

Pianist Tania Stavreva performs an intoxicating & jazzy classical program spanning three continents

Life, Inspiration & Rhythmic Movement

Bulgarian-born, New York City-based pianist Tania Stavreva's first solo piano CD [Rhythmic Movement](#)/\$15 is an eclectic toy chest of music close to the artist's heart, performed with a natural passion, positive energy, and contagiously playful intellectual curiosity that sublimely conflates her classical virtuosity with her relaxed, fresh, infinitely improvisatory

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CD REVIEW

jazz prowess. Mixing genres and styles, the artist has selected composers including Stavreva herself; Bulgarian composer Pancho Vladigerov and his son

Alexander; Argentine Alberto Ginastera; Russian Nikolai Kapustin; and Grammy-nominated American composer Mason Bates. The result is an entertaining CD of first-rate music and extraordinary music making.

Already on *Billboard's* Classical Top 10, *Rhythmic Movement* has also been awarded Best Classical Album at the 2017 Clouzine International Music Awards and has received three awards for outstanding achievement and was a medal recipient in the category of Classical Emerging Artist and Album at the 2017 Global Music Awards.

Composed by Stavreva for the Onomatopoeia Theater Company's off-off Broadway contemporary adaptation of *The Tempest*, the CD opens with its namesake, *Rhythmic Movement* [1] a short composition that serves as moniker for the character Caliban, son of the witch Sycorax in Shakespeare's play. A persistent, agitated pulse, rooted perhaps in a simple but profoundly atavistic Balkan modality familiar to the composer, describes the aberrations of this half man, half beast. *Ratchenitza* [2] is a traditional Bulgarian folk dance written by one of the country's most important composers, Pancho Vladigerov. It is the sixth and final piece from his *Shumen Miniatures* and is bright and airy in character. Stavreva's playing, precise and clean throughout, particularly her high register passagework, is captured to perfection by producer, engineer, and mixer Ron Saint Germain.

The artist's excellent liner notes point out that Vladigerov uses a typically Bulgarian asymmetrical rhythm (2+2+2+3) for *Mouvement Rythmique* [3] the last of six from his piano album *Aquarelles, Opus 37*. Stavreva's playing is flawlessly balanced between right and left hands, the inner compositional workings of the piece luscious and clear. There



is plenty of color contrast in Stavreva's playing as well, especially the moody section that in due course breaks into the bright sunlight of the piece's denouement and finale. The piece is lots of fun in the artist's able hands!

Alberto Ginastera's *Danzas Argentinas, Op. 2* spin vividly colorful images of people, places, and things; exactly Stavreva's interpretive coin. *Danza del Viejo Boyero (Dance of the Old Herdsman)* [4] opens the set with a quirky folk dance figure played by Stavreva with keen pulse and energy. *Danza de la Moza Donosa (Dance of the Beautiful Maiden)* [5] is realized by the artist with tender technical and intellectual sensibility; bittersweet imagery made tangible by the pianist's solidly intuitive playing. And the last of the set, *Danza del Gaucho Matrero (Dance of The Arrogant Cowboy)* [6] is deliciously frenetic, agitated, insistent, pointed in remarks with wide flourishes of bravado. Stavreva executes passages both fun and fantastical with superb musical charm and intuition.

Ruvido ed Ostinato, The fourth movement from Ginastera's *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 22* [7] is chock-o-block with syncopated energy, masterfully focused throughout; a virtuoso workout presented by the artist with effortless, even mischievous elan. The low register on the instrument sounds fabulous here, while balanced voicing, dynamics, and stylistic finesse are all accounted for; an ecstatically driven performance.

Two from Nikolai Kapustin's *Jazz Concert Etudes - Prelude and Toccata* are performed with bravura technical wizardry and pizzazz by the artist. My listening notes say simply, from hot to hotter! Stavreva is all over the keyboard, every note distinctly in its place for the *Prelude* [8] which sparkles with the jaunty viability of her interpretation. *Toccata* [9] revels in texture and style, the pianist's suave, natural technical

ease becoming irresistibly expansive and embracing. These two in particular, but the entire *Jazz Etudes* set are valuable additions to the recital repertoire by Russia's Gershwin.

Another composition by the artist, *The Dark Side Of The Sun* [10] is a fabulously evocative improvisation created inside the guts of the piano. Strums, swishes, glissandi, and other effects create a fearful dark storm of sound, with rumbling thunder, and ominous portent to open the session. Stavreva's versatility and taste make perfect sense of the atmospheric and not a little scary wonder of the piece. Ron Saint Germain's engineering and mixing expertise once more beautifully conjures agitation, and marvels at sound decay. Intriguing!

American composer Mason Bates has recently been named the most performed composer of his generation and the 2018 Composer of the Year by Musical America. His *White Lies for Lomax* [11] is a blues fantasy tribute to Alan Lomax, the ethnomusicologist whose early recordings influenced bands like Muddy Waters and the Rolling Stones. An electro-acoustic piece, *Dark Side* opens in the colors of delicate lace, a sustained pedal creating lovely overtones. An intensely interesting melodic figure paces the opening bars, then dives, dips, and curls into playful narrative and jaunty attitude. Lots of tinkling high figures intoxicate and entice, especially during the haunting pairing of the living artist's improvisations and the original, distant ghost performance of Lomax's song *Dollar Maime*. Evocative!

Personalizing her CD with flair and originality, Stavreva mesmerizingly sings, a cappella, the 17 second popular Bulgarian folk tune *Dilmano, Dilbero* [12] as prelude to her incredible performance on the piano of Alexander Vladigerov's *Dilmano, Dilbero, Variations on a Bulgarian Folk Song* [13].

A *tour de force*, the set of nine spectacular and deeply moving variations offer every type of pianistic challenge. Color, technical difficulty, style, sequence, and musical architecture present a world of moods, some wistful, others remarkably symphonic. The artist kicks up a hornets nest of kaleidoscopic keyboard color, finessed by her

inherent historical insight and informed by the artist's detailed passagework. Tremendous audio capture as well in the *Variations*, a pleasure for the ears and imagination as vistas of musical imagery explore the instrument's sonic capabilities. Character portraits of a Bulgarian archetype, the *Variations* are tempered by a proud history of empires and oppressions. Stavreva's interpretation is empathic in every way, by turns wistful and delicate or apocalyptic. Stavreva brings to the table a spectacular performance!

For fun, but also as an indication of her ecumenical taste and diverse interests, the final track on Tania Stavreva's first CD is titled, with tongue-in-cheek, *Ritmico y Distorsionado (Rhythmic and distorted)* [14] and is the same Ginastera movement (*Ruvido ed Ostinato*) from track seven, this time embellished with the improvised drumming of Will Calhoun. The two purposefully distort the audio in certain sections this time around. Edgy!



Photo by Reggo Wilson



[Daniel Kepl](#) has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor. Emeriti Philharmonic just finished its first tour of Cuba June 23 to July 8 2017 and a two week tour of Portugal is planned for late August/early September 2018. For more information visit www.emeritiphilharmonic.com

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