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Oleg KOMARNITSKY

**Chamber
and Instrumental
Music**

including

**Slavonic Capriccio
Sonata for Solo Cello
Violin Sonata
Piano Works**



London Piano Trio

FIRST RECORDINGS

OLEG KOMARNITSKY EMERGES FROM OBSCURITY

by Robert Atchison

The battles fought by Shostakovich and Prokofiev for the room to compose freely are widely known, and even though their integrity was repeatedly compromised by the dogma of Socialist Realism, at least they managed to attain international reputations. Of course, not all Soviet composers fared so well, and many other inventive musical minds had to endure similar grief and oppression, only to be forgotten by history. Less than twenty years after his death, Oleg Komarnitsky is already one such.

He was born in Moscow on 15 August 1946. His father, an army officer, taught at a military academy, and his mother, a linguist who knew several languages, worked in the Ministry of Power Engineering. There were a number of eminent ancestors in the Komarnitsky family, including the Hungarian king Mátyás Hunyadi, or Matthias Corvinus (1443–90).¹ Their descent notwithstanding, the Komarnitskys came from a very modest background – although there were always a large number of books in the house, and much music-making. From an early age Oleg enjoyed listening to music, and he liked to go to concerts, theatres and museums, and when his interest in and talent for music manifested themselves, his mother gave him his first piano lessons. He started his formal musical education at the Central Music School for Especially Gifted Children under the auspices of the Moscow Conservatoire, where he studied piano with Alexander Goldenweiser² and theory with Yury Kholopov.³ It was at the Central School that he started writing music, beginning composition lessons with Igor Yakushenko⁴ and Aram Khachaturian.⁵ By the time he left the school, Komarnitsky had

¹ The fourteenth-century castle-residence of Corvinus' father, János Hunyadi, or Ioannes Corvinus (c. 1407–56) still remains – though nowadays it is a museum located in Transylvania, in present-day Romania (it was formerly in the territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). János Hunyadi's other son is the eponymous protagonist of the opera *László Hunyadi*, first performed in 1844, by Ferenc Erkel (1810–93); it is considered the first major Hungarian opera.

² Goldenweiser (1875–1961) was an outstanding teacher, counting Lazar Berman, Samuil Feinberg, Nikolay Kapustin and Tatyana Nikolayeva among his students. His own music was composed in two distinct periods: in his student days, when he wrote mostly piano pieces and songs, and in a later period that began after a thirty-year gap, when he produced three operas, music orchestral music and, among other piano works, a series of *Contrapuntal Sketches*, Op. 12 (c. 1932), which Jonathan Powell has recorded for Toccata Classics (TOCC 0044).

³ Kholopov (1932–2003) was an enormously influential teacher and one of the most important scholars and analysts that Russia has produced. His students included Elena Firsova, Dmitri Smirnov and Vladimir Tarnopolsky.

⁴ Yakushenko (1932–99) cast his stylistic net wide: his works include a *Concerto for Jazz Band* (1965), a *Partita for Jazz Band* (1970) and a *Concerto-Symphony* for large orchestra and rock group (1981).

⁵ The Armenian-born Khachaturian (1903–78) is, of course, best-known for his ballets *Gayane* (1939–41) and *Spartacus* (1950–54).

1984, remaining there until 1990; from 1991 to 1997 he was a member of all three orchestras of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields and co-principal to Iona Brown. In 1993 he was appointed Director of the Spanish Chamber Orchestra, appearing frequently as soloist. Since 1997 he has had a busy chamber and solo career. His recordings include the Telemann Twelve Fantasias and the complete Sonatas and Partitas of J. S. Bach on the Altamira label, which also released the complete piano trios of Armstrong Gibbs with the London Piano Trio. Guild brought out his recording, with Olga Dudnik, of the complete Armstrong Gibbs works for violin and piano and his performance of *The Four Seasons* with his own Altamira Chamber Orchestra and Sir Michael Gambon narrating the sonnets Vivaldi wrote before composing the music. Robert Atchison was also Artistic Director, with Renato Bossa, of the International Music Series at the Certosa di Capri, Italy, from 2006 to 2009, and is Artistic Director of the Gibbs Festival in Danbury, Essex.

