongside an ensemble in which strings are joined by sounds from a keyboard as realised on a sampler, a bass guitar and what is described as a 'performance CD' providing an ambient background for the piece overall. As with almost all Kancheli's mature works, this unfolds as a continuous span.

The work commences with gestures from the sampler, with the sound of violins emerging as if from afar against somnolent strings. Gradually this takes on greater tonal and rhythmic definition as violins unfold a plaintive cantilena, its expressive gestures duly becoming more forceful with intricate pizzicato writing and sudden lunges from the strings – for all that the static nature of the whole remains consistent. As so often with this composer, elements of folk and traditional music can be perceived (such as when the work starts to assume a dance-like motion around the ten minute mark), but these are subsumed into an essentially abstract discourse whose evocative overtones are more implied than stated. Towards its mid-point, the work takes on that elegiac manner familiar from other of Kancheli's later compositions and the violins likewise become more co-operative in a mood of stoic fatalism. After some aggressive interjections a chorale-like theme is intimated by the violins during the final minutes – but this itself subsides into an overall passivity that persists until the closing fugitive gesture.

Middelheim (2016/18)

One of the composer's last works, *Middelheim* was written in 2016 as a piano trio and first performed as such in Tbilisi on 6 July 2021 by violinist Temuraz Jaiani, cellist Alexander Chidzhavadze and pianist Alexander Korsantia. Its subsequent hearings have also featured an ensemble of strings, as with the present recording, in which the ensemble comprises 23 musicians. Kancheli does not elaborate on the title, which most likely alludes to the Middelheim Open Air Sculpture Museum that forms part of the Nachtegalen Park near Antwerp, where the composer later made his home. Its website describes it thus: 'The merging of art and nature is a significant aspect of the museum. This is seen through the displayed works, the kind of exhibitions curated along with the pavilions and the structure of the open-air museum itself. In the works exhibited, their placement is just as important as the actual works because their intermingling with their natural surroundings transforms and augments the experience of the viewer'. Kancheli's music could thus be understood to embody this environment in sound.

Although its instrumentation might suggest something akin to a 'triple concerto' (in a lineage derived from Beethoven), the three instruments rarely emerge as soloists or as a conventional piano trio. Rather, their interplay feels closer to aspects of a single unfolding meta-instrument, which, in turn, articulates in melodic terms what the string ensemble provides for a harmonic backdrop. Formally, this music evolves as an overlapping succession of episodes for various combinations of these soloists in combination with ensemble textures of varying density, and with several attempts at building towards an emotional culmination whose non-arrival might itself be considered a focal point. Certainly, the closing stages pursue a logical if fragmented trajectory to a conclusion where the 'trio' achieves a tentative if meaningful expressive unity.

While they do not feature any of the artists who gave these pieces their respective premieres, the two recordings here can be regarded as authoritative and not least for the participation of Lera Auerbach who, as well as a pianist and a conductor, is among the leading composers of her generation. With a sizable output that currently includes six symphonies, ten string quartets, several concertante works plus numerous cycles of songs and piano pieces, she has also had frequent recourse to the combining of vocal and instrumental soloists with orchestral forces, which became a feature of Kancheli's later music. She has also worked with many of those musicians who latterly championed Kancheli, therefore making another link between artists and generations.

Richard Whitehouse

Tsutisopeli (2019)

Giya Kancheli stopped composing music in December 2018, yet his last score was finalised in mediocre health in May 2019 in his native Georgia. Kancheli wrote this musical farewell for Pavel Vernikov, Svetlana Makarova and the Rustavi Ensemble, and entitled it after the Georgian traditional poem *Tsutisopeli* (წუთისოფელი). This title alludes to Seneca's *De Brevitate Vitae*, and describes the shortness of life in a Georgian word that has no equivalent in any other language (literally 'tsuti' – 'minute', sopeli – 'country').

David Abrahamyan

Svetlana Makarova



Photo: Claude Dussez

Svetlana Makarova is a Russian-Swiss violinist renowned for her remarkable virtuosity and expressive depth. She won First Prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians in Moscow at the age of ten, launching an international career marked by numerous prestigious awards. In 2008, she was invited by Lorin Maazel to take up a leading concertmaster position at the Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia in Valencia. As a soloist and chamber musician, she regularly performs at the world's leading concert halls and festivals. Makarova is professor of violin at the Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien (mdw) and HEMU Lausanne. An internationally respected pedagogue, she is frequently invited to serve on the juries of major international competitions.

