



To Russia with Love—A Conversation with Cellist Wendy Warner and Pianist Irina Nuzova

Departments - Feature Articles

Written by [Jerry Dubins](#)

Sunday, 01 August 2010

BY JERRY DUBINS

There were great composers who wrote music for the cello but didn't play the instrument, and then there were great cellists who wrote music for their instrument but didn't particularly distinguish themselves as composers. On a newly released Cedille CD, cellist Wendy Warner and pianist Irina Nuzova bring together three Russian cello virtuosos who did some composing with five Russian composers who either wrote cello music specifically for them or who had a work they wrote transcribed by one of them.

In *Fanfare* 33:3, I had occasion to review another Cedille release featuring Warner in works by Popper and Piatigorsky. On that recording, the cellist was accompanied by a different pianist, Eileen Buck; but so smitten was I with Warner's phenomenal playing and consummate artistry that I was more than keen to accept this invitation to interview her and Nuzova, her pianist on this new album.

Q: Many composers of course, going all the way back to Bach and even a bit earlier wrote magnificently for the cello, but why do you think the cello almost seems to be stamped with a "made in Russia" label? It's rather like the flute and the harp with the French. Is there something about the cello that just gives it a Slavic character?

W.W.: The rich sonority of the cello and its vocal range lend themselves perfectly to this repertoire. The long, sustained melodic lines in the Rachmaninoff are best expressed on the cello, just as the virtuosic technical passages are perfect on the piano as well as in Irina's facile fingers.

I.N.: It is about that dark, rich, and long melodic line that the cello can produce and that reaches into the depth of one's soul. It is voice-like, and with its low register recalls the magnificent basses Russia is known for. Feodor Chaliapin, for example, would come to mind as such a voice, which is as richly sonorous as the cello's.

Q: I'd like to pursue this line of inquiry for a moment with Irina, for she has not only written extensively on the Miaskovsky sonata, but specifically for this recording project she enlisted Angela Livingstone, professor emeritus, Essex University, England, to make the first English translation of a poem, Bezglagol'nost (Wordlessness), by Russian symbolist poet Konstantin Balmont. In describing the Miaskovsky, you speak of the ties between the Russian soul and the Russian landscape, and you include the poem in your notes, the first verse of which reads:

In all Russian nature there's tenderness, tiredness,

An unrevealed sorrow, a pain that is speechless,

Unsoothable mourning, immensity, silence,

Cold height, and an endlessly vanishing distance.

Surely, these emotional and psychological states are not unique to Miaskovsky in particular or Russian composers in general. Sorrow, pain, mourning, tenderness, and tiredness are common characteristics in much Romantic music. Isn't the tiredness in Balmont's poem the world-weariness the Austrians called Weltschmerz? And as for the immensity, silence, and vanishing distance, I hear much of that in what I like to call American "plains and prairie" music, like in some of the works of Aaron Copland and William Schuman. But you're right, Miaskovsky's tiredness is nothing at all like Mahler's Weltschmerz. So what's different about it? Can you put a face to it, and by extension to all Russian Romantic music?

I.N.: The fundamental difference is in the nature of these pains. The 19th-century Romantic movement in Europe allowed the inner emotional life of the human being to come to the surface. Whatever was going on in one's soul came, so to speak, into the public domain—whether its sufferings were attributed to unreciprocated love, lost friendship, or unfulfilled dreams. In Germany my sense is that the *Weltschmerz* of the 19th century has an existential quality. Mahler once said that he was thrice homeless: as a Bohemian in Austria, as an Austrian working in Germany, and as a Jew in the entire world. Russian Romanticism, on the other hand, took its roots from the historical suffering of the nation, going back to the Mongol invasion that lasted for centuries. It also reflects the nostalgia for the old world and lost time, which might have taken root as far back as Peter the Great, who forced Westernization on Russia, something that is still questioned by Russians today. There is also a connection here with the Russian landscape with its vast distances and flat surface. If you think of Rachmaninoff's melodies in the Second and Third piano concertos, and of his and Miaskovsky's cello sonatas, they are everlasting and very plain, and the key is to play them without small local phrasing, while trying to sustain the huge and overarching line. This is the musical equivalent of Balmont's poetry, where he describes the landscape as an "endlessly vanishing distance."

Q: To Wendy I address a more down-to-earth question about the Miaskovsky. It certainly can't be called an obscure work, having some 10 recordings currently listed, including one by its dedicatee, Mstislav Rostropovich. Still, I wouldn't call it a staple of the cello sonata repertoire, and, according to Irina, you are the first American cellist to record it for an American label. Would I be correct in assuming that as a student of Rostropovich you learned the sonata under him? How did his style of playing influence your approach to the piece and to your interpretation of it?