Olga Dudnik was born in the Ukraine into a family of professional musicians and was soon giving concerts in prestigious venues across the Soviet Union. She studied at the Special Music School for Gifted Children in Kiev where she received the Gold Medal for Excellence and at sixteen she won the Ukraine Piano Competition. In 1990 she continued her studies with Alexander Volkov at the Rubin Academy of Music at Tel Aviv University. In 1993 she moved to London where she undertook Advanced Solo Studies at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama with James Gibb and was awarded the 'Premier Prix' on completion of the course. Later she continued her studies at the Royal College of Music with Irina Zaritskaya, where she gained an M. Mus. in Advanced Performance. Of her competitions Olga is especially proud of the first prize in the Arianne Katz Competition (1992) and prizes in the Young Soloist of the Year (1996) and Hong Kong International Piano Competition (1997). She has made both Purcell Room and Wigmore Hall debuts, the latter broadcast live by the BBC, and has appeared with numerous orchestras, including the London Philharmonic at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Since 1999 she has been on the staff of the Guildhall School and combines a teaching career with a busy schedule of recitals and concerto and ensemble appearances across Europe. Her more recent recordings feature William Wallace's Second Piano Concerto (2002) and the Piano Concerto by Christopher Gunning (2003), both released by Albany.

David Jones, born in Shrewsbury, began playing the cello as a young boy but was initially drawn to the sciences and read chemistry at Salford University before deciding to pursue a career as a cellist and joining the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, under the tutelage of Moray Welsh. During this time he attended master-classes in Perugia under David Geringas and also reached the finals of the LSO Shell strings competition. After completing his degree he held the position of co-principal cello, first in the Hallé and then in the Philharmonia Orchestra where he played the solos on many recordings, including Tchaikovsky's Second Piano Concerto with Barry Douglas. David was the cellist of the London Ensemble from 1994 to 2005, making frequent trips to Japan. On top of recitals and other chamber-music concerts, his concerto performances include works by Dvořák, Boccherini, Brahms (the Double Concerto) and Tchaikovsky (*Variations on a Rococo Theme*). In 2002 he was appointed associate principal cello of the Royal Opera House Orchestra, Covent Garden, and in spring 2009 he joined the London Piano Trio.

favourite of Komarnitsky's own students. Its brittle, very Russian humour lies downstream from Prokofiev and Shostakovich.

The *Slavonic Capriccio* was written as a *concertante* piece for violin and orchestra in 1978; Komarnitsky made this transcription for violin and piano [15] in 1987 and it was published in a collection of music for violin and piano a year later. At the premiere of the orchestral version the violin part was taken by no lesser a player than Mikhail Fikhtengoltz.⁹ It is a bold and contemporary work, similar in vein to Shostakovich's Second Violin Concerto. Like the Violin Sonata from seven years earlier, it has a violin cadenza towards the end of the work, which leads to a rousing finale.

The London Piano Trio was formed in 1997 by three of London's foremost freelance musicians and for the past sixteen years has toured across the globe, to Europe, North and South America, the Far East and Australia. A German critic described the group as 'simply world class' on their Frankfurt debut. Current activities include a residency at the Danbury Festival in Essex.

Champions of the underdog, the Trio has made a point of promoting new music and composers who have been forgotten through the passing of time. Already in the catalogue are the complete trios of Cecil Armstrong Gibbs, Donald Francis Tovey and Henry Cotter Nixon. A new string to the Trio's collective bow is collaboration, and they will be working with the famous Italian actress Milena Vukotić, Ballet Manila and Sir Michael Gambon on a number of specially commissioned works.

Further information can be found at www.londonpianotrio.com.

Robert Atchison was born in London and studied music from a young age. His teachers included Sheila Nelson, Bronislaw Gimpel at the Royal Northern College of Music, Emmanuel Hurwitz at the Royal Academy of Music and Maurice Haddon. In 1982 he was a finalist in the Abbado International Competition in Milan. He made his concerto debut in the Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1983 playing the Beethoven Concerto and in 1984 playing Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* at the Barbican. Abroad, he has given concerto performances and recitals in the USA, South America, the Far East and, in Europe, in France, Germany Ireland, Italy and Spain. He joined the Philharmonia Orchestra in