Pavel Vernikov



Photo: Claude Dussez

Born in Odessa, Pavel Vernikov studied at the Stolyarsky School of Music and the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory under mentors such as David Oistrakh and Semyon Snitkovsky. He gained international acclaim after winning the ARD International Music Competition (Munich) and the Vittorio Gui International Violin Competition (Florence). As a virtuoso violinist, he has performed worldwide, including at Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall, Het Concertgebouw and Teatro alla Scala. A sought after chamber musician, he has collaborated with top artists and served as artistic director of various festivals. He currently teaches in Vienna, Lausanne and Madrid, combining performance, pedagogy and festival direction.

Jing Zhao



Jing Zhao, born in Beijing, is widely regarded as one of the foremost cellists of her generation. In 2005 she won First Prize at the ARD International Music Competition (Munich) and in 2009 received the Exxon Mobil Music Award (Japan). She studied at the Karajan-Akademie in Berlin and with renowned cellists including Yo-Yo Ma and Mstislav Rostropovich. As a soloist she has performed with major orchestras under conductors such as Seiji Ozawa, Riccardo Muti and Myung-whun Chung. A dedicated chamber musician, she regularly appears at international festivals, and maintains an active recording career. www.jingzhaocello.com

Rustavi Ensemble



The Rustavi Ensemble – also known as the Georgian State Academic Folk Song and Dance Ensemble – was founded in 1968 by folklorist Anzor Erkomaishvili. From its beginnings as a male vocal choir, Rustavi has expanded to include dancers and instrumentalists, creating a comprehensive ensemble preserving Georgian polyphonic singing and traditional dance. Celebrated for powerful, richly textured harmonies and dynamic choreography, Rustavi has toured globally, performed thousands of concerts, and introduced Georgian folk music to the world. In 2001 it was awarded the UNESCO Pacha Prize for its contribution to safeguarding Georgia’s intangible musical heritage.

Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra



The Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra (LCO) has performed in prestigious venues worldwide and helped bring Lithuanian orchestral music to global audiences. It was founded in Vilnius in 1960 by conductor Saulius Sondeckis, and since 2004 has established itself internationally, touring across Europe, North America and Japan. The orchestra is celebrated for championing works by Lithuanian composers as well performing repertoire that spans Bach and Mozart, and has premiered pieces by numerous composers including Alfred Schnittke and Arvo Pärt.

www.lithuanianchamberorchestra.com

Photo: Dmitrij Matvejev

Lera Auerbach



Born in 1973 in Chelyabinsk, Lera Auerbach is a composer, concert pianist and conductor. Raised in a musical family, she began composing at an early age and later studied at the Manhattan School of Music, The Juilliard School and the Hochschule für Musik Hannover. Auerbach has since established a renowned international career, composing for major orchestras, ensembles and films, performing as a pianist, and conducting her own works. Her output spans concert works, chamber music and vocal pieces, often exploring profound human themes with a distinctive contemporary voice. www.leraauerbach.com

Giya Kancheli, one of Georgia's most eminent composers, became increasingly famous after the advent of glasnost in the Soviet Union, when his works, not least his seven symphonies, were heard internationally. Around the year 2000 Kancheli shifted away from the opulence of these pieces and moved towards a more restrained, introspective vein, which is exemplified by the three works on this album. Elements of folk and traditional music can be glimpsed in the abstract *Ex contrario*, while *Middelheim* is striking for its overlapping succession of episodes. *Tsutisopeli* was Kancheli's final score.

Giya
KANCHELI
(1935–2019)

- ❶ **Ex contrario** (2006) (version for two violins and string orchestra) **28:56**
❷ **Middelheim** (2016/18) (version for piano trio and string orchestra) **21:24**
❸ **Tsutisopeli** (2019) (version for two violins and men's choir) **12:22**

Text: Traditional Georgian

WORLD PREMIERE RECORDINGS

Svetlana Makarova ❶–❸, **Pavel Vernikov** ❶ ❸, **Violin**

Jing Zhao, Cello ❷

Davit Gvelesiani, Vocals ❸

Rustavi Ensemble ❸

(Anzor Erkomaishvili, Artistic Director [1940–2021])

Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra ❶ ❷

Lera Auerbach, Conductor ❶ ❷, **Sampler** ❶, **Piano** ❷

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