

Mily BALAKIREV (1837-1910) - MusicWeb Review - Volume 1
Complete Piano Works - 1

Piano Sonata in B flat minor (1905) [24:27]

Piano Sonata in B flat minor, op.5 (First Sonata) (1856) [20:46]

Piano Sonata in B flat minor, op.3 (Grande Sonate) (1855) [31:10]

Nicholas Walker (piano)

rec. Wyastone Leys, Herefordshire, England, 10-13 June 2012. DDD

GRAND PIANO GP 636 [76:23]

Variations on Themes from *A Life for the Tsar* (Glinka) (1855/1899) [12:38]

Au Jardin - Etude-Idylle in D flat (1884) [4:54]

Toccata (1902) [4:33]

Piano Sonata in B flat minor (1905) [24:43]

L'Alouette (The Lark) (after Glinka) (1855/1899) [5:20]

Islamey - Oriental Fantasy (1869/1902) [8:56]

Etsuko Hirose (piano)

rec. Cité Nantes Evenet Center, Nantes, France, 1-5 February 2012.

MIRARE MIR181 [61:04]

Many will be surprised to find *three* sonatas by Balakirev on volume one of Grand Piano's new survey of his complete solo piano works. Labels, pianists and critics seem to assume generally that there is only one, as Mirare have done on this 2012 release: the "Piano Sonata in B flat minor" played by Etsuko Hirose is "Balakirev's only sonata". What then has Nicholas Walker got his hands on? There is an obvious clue in the fact that each sonata is in B flat minor, yet Balakirev did not simply revise the original work - even a quick perusal of the track-listing will suffice to show that these are three different sonatas. All doubts are swept away once the music is heard, despite some obvious overlap or recycling of material: Balakirev wrote *three* piano sonatas. Walker explains the differences - not to mention the reason for the sudden ending of op.3 - in his booklet notes.

So it is that, whilst Walker has much hallowed competition as far as the 1905 Sonata is concerned, he has the field pretty much to himself with the other two, especially op.3, which - 150 years on - is revealed as a world premiere. Walker writes that the 1905 incarnation is "surely the most original, wholly Russian, structurally successful and moving of all Russian sonatas, comparable with that of

Liszt." That is a big claim - does it really make sense to discount the piano sonatas of Scriabin, Mussorgsky, Kabalevsky, Miaskovsky, Medtner or Prokofiev? - and one moreover that reasserts the frankly controversial idea that Liszt's B minor sonata stood aloft fifty years earlier. In fact, Balakirev's is an altogether more approachable, more immediate work, flowing with unforgettable Slavic flourishes and more cosmopolitan rhythms.

Walker and Hirose coincide very much in the piano sonata they both agree on, with very similar timings for all four movements, and a unity of approach that suggests Balakirev intended it played like this. Unlike Grand Piano's, the Mirare disc is, for the present at least, a standalone offering. Unfortunately the recording is marred by slight electrical interference that seems to run all the way through Hirose's recital and is most in evidence in the quiet spaces, especially at the ends of tracks. This very soft hiss may not be audible to all ears, especially under normal listening conditions, but at a high volume through headphones it is distinctly audible, especially in the quiet opening of *The Lark*. How this got past Mirare's production team is a mystery, but on the whole it is unlikely to undermine enjoyment of Hirose's programme. There is also some soft rustling in the opening *Glinka Variations* and elsewhere, but again not all that noticeable. Grand Piano's engineers have been more diligent, with good, solid audio throughout at Wyastone Leys - although someone slipped up to allow 'Lees'.

Hirose 'winds down' with *Islamey*, probably Balakirev's best-known work, and a favourite of virtuosos wishing to demonstrate their prowess. It is not the most difficult piece in the repertoire, as it was long reputed to be, but it does make relentless, incredible demands on the performer. Hirose is equal to them, even if she does downplay somewhat the 'Oriental Fantasy' aspect. On the other hand, her saccharine-free *andante espressivo* is preferable to the syrup served up by some.

Whilst both discs retail at the expensive end of things, Hirose's recital will likely hold wider appeal for those looking for a one-off purchase, with the lyrical loveliness of *L'Alouette* and *Au Jardin*, the known thrills of *Islamey*, the rhythmic jollity of the *Toccata*; all actually more French, Scandinavian or indeed Polish than Russian. Nationality is not in question though when it comes to Balakirev's virtuosic *Variations on themes from Mikhail Glinka's 'A Life for the Tsar'*, certainly not when a series of gentle high trills imitates the music of the balalaika! On the other hand, Grand Piano give better value for money in terms of minutes and audio quality. Walker is excellent - keeping things moving, fresh, breezy, never too Russian for a composer who sounds - counter to his overtly nationalistic ideals - surprisingly occidental.