⁹ Mikhail Izrailevich Fikhtengoltz (1920–85) – the name is sometimes transcribed as Fichtenholz – was a student of Pyotr Stolyarsky (1871–1944) and was one of the four Stolyarsky students who created a sensation by sweeping the board at the 1937 International Ysaÿe Competition (now the Queen Elizabeth Competition) in Belgium; the others were David Oistrakh, Boris Goldshtein and Elizaveta Gilels, the sister of the pianist Emil Gilels, and they returned to a hero's welcome in the Soviet Union. But soon afterwards, at the height of Stalin's great Purge, Fikhtengoltz's father-in-law, a high-ranking civil servant, was arrested and executed and when Fikhtengoltz refused to divorce his politically suspect wife, the prestigious career which should have been his suddenly evaporated: all his major concerts were cancelled. The resulting nervous strain made playing too painful, and Fikhtengoltz took refuge in studio work and teaching. With the help of a psychotherapist, he was able to resume his concert career after a gap of 23 years – but with deleterious effects on his health: after only a few years he died of a heart-attack.

already written a sizable amount of chamber music and choral compositions. In 1964 he entered the Tchaikovsky Conservatoire in Moscow, studying composition with Evgeny Kirillovich Golubev,⁶ and remained there until 1970; his contemporaries there included Karine Georgian, Viktor Tretyakov and Victor Yampolsky.

Komarnitsky began his working life as early as 1965, while he was still a student, soon becoming interested in the teaching of young people, a concern he was to maintain for the rest of his brief life. He started supervising a composition class in the Gnesin Music School for children and working in the Moscow Academy of Culture, in the department of music theory and history, and was appointed head of the department of composition in the Moscow Music Creation and Enlightenment Academy. In addition, he was charge of a composition class in the Moscow Chopin School of Performance Mastery, and was active in many other music educational schools and organisations.

From 1972 to 1993 Komarnitsky worked for Muzyka, the largest music-publisher in the Soviet Union, ending up as chief editor. Muzyka issued monographs and collections of essays on musical aesthetics, on the theory and history of music and on aspects of performance, studies of instruments, and popular-science books about music. It also published scores for the musical stage, symphonic and choral music, instrumental and vocal concert pieces, and all kinds of works for professional and amateur bands, folk orchestras and variety ensembles. It was also central to music education in the Soviet Union, supplying textbooks, teaching aids, exercise books for various instruments, anthologies and series for students in music schools, and music books for amateur activities, general schools and pre-schools. Many of Komarnitsky's works, such as his twelve duos for two violins, were written for Muzyka, as was an enormous amount of music for children and young students, most of it being used in pedagogical practices, in various collections, reading books and guides.

He was active as a musicologist, too, one of his more important articles being on Mozart's organ music, for which he reconstructed a fugue in G minor, attracting attention in the German press. He also worked on figured bass in the music of Bach.

He composed for a huge variety of genres: vocal-symphonic music, instrumental sonatas and concertos, vocal and chorus music, music for the dramatic theatre and much more, many of his works achieving performance not only in Moscow, but also Minsk, Riga and other cities in the Soviet satellite states. But for all his 'local' exposure, virtually nothing was known of his music outside the Soviet Union until 1996, when his *Partita for Violin and Organ* was performed and recorded⁷ by The Murray/Lohuis Duo in the USA.

Komarnitsky enjoyed an extensive network of friends and acquaintances, including the pianist Nikolai Petrov, violinist Viktor Tretyakov, choral conductor Vladislav Sokolov and the classical composers Pavel Aedonitsky and Andrei Eshpa and jazz composer Yuri Saulsky. His closest friend was Alexander Basilov, a

⁶ The compositions of Evgeny Kirillovich Golubev (1910–88) include seven symphonies, six concertos (three for piano), ten piano sonatas and at least 24 string quartets.

⁷ On Raven Recordings OAR-370

prominent composer and professor at the Gnesin College, and much of the music that the two men wrote in their earlier days each dedicated to the other. Their music is very different in style, but the two always said it had something in common.

Oleg Komarnitsky died suddenly, from a heart attack, in Moscow on 27 February 1998, aged only 52, and was buried next to his mother. With his death coming only a few years after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of many of its institutions, it seems that a good number, if not the majority, of his works have been lost; fortunately, some of his music remained with his family, and they have been instrumental in the presentation of this album. Its origin lies in the power of modern technology to bring people together: Natalya Komarnitskaya, the composer's daughter, set up a group on LinkedIn to promote her father's music and I expressed interest in it. With contact thus established, a dialogue developed, scores were sent from Moscow and so this recording project was born.

