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BALKAN DANCES & TANGO NUEVO

Mina Gajić
piano

Zachary Carrettin
violin

C o n f l u e n c e

Balkan Dances & Tango Nuevo

After many years of performing these works in recitals, we wanted to record them—not as two separate sets but as a confluence of dance-inspired music influenced by two distinct regions and cultures. We chose to travel back and forth between duo and solo, interweaving Balkan dances and *tango nuevo* in the way we have done in live performances. During the Covid-19 pandemic, which continues at the time we write these words, we’ve repeatedly found ourselves performing for audiences virtually, separated from one another by the computer screen and yet connected to one another by that same screen. In recording this audio CD we sought to bring some of the live concert experience to the listener. The track order, tempos, pacing between selections, the improvisatory nature of some of the phrasing, dynamics, articulations, and embellishments, were elements in our process that we felt could contribute to providing some of the live concert feeling that we’ve all been missing during periods of lockdown.

This music is especially close to each of us:

The tangos were composed for me (Zachary) to play, and like the sonatas of the Italian violinist-composers of the Baroque Era, these compositions provide an environment for exploration, an invitation to embrace improvisation as part of the process. As a classical violinist who utilizes improvisation as part of violin study and as a means to develop a particular relationship to a musical score, I feel a closeness to music that is structured in a way as to invite a particular type of partnership with the musician studying and performing the work.

The Balkan Dances are a musical reflection of the cultural influences in my

(Mina’s) childhood, in what was then Yugoslavia. Certain rhythms, melodic fragments, and harmonic progressions conjure visceral memories from traveling throughout the rich cultural landscapes across the region, and of singing and dancing traditional songs in several dialects as a child and music student. My mother helped with analysis of the musical material thanks to her extensive performances of Balkan folk music as a singer and player of the traditional recorders, and her many musical collaborations across all the regions of former Yugoslavia.

Marko Tajčević (1900–1984) was born in Osijek—then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and now part of Croatia. He completed his studies in Zagreb, Prague, and Vienna. Following his return to Zagreb (from Vienna) he taught at several schools before starting the music school “Lisinski,” where he taught before moving to Belgrade—then Yugoslavia, now Serbia—in 1940. There he taught in the preparatory division of the Music Academy and later became a professor at the college level, teaching composition and music theory. He wrote reviews for several publications, and published textbooks on music theory and counterpoint.

His musical voice is intertwined with the folklore of the Balkans, and it is no wonder his “Seven Balkan Dances” are perfect miniatures that capture the essence of each emotion that they depict. One can hear the serenity of the float-like sound of the cymbalom (No. I), rustic dance gestures and ambiance (No. II and No. VII), irregular meter combined with repeated intervals of fourths and fifths (No. III and No. V), lively gestures of implied irregular meter (No. VI), and the true pathos of unmeasured singing (No. IV). These dances are very close to me as they draw inspiration from my homeland of Serbia and the broader area of the Balkans, and they have been a regular addition to many pianists’ repertoire internationally, as well as in the repertoire of the great violinist Jascha Heifetz, who performed his own arrangement of these pieces for violin and orchestra.

-Mina Gajić

Ray Granlund (b.1975) is a polymath with a varied career as a musician and composer, linguist, editor, journalist and literary translator, recording industry professional and cultural entrepreneur. He studied music in the 1990s at Rice University's Shepherd School in his native Houston and Cultural Policy, Relations and Diplomacy at Goldsmiths, University of London in the new millennium. His output as a composer-performer is eclectic, including music in the western classical tradition and various popular traditions, for audiovisual media and for the concert stage.

"Maureen" begins with a dissonant and powerful introduction that opens up into a driving rhythmic rock-tango, so to speak. The middle section, a lament, takes us back to the days of yore and the old tango sentiment, reflected in the harmony and ornamented melodic strains. The driving rhythm then returns with a dissonant finish.

"TangoVals" immediately with its title, begs the question: what is a tango? In this waltz the composer offers us music that is in essence a tango, and yet not in the traditional meter of the tango dance form(s). The character is established by the harmony and the embellished melody. There is an overarching sense of melancholy for the way things were, and can never be again.

"Sollozo Perpetuo," (Perpetual Sobbing), is a strict *Tango Derecho*, in 4/4 meter with the final eighth note of each measure accentuated. We are immediately reminded of the aged bandoneon players of Argentina. The violin has a composed melody to play, remarkably a single, extended phrase. When this piece returns to the beginning the composer asks the violinist to ornament, and on the third iteration, to embellish even further.

"Tango Peregrino," (Wandering Tango), begins with a slow introduction that cadences into a tango derecho in the rhythmic underpinning. Fascinating harmonically, this piece uses dissonances in expressive ways and offers the violinist room to embellish on the repeat. The coda is wistful, and a reminder

that what you just heard was, in fact a tango. The title is an allusion to the manner in which the harmonies wander.

"TangoNometría" explores the far reaches of what is rhythmically possible in a music composition whose character reflects the tango nuevo genre. Utilizing 5/4 and 5/8, many would find this music impossible to dance to, and yet it's difficult to remain still while hearing it! The asymmetrical phrases in the A section nevertheless fit squarely in 4/4 time, (so if a couple bravely danced the traditional steps against the misleading accentuation, they would land on the correct foot at the start of each new phrase). Near the end, the composer inserts a circle of fifths chord progression over which a more "classic" violin melody soars with rhythmic flair, offering a bit of sentimentality prior to the driving rhythmic finish.

During the years that Ray wrote these tangos, he and I were collaborating internationally in performances with aerial-vertical dance troupe Project Bandaloop, both of us composing, arranging, and performing in diverse musical capacities. I had the invaluable opportunity to play these works for and with the composer many times, discussing articulations, dynamics, character, and the influences imbedded in the harmonies/melodies/rhythms. Like the composers of the Baroque Era, Ray invites the musicians to use the musical score as a map, adding personal nuances along the way, including ornamentation. Subsequently, I've never played these pieces the same way twice!

-Zachary Carrettin

Notes by the composer on “Tango du joli printemps” after the mélodie “C’est le joli printemps” FP 117/3 by Francis Poulenc:

Being also a classical singer I became a huge admirer of the music of Poulenc, in particular his mélodies, during my formal training in art song. He set to music a great variety of poetry by his contemporaries, which was often avant-garde, yet in the case of his *Chansons villageoises* song cycle, the words by Maurice Fombeure adopt the simple, rustic, repetitive nature of the folksong (reflecting the poet’s agricultural Poitevin childhood). Nevertheless they capture poignant human truths “between the lines”, as good folk lyrics often do, and Poulenc brought to bear his trademark harmonic genius at the cadences to underpin this profundity. The melody of the third song in the set, “C’est le joli printemps”, is hauntingly beautiful, capturing the poem’s evocation of couples revelling in the joys of springtime, sadly fleeting as they are intense. After the rising scale of the introduction, I set Poulenc’s melody in the A section, giving it a loving partner in the form of a new contrapuntal second violin line, and maintained Poulenc’s harmonization but cast it in the syncopated *habanera* variant of the tango rhythm. The B section, which continues the habanera under a sultry jazz manouche violin line, and C section, with its parallel fourths over driving rock eighths, depart from Poulenc to introduce complementary ideas, but Poulenc’s refrain returns after each and after another iteration of the whole Poulenc melody the conclusion mirrors the opening with a descending scale for the two violins in alternation.

-Ray Granlund

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