Mirare's Booklet notes are in English, French and, thoughtfully, Japanese, in place

of which Grand Piano have the more orthodox German. There is more Gro Thorsen on their front cover, a vaguely Russian-looking picture - although the sun does shine in Russia too, not least in Balakirev's delightful, outstanding piano music.

Byzantion

Fanfare Review - Volume 3 - Grand Piano

BALAKIREV Mazurkas Nos. 1–7. Piano Sonatina in D, “Esquisses.”

Berceuse in D \flat . *Dumka* in e \flat . *Réverie* in F. *Humoresque* in D. *Piece* in f \sharp .

Capriccio in D • Nicholas Walker (pn) • GRAND PIANO 714 (76:27)

This release is Volume 3 of a series encompassing the complete piano works of Mily Balakirev (1837–1910). As such, it competes with the 25-year-old recordings by the Russian-born pianist Alexander Paley (ESS.A.Y). There was also an earlier series of Balakirev recordings by Nicholas Walker on the ASV label, two volumes of which were reviewed in *Fanfare* in the late 1990s. I don't know if that series was ever completed, but in any case the performances on this release are new, recorded in 2012 and 2014, not reissues.

Balakirev, the organizer of the nationalist Mighty Handful, was one of the most important 19th-century Russian composers of music for solo piano. He was a brilliant pianist, and unlike the other members of his circle, he did not direct his creativity into opera but concentrated on songs, orchestral music, and music for the piano. He believed ardently in the necessity for Russia to develop its own musical style, free from Western influences, but somewhat in contradiction to this ideology, his method of compositional study was based not on theory but on empirical study of the works of other composers and of how they had dealt with particular compositional problems. He greatly admired such innovative European composers as Berlioz, Liszt, Schumann, and Chopin, and notwithstanding his nationalist attitude, they served as models for him.

Almost all of the content of this release is represented in Volumes 5 and 6 of Paley's collection. Nearly half the disc is devoted to Balakirev's seven mazurkas. These somewhat Chopinesque pieces (are there any mazurkas that aren't Chopinesque?) date from 1859 to 1906, nearly spanning Balakirev's entire career, but all except the first two were written after the composer, suffering a kind of nervous breakdown, temporarily abandoned music and took a job as a railway clerk (1871–76). Although these mazurkas frequently display the influence of Chopin, they also have an individuality that sets them apart from that composer, especially in their treatment of harmony, and a knowledgeable listener would be unlikely to think that they were actually by Chopin. In the first two mazurkas, dated 1859–60, Paley's performances are designated “second version,” without further explanation. There is no specification of version on the Walker disc, but more than

any possible differences in the scores used, what is striking is the marked contrast in the two pianists' performance styles: Paley's brittle tone, *détaché* fingering, complete lack of legato, and tendency to mark time versus Walker's greater forward impetus and linearity and fuller tone. I have no hesitation in preferring Walker's renditions, although I think he pushes No. 1 too hard, where more elegance and gracefulness would be welcome. In the next two mazurkas, both dating from 1884–85, I find Paley's playing once again inept and Walker's much better, although I think he again hurries the outer sections of No. 4 a bit and underplays their grace and elegance.

Mazurka No. 5 exists in several versions. As Walker relates in his notes, Balakirev first included it in his *Grande Sonate* of 1855, then revised it for use as the second movement of his Sonata No. 1 of 1856. A further revision, in D Major, was completed in 1900 and then used as the second movement of the Sonata No. 2 of 1905. By comparison with the 1856 version, that of 1900 is considerably extended and elaborated, with denser textures. But in 1884 the composer had begun another revision, in C# Major, leaving it incomplete after 235 bars. Walker has chosen to perform this version, completing it with 53 additional bars, "basing them on the gestures of both the earliest and the later versions, inspired by the colourful textures of the 1884 version ... and using a harmonic language similar to that of Balakirev in the 1880s." (Walker's performances of the other versions may be heard on the first disc in his series, as movements of the sonatas.) While it is interesting to hear this otherwise unrecorded variant, I am more taken with both the 1856 and the 1900 versions. I once again find Walker's main tempo too brisk, and I think he underplays the jerky, syncopated rhythm of the piece by comparison with Paley, whose playing in both those versions is much more effective than in the earlier mazurkas. But Walker's subtle, mysterious rendering of No. 6 (1902) is certainly preferable to Paley's lumpy one. Likewise, Walker's pensively lyrical treatment of No. 7 (1906) scores over Paley's fragmented reading.