W.W.: Actually, I did not study the Miaskovsky with Rostropovich. However, I did study the Rachmaninoff with him. I agree with Irina that the intensity found in the Miaskovsky is more introverted and repressed. This inward intensity is less accessible to the performer and listener, and it's challenging to communicate this subtle difference. The Rachmaninoff you can play wearing your heart on your sleeve.

Q: The piece we've been discussing is Miaskovsky's A-Minor Sonata, the second of two he wrote for cello. It was completed in 1949, 15 years after the much more widely played and way more often recorded cello sonata by Shostakovich; yet Miaskovsky's musical language seems to look back to a

much earlier period. His works were once more popular than they are today, both in the pre-World War II Soviet Union and in the West; but after his death in 1950, interest in his music took a nosedive. Do you suppose his musical conservatism, rather too derivative style, and profligate approach to composing—"he wrote symphonies by the truckload"—are what account for his rapid decline?

W.W.: I think I'll defer to Irina on this question regarding Miaskovsky and his popularity.

I.N.: During his life he stood in the shadow of such giants as Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Stravinsky. He was well-respected in his time, and did not run into trouble with the Soviet authorities as others sometimes did. Perhaps this is one reason why he became less popular later on, because people thought he was not enough of a rebel. He certainly was cautious politically, but this should not be held against him in judging his works. Perhaps also his time and the pace of history didn't coincide. Bach also wasn't revived until Mendelssohn discovered him almost a century later. I'm not comparing Bach and Miaskovsky, but would like to say that the voice of, let's say, a painter, a poet, or a composer sometimes isn't heard instantaneously, and there will be a time in the future when that voice will leave its trace in history, as in fact the first poem I quoted in my notes expresses. The rehabilitation of Miaskovsky's heritage in Russia itself began about two decades ago when Evgeni Svetlanov recorded all his symphonic works with the USSR Symphony Orchestra using his own money for the project. It was followed up by several festivities honoring the anniversary of his birth. There is also a Web site now dedicated to Miaskovsky where you can find there the recent events, articles, and so on.

Q: You say that Miaskovsky did not run into trouble with the Soviet authorities as others sometimes did, but isn't it true that in 1947 he was cited, along with Shostakovich, Khachaturian, and Prokofiev, as one of the principal offenders in writing music of anti-Soviet, anti-proletarian, and formalist tendencies?

I.N.: What I mean is that he didn't have that open conflict with the authorities as the others did, nor was it reflected in his music in such an acute way as in Shostakovich's and Prokofiev's music. As far as I know he ignored whatever was said against him, not trying to protest, defend himself, or comply with the rules. He simply remained silent.

Q: Of course we hardly need to talk about the Rachmaninoff cello sonata. With some 65 versions of it currently available by just about every cellist and his cousin, the piece comes close to vying with the Beethoven and Brahms cello sonatas for most frequently recorded award. So in making a programming decision to include it, I should think that uppermost in the minds of any artists would be the question "What do we bring to the table that others don't?" What aspects of Rachmaninoff's sonata do you find of special interest?

W.W.: When Irina first proposed the idea of recording the Rachmaninoff Sonata, I was resistant for exactly the reasons that you mention. Not only would we be competing with a CD market that consists of present-day cellists, but we would also be competing with our mentors who are no longer living. Then I started to put my focus elsewhere. I think the point isn't to put out a recording that will be the definitive recording of the Rachmaninoff Sonata, but to contribute a different point of view and interpretation, one which is meaningful to both of us.

I.N.: I have not listened to all recordings, of course, nor do I want to, because if I want to say something in my own voice, it is important to *protect* one's personality. I hope this doesn't sound immodest, but I believe our voice is strong enough to be heard, regardless of what has been done by others. Our approach is perhaps different from others. A piece of art could be looked at from two perspectives, as a whole or in its details. Rachmaninoff's sonata has a peculiar structure. The first movement alone has about 20 tempo changes! Sometimes it seems to me that this sonata is a quilt made of dozens of beautiful pieces. It doesn't bother me, however, to appreciate and enjoy each turn and harmonic change of this sonata. I think one has to decide whether to try to build a comprehensible whole out of these pieces, or let those "heavenly lengths" be, meaning enjoy each piece of the quilt in all its detail. There are technical challenges as well, but I conquered them with pleasure since I absolutely adore this music. It

doesn't always happen this way. For example Chopin's cello sonata doesn't come as easy technically to me because it is farther away from me on the emotional level.

