

MUSIC FOR BRASS SEPTET • 3

Shostakovich • Prokofiev
Scriabin • Rachmaninov

SEPTURA



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Dmitry SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)			Alexander SCRIBIN (1872–1915)		
Quartet No. 8, Op. 110			Six Preludes		
(arr. Simon Cox & Matthew Knight)			(arr. Matthew Knight)		
1	I. Largo	22:21	11	I. Maestoso (Op. 13, No. 1)	7:54
2	II. Allegro molto	5:16	12	II. Scherzoso (Op. 35, No. 3)	2:40
3	III. Allegretto	3:11	13	III. Lento (Op. 31, No. 4)	1:11
4	IV. Largo	4:45	14	IV. Con stravaganza (Op. 31, No. 2)	1:12
5	V. Largo	5:18	15	V. Lento (Op. 16, No. 4)	0:58
		3:51	16	VI. Allegro (Op. 11, No. 6)	0:49
Sergey PROKOFIEV (1891–1953)			Sergey RACHMANINOV (1873–1943)		
Suite (from <i>Ten Pieces for Piano, Op. 12</i>)			Vocalise, Op. 34, No. 14		
(arr. Simon Cox)			(arr. Simon Cox)		
6	I. Marche	10:22	Four Pieces (from <i>Six Morceaux, Op. 11</i>)		
7	II. Gavotte	1:40	(arr. Simon Cox)		
8	III. Scherzo humoristique	2:45	17	Four Pieces (from <i>Six Morceaux, Op. 11</i>)	17:19
9	IV. Allemande	2:43	18	I. Russian Theme	4:30
10	March from 'The Love for Three Oranges',	3:10	19	II. Scherzo	3:11
	Op. 33ter		20	III. Romance	3:42
	(arr. Simon Cox)	1:44	21	IV. Slava! (Glory)	5:45

Septura

Alan Thomas, Trumpet 1 in B flat • Simon Cox, Trumpet 2 in B flat • Huw Morgan, Trumpet in E flat
 Matthew Gee, Trombone 1 • Matthew Knight, Trombone 2 • Dan West, Bass Trombone • Peter Smith, Tuba
 Simon Cox, Founder and Artistic Director • Matthew Knight, Co-Artistic Director

After Septura's previous Naxos outings – to nineteenth-century Germany, and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England (via France) – the next step in the creation of our counter-factual canon brings us to the twentieth century, and Russia. This time our temporal brush is slightly broader, as we chart a turbulent seventy years in Russian history, stretching back from the stark Soviet soundscape of Shostakovich, through the early modernism of Prokofiev, to the pre-revolutionary opulence of Scriabin and Rachmaninov.

As ever in this series, we lament the lack of original brass chamber music by these great composers, and it is all the more frustrating considering the significant rôle that all of them give to the brass section in their symphonic output; but through our experience of their music in that medium, we feel a stylistic affinity for it, and that is why this repertoire seemed such a logical choice.

We have focused largely on the rich tradition of Russian piano music (for two or four hands), but with one significant exception – perhaps the most ambitious theft of our musical kleptomania so far: **Shostakovich's** iconic *Eighth String Quartet*.

The *Eighth Quartet* was written in just three days in war-torn Dresden in July 1960. As with many of Shostakovich's most prominent works, a highly-polarised debate has raged about the piece's 'meaning'. Dedicated "to the victims of fascism and war", is this the work of a passive supporter of the Soviet regime – with the fourth movement's sustained A sharp a literal representation of the drone of a Western bomber over Dresden, and the repeated triple stabs stuttering anti-aircraft fire? Or, as Solomon Volkov's 1979 Shostakovich 'memoir' *Testimony* (now widely discredited) alleges, is it the manifesto of a closet dissident, bemoaning the artistic straitjacket of Socialist Realism, a view sup-

ported by the musical quotations in the same movement – the revolutionary song *Tormented by Harsh Captivity*, and an aria from the Siberian prison in Shostakovich's own opera, *Lady Macbeth*?

Arguably these reductions of the piece to simplistic antithetical programmes do a disservice to the profound and deeply personal nature of the music. The quartet was written shortly after the first symptoms of a debilitating muscular weakness, and Shostakovich's reluctant and enforced joining of the Communist Party. His friend Lev Lebedinsky suggested that Shostakovich planned to commit suicide, and thought of the work as an epitaph; indeed, in a letter Shostakovich reflected that "if I die someday then it's hardly likely anyone will write a work dedicated to my memory. So I decided to write one myself." This musical epitaph is realised through the use of Shostakovich's musical signature – D, E flat, C, B natural, or with their German note names, *D, eS, C, H* – a motif which binds together the five interconnected movements. It is woven into a melancholic counterpoint in the C minor outer movements (although the appearance of all twelve tones of the chromatic scale in the first four ascending entries clouds this tonality), and pervades the remaining movements: the aggressive, wild G sharp minor dance of the second; the grotesque G minor waltz of the third; and the stark drama of the fourth.