The Sonata for violin and piano, *Alyonushka* [1], written in 1970, takes its inspiration from Russian folk- and fairy-tales and the famous painting, *Alyonushka* (1881) by Victor Vasnetsov.⁸ Komarnitsky's *Alyonushka* was inspired by the hearing of a sonata by Nikolai Medtner, whose music is outstanding for its harmonic richness and ardent lyricism – indeed, Komarnitsky's favourite Medtner quotation was 'Melody without harmony is unnatural'. *Alyonushka* is cast in a single continuous movement, with a violin cadenza towards the end of the work, which leads to a slow recapitulation of the main theme. This is Komarnitsky at his most introspective, and although the music does follow the traditional sonata-form of exposition, development and recapitulation, it is impressionistic in character, meandering through a wide variety of colours and harmonic styles.

Most of Komarnitsky's Suite for Piano was written – with children in mind – in 1968. 'Autumn' [2] suggests the beauty of that foggy and wistful season; 'Humoresque' [3] was published by Muzyka in a compilation entitled *Music of Modern Composers*, an anthology for young musicians, in 1987 and was a favourite piece of Komarnitsky's own pupils. 'Mischief' [4] was written in 1975 and dedicated to Komarnitsky's son and was later added to the Suite. It is a programmatic portrait of an active five-year-old child running and jumping around. Having heard the noise, a nursemaid appears in the room and tells him to stop fooling around – her loud



Victor Vasnetsov's famous painting *Alyonushka*, one of the inspirations behind Komarnitsky's *Sonata for Violin and Piano*

⁸ Vasnetsov (1848–1926) was one of the founders of the folklorist school of painting that led into romantic modernism, taking his inspiration from both peasant life and Russian mythology. He later became a prominent designer and was responsible for the stage-designs and costumes for Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *Snegurochka* ('The Snow Maiden') in 1882.

voice can be heard in the music. After she leaves the room, the boy slyly continues what he was doing and ends the piece with an emphatic gesture.

The Sonata for Solo Cello in C minor was written in 1973, some years after Komarnitsky met Mstislav Rostropovich at the Moscow Conservatoire and presented some of his music. 'Slava' answered his questions, offering his thoughts on Komarnitsky's music and music for the cello more generally, and it was therefore natural for Komarnitsky to dedicate his solo sonata to Rostropovich. The sonata-form first movement, *Andante espressivo e poco rubato* [5], begins in reflective introspection with a soulful melody, low in the instrument, evoking the bleak expanses of Mother Russia before moving on to wistful and energetic middle sections, culminating in a triumphant return to the main theme. In the second of its two movements, a virtuosic *Allegro ma non troppo* [6], constant hidden references to the first subject of the preceding movement unify the work as a whole. Alternating staccato and slurred passages are surely a nod to the technique and style of the dedicatee.

The Two Pieces for Piano, written in 1974, were also intended for children. The title of 'Joke' [7], an *Allegretto* in G major, is self-explanatory, but 'March of the Chess Pieces' [8], a Prokofievian *Moderato* in C major, requires a little explanation. Komarnitsky was discussing the music of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* with some children who grew very excited by the idea of the toys coming alive and asked him if there was any music written for the chess figures. That inspired him to write some and, since the figures are disciplined and look like an army, the logical thing was to make them march.

The *Andante Amoroso* [9], composed in 1996 and the last piece of music that Komarnitsky wrote, is an interesting experiment in musical communication across the centuries. The basis of the works is a *Fantasia* for piano by Leopold Mozart (1719–87), the father of Wolfgang, which forms the piano part; Komarnitsky then wrote the violin part to sit on top of it. The result weaves hypnotically between tonality and atonality.

The *Two Pieces on Swiss Folksongs* – 'The Flowers Have Gone to Sleep' [10] and the simple but atmospheric 'Winter in the Forest' [11] – were arranged by Komarnitsky in 1976 for a volume of piano versions of songs from around world that was published the following year.

The *Monologue* for solo violin [12] was written in 1995 and is dedicated to Viktor Tretyakov who had studied with the composer at the Central Music School; Komarnitsky valued his friendship and considered him as the finest violinist he knew. The *Monologue* starts quietly, with a feeling of isolation, and slowly builds through the first part of the work. It then passes through a succession of emotional states, returning at the end to a muted reflection of the opening section and a coda that fades away as if floating on calm, tranquil waters.

In the canon 'In a Smithy' (*Old Clavecinists' Style*) for piano [13], written for children in 1980, Komarnitsky emulates the rhythmic banging of a blacksmith at work and simultaneously evokes the sound of early keyboard writing in a style similar to Couperin or Rameau.

'Mockery' [14] is the only piece that remains from a piano suite called *Ironic Humoresques* written in 1981; it owes its survival to its publication in an anthology intended for young players – and, indeed, it too became a