Rather than grouping all of the mazurkas together, as does Paley, Walker intersperses them with other works. One selection that is not available elsewhere is Walker's completion of an unpublished 64-bar fragment dating from 1851, to which he has given the title *Piece in F# Minor*. He describes it as a "Slavic waltz," but I hear nothing in it that is particularly Slavic, although it is certainly pleasing enough. His performance is crisp and energetic. The remaining works all date from Balakirev's final decade. In all of them I find Walker's performances preferable to Paley's, which are undermined by his characteristic brittleness, lack of legato, and tendency to play individual notes rather than phrases. In the madcap *Humoresque* (1902), Paley does not approach Walker's energy and verve. At about 10 minutes in length, the 1902 *Capriccio* is the most extended piece on the disc and encompasses a lot of variety. Paley's performance is one of his better ones but still seems labored in comparison to Walker's brilliant and exciting account. In three miniscule movements lasting a total of five to six minutes, the 1909 *Sonatina* was Balakirev's very last work. Walker's performance of this valedictory piece is

excellent—nuanced and serenely eloquent in the first movement, hauntingly yearning in the second, joyous and brilliant in the third—while Paley's is comparatively earthbound, lacking his rival's lyrical flow.

The recorded sound of this release is vivid and full-bodied, although it sometimes has a slightly veiled, soft-focus quality. It contrasts markedly with the dryness of Paley's recordings. Walker's persistent low-level humming is a minor annoyance. His liner notes, on the other hand, are highly informative.

Despite my minor reservations, the choice between the two comprehensive collections of Balakirev's solo piano works is clearly in favor of Walker's yet-to-be-completed one, and some of the pieces on this disc are not otherwise available except from Paley. This release must be considered a significant addition to the recorded repertoire of Russian piano music. **Daniel Morrison**

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Fanfare Review - Volume 4 on Grand Piano

BALAKIREV Scherzos Nos. 1–3. *Novelette in A. Pustynia (The Wilderness). Fandango-étude. Sérénade espagnole sur des thèmes donnés par M. Glinka. Caprice brillant en forme d'ouverture sur le thème de "La jota aragonesa" de M. Glinka. La fuite en Égypte, ouverture de H. Berlioz. Mélodie espagnole. Valses-Caprices Nos. 1 and 2* • Nicholas Walker (pn) • GRAND PIANO 810 (75:07)

This release is the fourth volume in Nicholas Walker's ongoing survey of the complete works for solo piano by Mily Balakirev (1837–1910), the founder of the Russian nationalist "Mighty Handful." I reviewed Volume 3 in 40:5 and gave it my approval, although with a few reservations, mainly relating to some tempos I felt were hurried. I judged Walker's performances to be consistently preferable to the often prosaic efforts of Alexander Paley, whose recordings on the ESS.A.Y label were then as now the only available alternative for a comprehensive survey of Balakirev's piano music.

This latest release includes Balakirev's three scherzos, the first a very early work from 1856 and the other two dating from 1900–01, near the end of the composer's career. Rather than being grouped together on the disc, the scherzos are interspersed with various other pieces, some of which are transcriptions of works of other composers. Walker's technical command in this often demanding and virtuosic music is never in doubt, nor is his sensitivity to its expressive and coloristic content. This volume of his survey shares only two works with the well-regarded recital by Danny Driver (Hyperion), the Scherzo No. 1 and the *Valse-Caprice* No. 2. In the early and somewhat Lisztian B-Minor Scherzo, Walker's playing is more linear, with more color and depth of tone, while Driver's is more

