



Metamorphoses for a Cavaillé-Coll Organ – Transcriptions of Russian Music

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Fanfare (James A. Altena - 2018.08.01)

Transcription for organ of repertoire originally composed for other instrumental media—orchestra, string quartet, and piano in this instance—is a rather tricky business. It is not just a matter of finding effective counterparts in the organ stops to the original instrumental timbres—fairly easy to do for orchestral instruments, but next to impossible for piano—but also to reflect such specifications as dynamic shading, accent, and articulation. As a wind instrument with a good deal of inherent reverberation, the organ is really not capable of producing a true staccato, marcato, or sforzando, nor can it imitate the dying away of a note suddenly struck and released on a piano or string instrument, much less a pizzicato. These factors all need to be weighed in deciding whether a piece is suitable for transcription in the first place—some works should not even be candidates—before moving on to attempts at addressing and resolving such difficulties.

Here, unfortunately, I don't think sufficient thought was given to such crucial preliminary considerations. Most of the selections on this disc—particularly the Shostakovich Quartet, which is a hopeless misfit here and virtually unrecognizable—are manifestly unsuited to organ transcription; only some of the Prokofiev pieces, with their macabre atmospheres, manage to come off. The Rachmaninoff Preludes and the Tchaikovsky Nutcracker excerpt lose all their needed articulation (repeated notes are just a smear of sound) and come off as too mushy and spongy; the excerpts from Swan Lake and Scheherazade suffer from some poorly considered choices of stops. In addition, Sophie Rétaux's playing is too cautious and occasionally given to overly slow tempos. I have no complaints about the instrument itself, the Cavaillé-Coll organ of Saint-Omer, where Rétaux is the organist, or the fine recorded sound. The booklet in the digipak comes with trilingual German-English-French program notes and artist bio, complete specifications for the organ, and photos. For a vastly superior instance of successful transcription of orchestral and piano repertoire for organ, see the disc by Tobias Frank that I review elsewhere in this issue. This one is regrettably not recommended.