TCHAIKOVSKY, B: *Piano Sonatas & Pieces*
Olga Solovieva—Albany 749—55 minutes

Piano Concerto; Clarinet Concerto; Signs of the Zodiac
Olga Solovieva, p; Anton Prischepa, cl; Russian Academy Chamber Orchestra/ Timur Mynbaev
Naxos 557727—70 minutes

Symphony 2; Symphony with Harp
Emilia Moskvitina, hp; Moscow Radio Symphony/ Vladimir Fedoseyev
Relief 991080—75 minutes

It's customary to begin reviews of Boris Tchaikovsky by explaining that he wasn't related to Peter Ilyich, that he lived from 1925 to 1996, and that he was a student of Miaskovsky and an eminent member of the generation just after Shostakovich and Kabalevsky (which, I might add, includes also another master finally beginning to get much-deserved international attention: Mieczyslaw Vainberg, or Weinberg, whose symphonies are now being issued on Chandos). But with the rate that BT's music is being released these days, and the worldwide recognition it's been getting, this introduction will soon be unnecessary.

It's about time, too, as these three recent releases help to show. Olga Solovieva's recital of Tchaikovsky's piano music, for example, reveals a composer in complete mastery of traditional procedures and forms, yet with his own individual take on them. The two sonatas, from 1944 and 1952 (and thus early works) are the main attraction here. There are kinships to Miaskovsky and to Prokofieff, but also a personal sweetness and simplicity that recall such mid-century Americans as (early) Barber and Norman Dello Joio. And what winsome melodies Tchaikovsky writes! Just listen to the glorious singing line spun out in the slow movement of Sonata 2, a six-minute unbroken melodic span of quietly exultant beauty. Fast movements are bright and vivacious, burbling along in counterpoint of aquamarine clarity and effortless perfection.

The program is filled out with a four-minute, single-movement Sonatina and three pedagogic but charming sets of miniatures: Eight Pieces for Children, *Pentaonica*, and *Natural Modes*. Olga Solovieva plays this music with relaxed aplomb and perfect sympathy, and Albany's sonics are ideal.

Not content with his chaste early idiom, Boris Tchaikovsky made a restless and wide-ranging exploration of stylistic (and emotional) possibilities in his later career, though he never adopted any specific ideologies or abandoned tonality. This expansion of musical resources is apparent in the two concertos and cantata on the first Naxos release of BT's music. The ingratiating 1957 Clarinet Concerto is still genial and melodic. The springtime ardor of the opening moderato isn't so far from such English pastoralists as Finzi and Moeran, or Scandinavians like Larsson and Wiren; though the impish high spirits in the finale are clearly indebted to Shostakovich's irreverent vein. Performance and sonics here are, I'm happy to report, excellent—much better than on Northern Flowers 9918 (Mar/Apr 2004). Clarinetists really need to discover this concise work (12 minutes); it offers the soloist an opportunity to show off his abilities while at the same time delighting his listeners.

Tchaikovsky's 1971 thorny, bracing, and very original Piano Concerto presents a stark contrast to the Clarinet Concerto—and sharp internal contrasts in its five movements, also. I is a toccata on a rapid repeated-note motive, first presented in the piano then passed among other instruments, that continues, with manic insistence, for the whole movement. II is a nine-minute aria sung by the piano that begins with neobaroque stateliness, becomes more sonorous and warmer with more active figurations, then gently resolves into ethereal innocence as exquisite chromatic variants deflect the piano's ever-ascending reprise of the opening aria. III is a lumbering quick-march whipped along by crashing piano clusters, pounding drums, and yawping brass; while IV is a half-playful, half-brutal moto perpetuo that keeps coming apart at the seams. V, the strangest of all, brings the work to a stunning and unforgettable conclusion. It's a ragged, jerky, mocking, fierce, phantasmagoric funeral procession that plods on, with stoic disillusion, into bleak, spectral hopelessness. One can't listen to this grim music without feeling it's an indictment of Soviet-era repression.

Tchaikovsky's concerto was first recorded, with the composer at the piano, in a performance of terrifying force (Relief 991076, May/June 2005), but in thin, edgy sonics that seriously detracted from its power, making the piano, in particular, sound twangy. On this new Naxos Olga Solovieva plays with incisive precision and ferocity, persuasively championing Tchaikovsky as she did on the Albany disc of his piano pieces; and Naxos has given her the immediate sonics needed to render this music with convincing realism and effect.