Q Of the three cellists to whom the works on your disc are dedicated, two of them—Rostropovich and Piatigorsky—are practically household names, but unless one reads the liner notes to recordings, there's a good chance that the name Anatoly Brandukov wouldn't raise nods of recognition. Yet it was he to whom Rachmaninoff dedicated his ever-popular sonata. And it turns out that Brandukov, a one-time theory student of Tchaikovsky, also composed some music of his own, as did his later, better-known cello-playing compatriots. I note a recording of a nocturne and a mazurka by Brandukov, and was just wondering if you've ever played any of his pieces or may have thought about including one on your CD. Now wouldn't that be an interesting idea—following a piece written by a major composer with one written by its dedicatee? Might you consider that for a future release? Program suggestions?

W.W.: Yes, I like the idea of your dedication and connections. I love this idea of making a CD of pieces by major composers with ones written by their dedicatees, but I need to give some thought to which composers, which pieces, and which dedicatees would make for a sensible and satisfying program.

I.N.: We never played the pieces you mentioned and certainly such a tribute from the dedicatee to the composer would be an interesting "exchange" idea. For instance, I just played *Kreisleriana*, which was dedicated by Schumann to Chopin, and Chopin in turn dedicated his second Ballade to Schumann. This is an equal exchange, but in the case of Brandukov, as you mention yourself, it probably will be hard to compile an entire CD, yet it is a very interesting approach. Thank you for giving us food for thought.

Q: The great 20th-century cellist Gregor Piatigorsky was of course only 12 years old in 1915 when Scriabin died, and to the best of my knowledge, the composer wrote no chamber works for cello. So the 11th of his 12 piano etudes, op. 8, was not dedicated to Piatigorsky but was transcribed by him for cello and piano. By all accounts, it's the 12th of the etudes that's the famous one; there are more than 60 recordings of it compared to just a handful of recordings of the others. Do you know why Piatigorsky chose the 11th in B-Minor to transcribe? Is there something about it that works especially well on the cello? Did he transpose it to a more reasonable key? Five flats isn't very nice; the only open string it leaves you with is the C string. I guess this question is for Wendy.

W.W.: I think Piatigorsky chose this etude because he could transcribe it in a way that is idiomatic for the cello. I believe that this one works beautifully for the cello as it is the most sonorous. Piatigorsky chose the perfect key, B-Minor, for the cello. It is true; he could have chosen an easier key that would have been more idiomatic for the cello. However, the color and dark warmth that this key gives is perfect on the cello. For me the challenges in the Myaskovsky were not technical. I did not identify with this piece as strongly as Irina did. This kind of inner intensity does not come as naturally to me. I had to learn how to get inside of this music and make it my own.

Q: Rostropovich is also the dedicatee of the brief Musica nostalgica by Schnittke, a tart tongue-in-cheek take-off on a Classical minuet. I'm not so sure, as Andrea Lamoreaux claims in her album notes, that Haydn would have loved it. I doubt that he would have comprehended it, thinking that either his hearing or the playing had gone bad. But the odd piece out here seems to be the Adagio movement from Prokofiev's 10 pieces from Cinderella. The transcription for cello and piano is by the composer himself, but did he dedicate it to one of the three cellists that are cited as establishing a kind of theme to this program?

W.W.: The Prokofiev does seem like the odd man out, but the connection here is a personal one. Rostropovich passed this music down to me when I was 19 years old. He invited me to play on the radio in France alongside him playing the Prokofiev Sonata for a Prokofiev celebration. Since the CD is going to be dedicated to him, I thought this was a nice touch.

Q: Again, this is addressed to Wendy. Tell me more about your cello, which I understand is a Giuseppe Gagliano from 1772, and your bow, a circa 1815 Tourte nicknamed “De Lamare.” Obviously, the cello has been fitted to modern standards and is strung with modern strings. Is this the same instrument you played on your previous Cedille album?

W.W.: I own two cellos: Carl Becker, 1963 and Joseph Gagliano, 1772. For the Popper and Piatigorsky CD I used both cellos—the Gagliano for the Popper and the Becker for the Piatigorsky. For the Russian disc I was lucky enough to obtain a Peter Guarneri cello from Bein and Fushi in Chicago. The Tourte bow is on loan from a generous patron of the Stradivarius Society in Chicago.

Q: You write in your notes of having formed a duo. That sounds like this new CD is not just the product of an ad hoc, one-off effort but the beginning of something more permanent. If that’s the case, tantalize me with what might be in the works.

