



Photo courtesy of: Paul Efland and Konstantin Ovchinnikov

The CD cover features a central illustration of a violinist in a white shirt and dark pants, playing a violin. The background is a stylized, colorful scene with a red building and a yellow sky. The text is arranged as follows:

VIOLIN DUOS
Ysaÿe Rózsa Bronner Podgaitis

PHCD 175

Levon Ambartsumian
Shakhida Azimkhodjaeva

PHONIX CD

20th/21st Century Violin Duos

The Violin Duo was once a popular genre, though it is seldom given much attention by composers now. It emerged in the early 18th century in France with the aim of providing compositions for domestic music-making and for educational purposes. The genre proved to be not only practical but popular, and it soon spread throughout Europe. With concert flourishing at the turn of the 18th into the 19th centuries, violin virtuosos were asking composers to provide violin duos (often labeled concertant and brilliant) in order to showcase their brilliant technique, with the result that the genre took on a new level of complexity and virtuosity.

In the 20th century the violin duo passed out of fashion, the most notable exception being Bartok's *44 Duos for Two Violins* of 1937. Hence it is with particular interest that the present disc brings to us four violin duos that are not only of modern composition, but are quite remarkable in their own right. According to violinists Levon and Shakhida, the starting point for their project was the Ysaye Sonata, having heard their violin teachers play the world premiere recording as performed from Ysaye's manuscript. The sonata by Rózsa was an obvious choice for their recording, it being a major work among violin duos of the 20th century. The other two composers on this recording, Mikhail Bronner and Efrem Podgatis, have enjoyed a long relationship with both Levon and Shakhida, for whom they wrote their duos.

Belgian violinist Eugene Ysaye (1858-1931) was one of the last 20th-century proponents of the Romantic violin style, combining great technical facility with depth of feeling. Ysaye's performances of violin concertos by his teachers Wieniawski and Vieuxtemps brought him international acclaim. In the last decade of his life, failing health forced him off the stage, whereupon he turned to composition, not surprisingly with a focus on works for the violin. Ysaye dedicated his Sonata for Two Violins (1915) to Queen Elizabeth of

Belgium; the fact that the Queen was one of Ysaye's violin pupils attests to his national prominence. This sonata demonstrates his forward-looking compositional style, unfettered by convention. It is inventive and rhapsodic, contrapuntal and densely textured. In this piece Ysaye explores a wide variety of violin techniques, including many manners of bowing, harmonics, extended arpeggios, and multiple stops. So full is the sound of this sonata, that it creates the aural effect of a string trio or even quartet; it is easy for the listener to forget that only two people are playing here! In fact, its original publisher deemed it too difficult to be performed by two, so a trio version was made to include a viola; the premiere of the original version had to wait until 1924.

For the last fifty-five years of his life, Miklós Rózsa (1907-1995) lived in Los Angeles, where he achieved widespread fame for his contributions to Hollywood film music; of his more than 100 film scores, three earned him Oscars. What many people may not realize is that his earliest influences drew from a classical training and his close affinity to Hungarian folk music. Born in Budapest, Rózsa was aware at an early age of the pioneering efforts by Bartok and Kodaly in the collecting of his country's folksongs. Rózsa's mother, in fact, had been a classmate of Bartok's at the Liszt Academy in Budapest. Rózsa spent summers of his youth at his family's country estate near the village of Nagyőcz, and the Hungarian folk idiom that he heard there became part of his mature musical language.

Rózsa's Sonata for Two Violins (1933, new version 1973) manifests Hungarian influences in its modal, folk-like melodies and harmonies. The first movement opens with four stridently dissonant chords that recur throughout, seemingly as interruptions to the other themes that are more conjunct and lyrical. However, as the music develops, Rózsa integrates fragments of these strident chords with the other themes, thereby giving the movement a sense of unity in spite of its contrasts. The second movement owes its elegiac character to the plaintive quality of its modal themes, played by muted violins two octaves apart.

This spare texture creates an emptiness in the middle register, a space that is normally full of sound, and the effect contributes much to the music's melancholy. The third movement evokes an energetic Hungarian dance with its cross accents and frequent use of fourths and fifths.

Russian composer Mikhail Bronner (born 1952) has written over a hundred works, many of which are intended for the theater; moreover, one might say that theatrical elements are used extensively in other genres of his output. Spiritual themes also play an important role in his output, exemplified in his works based on Old Testament history and characters (e.g., Adam and Eve, Abraham and Isaac) and most significantly in his large-scale Jewish Requiem.

Both theatrical and spiritual influences may be discerned in Bronner's *Transformation of the Soul* for two violins, written in 2008. The composer explains that the piece is divided into two parts, with the first portraying a child's soul entering a splendid world and coming to appreciate its harmony and beauty.

After a brief introduction, one hears a motive of a rising 6th followed by an expanded form, this time encompassing a 7th and outlining an arch. As the music progresses, this motive undergoes continuous variation, as a parallel to the child's growth. Bronner states that in the second part of the piece, as the person matures, something "dark and dreadful" intrudes into his life which possesses his soul and from which he cannot escape; bitterness comes to replace his sense of love and beauty. The music in this part assumes the character of a whirling dance, with frequent evocations of a sardonic waltz that becomes more dissonant and rhythmically ambiguous as the music spins onward. One might hear Bronner's employment of a dissonant waltz as representing a mocking of beauty. (A similar use of the waltz as a vehicle of satire or reflection on the world's decadence has precedents in works by Liszt, Saint-Saëns, Ravel and Mahler, among others.)

As the waltz dissolves near the end, the principal motive from the first part reappears, now played boldly and in longer note values, presenting the central

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character in his final, mature state, direct and unadorned. The score then calls for a recording of the wind to be played, suggesting a post-apocalyptic vision of an empty world, be it an external or internal world, with only the wind remaining.

Russian composer Elfem Podgaitis (born 1949) has to this date composed twelve operas, three symphonies and 26 concertos, some for more neglected instruments such as the bayan (a chromatic button accordion), marimba, mandolin, balalaika and percussion. During his sixtieth year, Podgaitis was honored by performances around the world of more than 60 major works, including the premieres of two operas and eleven concerts devoted solely to his own compositions.

For many years, Podgaitis has written music for the renowned children's choir Vesna. In fact, Podgaitis' music for children has a special place in his output; he creates music that evokes dream-like states, poetic fantasy, and love of nature. Some of the titles of his concert music bear similar poetic themes, e.g., *The Maompipes* (fairy tale cantata), *Trip to Orchestraland* and the opera *Thumbelina*.

In his fantasy for two violins subtitled *Willful Fairy* (2009), Podgaitis says he wanted to create a musical image of a supernatural female creature who is graceful and kind, but who can also be tough and stubborn. In accordance with the composer's program, his music is capricious and frequently changes its mood, with many trills and sudden scalar flights to suggest the elfin quality of the title character. It is noteworthy that Podgaitis bases much of this piece on a waltz, though without the seemingly sardonic intent of the waltz in Bronner's duo; here the waltz aptly conveys the fairy's pert and mischievous nature.

Kevin Kelly

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