Naxos completes what is truly a wonderful program with Tchaikovsky's 1974 cantata for soprano, harpsichord, and strings, *Signs of the Zodiac*. This sets, after a six-minute instrumental prelude, four Russian lyrics from the past two centuries (included in the notes in both English and transliterated Russian). The music is appropriately poetic and evocative, often melancholy, sometimes delicate and fresh, sometimes visionary, always sensitively responding to the death-haunted images laced with typical Russian irony, as when Alexander Blok's 'Far Out' extols the comforts of his "cozy" coffin. The poignant vocal part is beautifully sung by Yana Ivanilova.

Relief 991080 pairs two of Tchaikovsky's four symphonies. Symphony 2 (1967) is an ambitious and imposing three-movement structure lasting just under an hour. Like Carl Nielsen, Tchaikovsky approached the symphony as both an opportunity to experiment and to make an epic statement; and the result is a complex, imaginative, and deeply felt work with all sorts of striking timbral and gestural touches, and many passages of chamber-music transparency, that encompasses a wide range of moods from furious agitation and fiery intensity to whimsical caprice and nostalgic fervency. I begins unlike any other symphony: with the spare ringing of capricious solo violin pizzicatos. Soon the mood becomes more energetic and urgent, a mingling of fear, defiance, and exultation set off and protracted by quieter episodes of uneasy lyricism and tremulous, ghostly twitterings, sometimes in dreamlike quotations from earlier music—though this never creates the effect of pastiche but instead remains hallucinatory and integral to the emotional intricacy of the music.

II, a mysterious and nocturnal Largo, is colored by the slow and quiet but inescapable time-setting plunk of the marimba under long, mournful, oddly twisting melodic lines that begins and ends the movement, surrounding its more songful and fervent central development. The finale is a curious and fascinating rondo on a beguiling but somehow elusive tune, scampering and nervously giddy at first, but gathering power and raucous complexity in a rather Nielsenesque accumulation that expends its force without ever quite triumphing, instead dissipating into an enigmatic coda dismissed by an equivocal major-minor triad. A suitable end for this grand but unconventional symphony.

Relief's recording of Vladimir Fedoseyev leading the Moscow Radio Symphony was made in concert in 1977. The performance is good and the sound reasonably clear and strong if a bit congested at climaxes; audience coughs are heard a few times, but not often, and there's applause at the end. Another performance, by Kiril Kondrashin and the Moscow Philharmonic and recorded in 1969, was on Russian Disc 11063. It generates more headlong excitement in the allegros and is in better if not state-of-the-art sonics. Though I like Fedoseyev on Relief, I prefer Kondrashin, who makes the music more involving and projects its details more vividly.

Even if you have the Kondrashin you may want this new Relief disc for Tchaikovsky's 1993 *Symphony with Harp*, as he titled his fourth symphony (it was his last orchestral composition). This is the work's first recording, taken from the 1993 premiere performance, so again there's some audience noise and of course applause at the end. Again the sonics are good but not faultless, with lots of ambience and dynamic punch but occasional slight distortion at climaxes. And once again, Tchaikovsky has re-thought the symphonic form, this time coming up with a 22-minute, five-movement edifice with a prominent (though by no means continuous or concerto-like) harp part and strange, abrupt shifts of mood that seem to mirror an internal and unexplained psychic drama. I found the effect gnomic and oblique and harder to penetrate than his Second Symphony or Piano Concerto. But there's never any doubt of the composer's skill, integrity, invention, strength of personality, and determination to find suitable musical embodiment for subtle and even contradictory emotional states.

Music lovers new to Boris Tchaikovsky should start with the Naxos, then listen to his enchanting Sinfonietta for Strings on Hyperion 67413 (Sept/Oct 2004). Then go on to the splendid Cello Sonata on Boheme 308272 (Mar/Apr 2004) and Piano Trio on Boheme 907084 (Nov/Dec 2000), the Second Symphony, and the three big orchestral works, including *Sebastopol Symphony* (his third symphony) on Chandos 10299 (Sept/Oct 2005), of which Roger Hecht, in an especially detailed and informative review, wrote "Not only is it romantic; it's also haunting, involving, and conducive to rehearings...I have been introduced to a master".

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