percussive and *détaché* in its fingering, although not as much as that of Paley. Walker's treatment of the lyrical middle section is pleasingly dreamy and mysterious, and in the densely written conclusion of the piece, Walker's account seems the most secure and coherent of the three performances. The much later *Valse-Caprice*, dating from 1900, is a transcription by Balakirev of a waltz by Aleksandr Taneyev, a distant cousin of the better-known Sergei Taneyev. There is no difference in timing between the Walker and Driver accounts, but Driver's seems more spirited and sparkling, and here I find the clarity and incisiveness of his playing marginally preferable to Walker's more relaxed and less forward-pressing approach. In the D \flat -Major Scherzo No. 2, Paley's rendition is not bad, although as usual tonally austere and too *détaché* in its fingering, but it is clearly eclipsed by Walker's fluency, verve, and color. The competition is still more lopsided in the third of the scherzos, in F \sharp Major, where Paley's account often seems fragmented, while Walker displays his usual sense of line and continuity. Like several other Russian (and French) composers, and despite his overriding interest in creating a distinctively Russian musical style, Balakirev had a strong interest in Spain, or at least in Spanish music, or perhaps he was just emulating his mentor Glinka in that respect. Three of the four Spanish-flavored pieces on this disc have a Glinka connection. In 1856, as Walker relates in his notes for this release, the older composer personally provided the young Balakirev with the theme for the *Fandango-étude*, drawing upon the Spanish melodies he (Glinka) had collected during a two-year stay in Spain. Not published in the composer's lifetime, the *Fandango-étude* here receives its first recording. Like Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev was prone to revising his earlier works, and the *Sérénade espagnole* of 1902 is in fact a reworking of the *Fandango-étude*. (Notwithstanding his nationalistic Russian outlook, Balakirev was also prone, like a good many other composers of Imperial Russia, to give French titles to his works.) The *Caprice brillant* on the *Jota aragonesa* theme is a piano transcription of Glinka's well-known orchestral work. The version offered here is a 1900 revision of the original c. 1862 transcription. *La fuite en Égypte* is Balakirev's arrangement of the overture to the second part of Berlioz's *L'enfance du Christ*. In all of these pieces, Balakirev's mastery of idiomatic, resourceful writing for the piano, as well as Walker's mastery as an interpreter, is prominently in evidence. Throughout this recital, Walker's artistry benefits from vivid, realistic, full-bodied, and well-balanced sound, with well-defined piano tone and ample color, in marked contrast to the dryness of Paley's recordings. While low-level humming by the pianist was audible in Volume 3, I did not notice any in this new release. Walker's notes on the program are interesting and informative. The back cover of the booklet is graced by a haunting portrait of the composer in old age, with a white beard, angry eyes, and lips slightly curled in a sardonic half-smile. Balakirev must be considered a major contributor to the 19th-century Russian piano literature, and Nicholas Walker's traversal of his piano music is the one to have. I would expect there to be at least two more releases in this series, and I

look forward to hearing them. **Daniel Morrison**

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Fanfare Review - Volume 5 - Grand Piano

BALAKIREV *Réminiscences de l'opéra La vie pour le Czar. Impromptu. Gondellied. Tarantelle. Polonaise brillante* • Nicholas Walker (pn) • GRAND PIANO 811 (79:35)

& GLINKA *Ruslan and Liudmila: Chernomor's March* (arr. Balakirev). **CHOPIN** *Piano Concerto No. 1: Romanza* (arr. Balakirev). **Scherzo No. 2** (cadenza by Balakirev). **LISZT** *Mazurka brillante*, S 221/R 43 (original version and version with coda by Balakirev). **BEETHOVEN** *String Quartet No. 8*, op. 59/2: *Allegretto* (arr. Balakirev). **String Quartet No. 13**, op. 130: *Cavatina* (arr. Balakirev)

I reviewed Volumes 3 and 4 of Nicholas Walker's survey of the complete piano works of Mily Balakirev in 40:5 and 43:2 respectively, giving both an unequivocal recommendation for this repertoire. Admittedly, his competition for the complete piano works of this composer is weak, consisting solely of the often unsatisfactory efforts of Alexander Paley (ESS.A.Y), but Walker's performances were for the most part commendable. This latest volume, Number 5, consists primarily of Balakirev's transcriptions and other reworkings of music by other composers. Curiously, the best-known of those transcriptions, that of the Glinka song *The Lark*, is not included here, nor did it appear in any of the prior volumes.

The disc opens with a 12-minute fantasy on themes from Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar*, in the manner of Liszt's operatic "paraphrases." Published in 1899, the piece is a revision of a much earlier work dating from 1853–56. In it the beautiful Glinka themes are embroidered with much pianistic bravura, as Balakirev, who was himself a renowned virtuoso pianist, brilliantly exploits the resources of his instrument to create a vividly colorful and dramatic synopsis of the opera. The piece makes considerable technical demands on the performer, and Walker negotiates them with impressive skill as well as spirit. The other Glinka-derived piece on the program is a transcription of the march of the evil wizard Chernomor, from Glinka's other opera, *Ruslan and Liudmila*. According to Walker's notes, Liszt also transcribed this march, and Balakirev edited Liszt's version for publication, but Balakirev's own transcription, which here receives its first recording, is more "literal." It does, in fact, seem a straightforward arrangement for piano of the Glinka orchestral score. Walker's treatment is more expansive than that of Valery Gergiev, in his recording of the complete opera (Philips), but is strongly accented and suitably truculent.