W.W.: We are hoping this CD will help launch our career as a duo. We are very excited about the future possibilities. With the duo, I would like to pursue new commissions for cello and piano, especially from young American and Russian composers. Irina is a young Russian woman my age who moved to the U.S. in 1991. I feel that our two cultures meld in our recitals in a unique way, which is why I’d like to emphasize works that reflect our diverse backgrounds. Finally, to make recitals captivating and more audience-friendly, I’d favor programs that are not exclusively recitals, but have an educational component and that may center on an artist or author, or include poetry readings. We are planning to make a CD of André Previn’s cello sonata, alongside two other commissioned works.

I.N.: No, it is not an ad hoc effort. We formed the WarnerNuzova duo formally in 2008, having tried each other out for two years. It’s a big decision, but it was not a difficult one, because when we perform it is so exciting and the music so riveting (at least I think it is; I hope I don’t sound too immodest) that it would be a waste not to take our duo as far as we can. We are trying to develop the cross-cultural idea that lies at the core of our duo. We intend to perform and record both classical and contemporary works, and give commissions to composers from both continents or to Russian Americans who live here. We also would like to do more with poetry, for instance, by staging the Miaskovsky sonata together with poetry readings such as the *Wordlessness* poem that is in the liner notes—both in Russian and in English. More traditionally, we are also scheduled to perform the Beethoven sonata cycle in several cities, and make a live recording.

MIASKOVSKY Cello Sonata No. 2 in a, op. 81. SCRIBIN Etude, op. 8/11. SCHNITTKE Musica nostalgica. PROKOFIEV 10 Pieces
from Cinderella: Adagio. RACHMANINOFF Cello Sonata in g, op. 19 • Wendy Warner (vc); Irina Nuzova (pn) • CEDILLE 90000120 (68:55)

The “find” for me on this disc was the Miaskovsky. I’ve not always come away with uniformly favorable impressions from previous, though admittedly limited, encounters with this composer. But his 1949 A-Minor Cello Sonata is a gorgeous post-Rachmaninoff Romantic outpouring. Shame on me that I’d never heard it before now, especially since a comprehensive Internet edition of the composer’s complete works and recordings, compiled by Onno van Rijen (home.wanadoo.nl/ovar/miasopus.htm), lists some 16 versions, a few, it’s true, by some fairly obscure artists on equally obscure labels. Nonetheless, Wendy Warner and Irina Nuzova are not the first duo to discover its beauties. They revel in the score’s riches, Warner drawing a tone of great depth and vibrancy from her cello, while Nuzova matches her partner with luxuriantly resonant sound across her piano’s full range.

Rachmaninoff’s well-recorded, if not over-recorded, cello sonata was probably not in need of another version, but if it had to have one, Warner’s and Nuzova’s needn’t take a back seat to any of them.

Technically, Warner's playing is first-rate, with spot-on intonation, clean articulation, and alert rhythmic pointing. The cellist also displays a great deal of sensitivity to the music's particularly Russian ethos and pathos, though she herself is not Russian. But Rachmaninoff, the giant who bestrode the piano, could not help but write a work in which his instrument played an equal, if not dominant, role. The composer himself resisted the idea of calling the piece a cello sonata, insisting that it was in fact a sonata for cello and piano. Thus, one must judge performances of the piece as much by the pianist's contribution as by the cellist's. Nuzova rises to the occasion, never once flinching at the enormous technical difficulties Rachmaninoff's keyboard writing poses. This wouldn't be the only version of the piece I'd want in my collection—Mischa Maisky's live performance with Sergio Tempo from the 2005 Lugano Festival is electrifying, and Alexander Kniazev with Nikolai Lugansky on a Warner Classics CD is perhaps even more "Russian" than are Warner and Nuzova—but what I like about the Warner-Nuzova matchup is that of an absolutely co-equal partnership in which neither player defers to the other in asserting the importance of her part.

The Scriabin etude transcription is quite lovely, though the annotator to the Naxos CD of Scriabin's complete etudes, George Ledin, Jr., describes this op. 8/11 etude as having a "Tchaikovskyan undertaste." I'm not sure whether to take that as being better or worse than an "aftertaste." Surely, it suffers no more from the lugubriousness that one commonly encounters in Russian music, and which is discussed at some length in the above interview.

The Schnittke *Musica nostalgica* is a hoot, or perhaps better put, Haydn at a hootenanny. Warner and Nuzova play it for all it's worth, which, to me, isn't much, while Prokofiev's Adagio movement from his own transcription for cello and piano of 10 pieces from *Cinderella* makes a fitting disc filler.

Recommended. **Jerry Dubins**