An equally significant autobiographical element is the use of self-quotation: as well as *Lady Macbeth*, Shostakovich quotes from his first and fifth symphonies, second piano trio, and first cello concerto. This musical quotation provides some justification for arranging the work for brass septet: since much of the material is recycled from elsewhere (and in the case of the first symphony quotation, it is actually a trumpet solo that is re-used) it cannot be said to 'belong' exclusively to the string quartet. Another compelling reason for brass transcription is the sheer scope of the piece, which seems almost symphonic, rather than chamber musical, in its outlook. In this respect the greater power and dynamic range of the brass septet arguably realises Shostakovich's musical intentions more fully, in ways that the original string instrumentation simply cannot.

Although **Prokofiev** was without doubt one of the most original and distinctive voices of the early twentieth century, his reputation in the West was diminished by Cold War

antipathies, and his music has perhaps never been celebrated as much as that of Stravinsky and Schoenberg. However, whereas those composers eventually threw out the centuries-old harmonic system and turned to atonality, Prokofiev's unparalleled gift was to create original music that remained tonal. Finding an original path within an existing framework is also the basis of Neoclassicism – a rejection of the unrestrained emotion of Romanticism in favour of a return to Classical principles of order, balance and clarity – so it is no surprise that Prokofiev became a key exponent of that movement. The *Op. 12* suite was composed whilst Prokofiev was still a student – precocious and arrogant (he irked his peers by keeping statistics on their errors) – at the St Petersburg Conservatory, and it represents an early foray into Neoclassicism, with the influence of the eighteenth-century dances (which featured so highly in Volume 2 of this series) keenly felt, especially in the *Gavotte* and grotesque *Allemande*. The spiky opening *March*, repeatedly lurching between F and F sharp minor, foreshadows the more famous March from his opera, *The Love for Three Oranges*. The *Humorous Scherzo* ironically sets a rapid and agile dance in the piano's grumbling low register, and the effect is heightened by arranging it for comically inelegant and unwieldy instruments – Prokofiev himself arranged it for four cumbersome bassoons, and luckily within the septet we have our own comedy troupe, three trombones and a tuba.

Prokofiev left Russia after the revolution, believing the country "had no use for music at the moment", and from 1918 he spent four years in America. On the lengthy voyage there he came across a *commedia dell'arte* play, *The Love for Three Oranges*, by the Venetian playwright Carlo Gozzi, and remarked that "the play, with its mixture of fairy tale, humour and satire, had a strong appeal to me". He was commissioned to compose the opera in Chicago, and completed the piece in 1919. The grotesque *March*, actually the entr'acte connecting the first scenes of the second act, gained huge popularity as part of a six-movement concert suite that Prokofiev produced in 1924; he had previously arranged it for piano, and it is this version that we have transcribed for brass septet.

Scriabin was a maverick composer in pre-Revolutionary Russia, highly innovative and influential in his lifetime, but greatly disparaged (especially in the West) for many years

after his death. Unlike Prokofiev, his harmonic language became progressively more dissonant, culminating in his own brand of atonality – a wider conception of harmony, influenced by his synesthesia (the association of different colours with specific pitches and harmonies). Born into an aristocratic family in Moscow in 1872, Scriabin studied the piano at the Conservatory there (despite having unusually small hands) and the impact of his beloved Chopin is felt not just in the late-Romantic harmonic language of his early compositions, but in the genres he employed: notably, Scriabin composed nearly ninety solo piano preludes, spanning his entire compositional lifetime, and therefore charting his rapid stylistic development. Mostly tiny miniatures – concentrated musical aphorisms – they nevertheless vary wildly in mood and colour, and in these brass transcriptions we attempt to capture the extreme contrasts through varying instrument combinations, mutes and articulations.

Our brief suite contains three preludes from the infancy of Scriabin's career, in the early 1890s: *Op. 16, No. 4* is a simple accompanied melody – just four plaintive phrases – in E flat minor; *Op. 11, No. 6*, by contrast, is a rhythmically-frantic canonic movement in an unambiguous B minor; *Op. 13, No. 1*, however, whilst often majestically homophonic in texture, shrouds its C major tonality in ambiguity, avoiding any obvious perfect cadences in that key, and hinting at Scriabin's future abandonment of functional tonality. The remaining preludes are from almost a decade later, and although all of them have a preoccupation with the perfect cadence, it seems like a deconstruction rather than an endorsement of harmonic convention: in the rhythmically-quirky *Scherzoso Op. 35, No. 3*, perfect cadences abound, but the C major tonality is consistently undermined by flatter keys, and in *Op. 31, Nos. 2 and 4* the cadences – isolated and broadened at the end of *No. 4*, and emphatic *sforzandi* in *No. 2* (the tempo marking of which is *con stravaganza*) – seem like a desperate response to the preceding sliding chromaticism.