Walker writes that Balakirev "loved Chopin" and "particularly adored the First Piano Concerto," but he nonetheless felt the need to re-orchestrate that work.

Well, we know that orchestration was not Chopin's strong point, and the orchestration of his concertos has been much criticized. Balakirev also made an arrangement for solo piano of the Romanza second movement, dated 1905 in its manuscript, but Walker surmises that like many other Balakirev pieces it was in the composer's head and was performed by him many times before being written down. The arrangement works well as a solo piano piece. It is easy enough for the pianist to absorb the simple orchestral part, mostly with the left hand, and all that is lost is the greater legato of which the orchestra is capable. Walker plays the piece with unaffected simplicity and refined expressivity, lingering less than in most of the recordings I have of the concerto. A more unconventional Balakirev refashioning of Chopin music is the Impromptu, which, as Walker puts it, "dovetails" two of Chopin's op. 28 Preludes, No. 11 in B Major and No. 14 in Eb Minor. Since the two preludes together last a total about a minute, in Maurizio Pollini's admittedly quicker performances (DG), while Balakirev's piece lasts almost five minutes, it is clear that there is a lot of input from Balakirev. In essence, Balakirev treats the two preludes as the A and B sections of a rondo-like structure but elaborates on them considerably. I suppose that it is natural for one master pianist and composer, contemplating the work of another, to think, "I can get more out of this material." Balakirev also did that, although in more limited fashion, when he modified the cadenza of Chopin's Scherzo No. 2, producing a version of the piece that he first performed in 1894 but which was published only recently and here receives its first recording. As Walker describes it, at bar 716 "Balakirev introduces the *sostenuto* theme in heroic counterpoint to Chopin's original." Listeners who are not pianists who have actually performed the piece may be hard-pressed to identify this emendation, as I was, despite repeated attempts to compare this version with a recording of the standard score. In any case, Walker's performance is a good one, notable especially for its sensitive expressivity in the middle section, although lacking the tension, incisiveness, and crystalline clarity of Pollini's account.

Another composer whom Balakirev revered but apparently felt he could sometimes improve upon was Liszt, for instance by adding a more flamboyant coda to that composer's *Mazurka brillante*. Walker provides two performances of the piece, one of the original and the other with Balakirev's addition, which adds about eight seconds to the piece. His version was published in 1898 in a journal but may well have been conceived a good deal earlier for his own concert performances, and it is recorded here for the first time. Balakirev did not tamper with the two movements from Beethoven's string quartets that he transcribed much earlier in his career, in the late 1850s and early 1860s. His straightforward piano transcriptions of the quartet movements are not without interest as an occasional alternative way to hear this music—the leaner texture of the piano tends to focus attention on harmony. The scherzo from the E-Minor Quartet, the second of the Razumovsky set, may well have appealed to Balakirev's nationalist instincts, since its trio section incorporates the old Russian hymn tune that Mussorgsky later used

in the Coronation Scene of *Boris Godunov*. The heavenly Cavatina from op. 130 is as sublime as ever in Walker's sensitive rendition.

The program closes with three short original pieces by Balakirev. The *Gondellied*, completed in 1901, depicts the movement of gondolas not in Venice but on the canals of St. Petersburg, where the composer spent most of his life, and is evocatively Russian in flavor. In the *Tarantelle*, also from 1901, Balakirev has left Russia for Italy, with a wildly energetic and technically demanding dance. The *Polonaise brillante*, dating from 1853–54, is Balakirev's earliest surviving piano piece and here receives its first recording. It is a very promising start for a teenager who although already an accomplished pianist had received no formal training in composition.

As in earlier installments of the series, this release enjoys vivid, realistic, full-bodied sound, with well-defined piano tone and ample color. Since this volume consists mainly of Balakirev's arrangements and revisions of music by other composers, it might seem less essential than the earlier volumes in the series, but those with a strong interest in this seminal Russian composer will want it nonetheless, and with Walker's accomplished performances it offers rewarding listening. **Daniel Morrison**

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