Rachmaninov's *Vocalise* is one of his most celebrated pieces. The last of the 1912 set of *Fourteen Songs*, it is unusual because it is wordless: sung to a vowel of the

singer's choice, it uses the voice as an instrument. For this reason, and because of its typical lyricism and sumptuous late-Romantic harmony, it has inspired many arrangements – for solo instruments, chamber ensembles, and (by Rachmaninov himself) for orchestra. Our version features not one soloist, but four: the first section split between two trumpets, and the second between two trombones, with the remainder of the septet cup-muted for the piano accompaniment.

Almost twenty years earlier, Rachmaninov's career was still in its infancy (although he had already had considerable success with his one-act opera *Aleko*) when he composed his *Op. 11 Six Morceaux*, a suite in the long Russian tradition of four-hands piano music. The collection, of which we have recorded four movements, was written at breakneck speed in April 1894, and he conceded that its principal purpose was "to balance the books". Nevertheless, the hallmarks of his developing style are already evident, notably in the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church – bell-tolls and melodies based on liturgical chants – and folk song. Bell-tolls play a crucial role in the *Scherzo*, interrupting the frenzied triple-time dance to usher in slower, more reflective music, giving the movement a decidedly programmatic character. And in the questing *Romance* the unsettled and chromatic melodic line contrasts with a steady and unwavering bell-like accompaniment. The outer movements are variations on existing melodies – the well-known traditional *Song of the Volga Boatmen* in the opening B minor *Russian Theme*, and a Russian Orthodox chant (one that coincidentally also appears in the Coronation Scene of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*) in the concluding climax of *Slava!* (Glory). Strangely, there is very little *thematic* development in either: after initial trombone intonations the themes are repeated – re-harmonised and transposed, housed in different textures, and played at different tempos, but essentially unaltered throughout. This gives both a gnomic air: irredeemably desolate in the *Russian Theme*, and building towards an inextinguishably triumphant C major in the epic climax of *Slava*.

Matthew Knight

Septura

Septura brings together London's leading players to redefine brass chamber music through the uniquely expressive sound of the brass septet. By creating a canon of transcriptions, arrangements and new commissions for this brand new classical configuration, Septura aims to re-cast the brass ensemble as a serious artistic medium. Currently Ensemble in Residence at the Royal Academy of Music, London, the group is recording a series of discs for Naxos Records, each focused on a particular period, genre and set of composers, creating a 'counter-factual history' of brass chamber music. Weaving this ever-increasing repertoire into captivating live events, Septura is gaining a reputation for engaging audiences with innovative and imaginative programming, built around strong concepts and themes. Septura's members are the leading players of the new generation of British brass musicians, holding principal positions in the London Symphony, Philharmonia, Royal Philharmonic, BBC Symphony, City of Birmingham Symphony, Basel Symphony and Aurora orchestras. Septura is represented worldwide by Percius Artist and Project Management – www.percius.co.uk. This recording was made possible by Septura's Friends and Supporters, and in particular the generosity of Christopher Bostock OBE (1923-2014).

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Photo: Bethany Clarke



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Stretching back from the stark Soviet soundscape of Shostakovich, through the early modernism of Prokofiev to the pre-revolutionary opulence of Scriabin and Rachmaninov, Septura redresses a lack of original music for brass by these great composers by charting a turbulent seventy years of Russian history. Brass instruments feature prominently in these composers' symphonic output, and Septura is a natural fit for their chamber music. The focus is piano music with one prominent exception: perhaps Septura's most ambitious transcription to date, Shostakovich's profound and deeply personal *Eighth String Quartet*. Volumes 1 and 2 are available on Naxos 8.573314 and 8.573386.

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- Sergey PROKOFIEV (1891–1953)**
- 6–9** Suite (from *Ten Pieces for Piano, Op. 12*) (arr. Simon Cox) 10:22
- 10** March from 'The Love for Three Oranges', Op. 33ter (arr. Simon Cox) 1:44
- Alexander SCRIABIN (1872–1915)**
- 11–16** Six Preludes (arr. Matthew Knight) 7:54
- Sergey RACHMANINOV (1873–1943)**
- 17** Vocalise, Op. 34, No. 14 (arr. Simon Cox) 5:59
- 18–21** Four Pieces (from *Six Morceaux, Op. 11*) (arr. Simon Cox) 17:19

A detailed track list can be found on page 2 of the booklet



Septura
Alan Thomas and Simon Cox, Trumpets in B flat
Huw Morgan, Trumpet in E flat • Peter Smith, Tuba
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