

BREAKING BOUNDARIES: FRIENDSHIP AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN EAST AND WEST IN MANHATTAN



BY ADORA TROSTLE POSTED ON NOVEMBER 25, 2019



On October 30th, the Capital Symphony Orchestra, a local string ensemble brought together under the direction of Russian maestro Vladimir Gorbik, presented a concert titled “Breaking Boundaries” at St. John Nepomucene Catholic Church in midtown Manhattan. As explained in a brief opening address by composer Nicholas Reeves, the program title signified multiple ways in which the programmed pieces illustrate the transcending of various types of barriers and divisions—between life and death, academic classicism and popular culture, the individual and society, and East and West.

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*This Photograph was used in the promotion of
a previous CSO concert
to highlight the need for environmental awareness.*

The concert was divided into two parts, the first consisting of three shorter contemporary pieces lasting 10–15 minutes apiece. The opening work of the English composer Anna Clyne, *Within Her Arms*, was penned in 2009 as a lament for the composer’s recently deceased mother. It was premiered by the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Esa-Pekka Salonen, and since then has garnered numerous performances around the world. The work—characterized by a fair degree of diatonic dissonance due to the use of pan-diatonic heterophony, though without ever losing a tonal mooring—is constructed from a keening four-note motif, evoking a sigh of mourning. This is originally stated softly on a few of the upper strings, but is then subjected to progressively dense layers of divisi string sections, playing at various rates of speed as well as with increasingly complex elaboration of the original material. The piece rises to an intense climax and then quickly dies away into nothingness.

Next there followed the *Variations on a Bulgarian Folk Song “Dilmano, Dilbero,” op. 2*, for solo piano of the Bulgarian composer Alexander Vladigerov (1933–1993), whose father, Pancho Vladigerov (1899–1978)—a leader of the “Second Generation” composers who combined classical and folk music forms—is widely considered to be the most important composer in Bulgarian history. Bulgarian folk music is characterized by asymmetric meters of 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, or 15 beats per measure, which variously subdivide into smaller units of 3 and 2 beats. The resulting rhythmic complexity from the shifting meters and accents lends considerable variety to the music. Vladigerov’s piece, a tuneful and tonal barnstormer that is a real crowd-pleaser, consists of the theme, nine short variations of assorted tempos and characters, and a coda. Most of the sections are energetic and propulsive, with the seventh variation (the longest) providing an island of relative repose. The theme and first five variations require only a bit more than two minutes to dispatch, after which the remaining variations are longer and more elaborate. The fourth and fifth variations integrate elements from various styles of jazz; the seventh invokes the spirits of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff, while the eighth and ninth suggest a touch of Gershwin. The proceedings were in the assured hands of the Bulgarian-born pianist Tania Stavreva, a New York area resident, who in 2017 issued a recording of the work on a CD (Rhythmic Movement) on her Tania Stavreva Music LLC label (available for purchase at www.taniastavreva.com/shop, CDBaby, and Gumroad.). An expressive virtuoso with superb technical prowess, she dispatched the fierce technical difficulties of the piece with seeming effortlessness, amply displaying both power and delicacy as required while always projecting a singing line and ringing tone.

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Closeup of Tania Stavreva – Photo Credit to Paul Stetzer

Stavreva and the orchestra then combined forces in the world premiere of the *Concertino Campana* by Nicholas Reeves, a professor of music at Adelphi University on Long Island. This three-movement work successively portrays various aspects of bells in three locations throughout the world. The brief first movement, “*Three Days in a Minute*,” depicts the Prague Astronomical Clock, first built in 1410 and elaborated upon over succeeding centuries, which simultaneously tracks several different types of time cycles (solar, lunar, sidereal, Babylonian, Old Czech, and modern 24/7). These assorted simultaneous clock movements are portrayed by the same motivic material entering and moving at different times and rates of speed, resulting in dense and dissonant polytonal textures.

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Nicholas Reeves, Tania Stavreva and Vladimir Gorbik after Rehearsal

Next, “*Ayr*” portrays the Great Uspensky bell in the Kremlin. Here, the slowly moving music assumes a shimmering, eerie, other-worldly feel reminiscent of scores for sci-fi films. The closing movement, “*Call Changes*,” longer than the previous two movements combined, is based on the famous cascading peal of the bells in Westminster Abbey, intermixed with thematic material from Henry Purcell’s anthem *Rejoice in the Lord Alway*, known as the “Bell Anthem” for its reliance on the same change-ringing sequence. Here, due to this thematic basis, the music is somewhat more tonal. The piece is difficult to absorb on a single hearing, but repeated exposure (courtesy of a recording of the concert provided to me for review purposes) clarifies its structure. In contrast to the rest of the program, here the reverberant church acoustic was less than ideal, as it caused the solo piano and various overlapping string lines to blend into one another and become difficult to distinguish. That said, having attended the final rehearsal earlier in the day, I was impressed at how Stavreva, Gorbik, and the orchestra worked to adjust their playing to obtain as much clarity as possible, a major tribute to their technical skills, as was indeed the entire performance of this challenging work.

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Vladimir Gorbik, Tania Stavreva and Nicholas Reeves after the Performance

The second half of the concert comprised a single work in a contrasting Romantic vein, Tchaikovsky's beloved *Serenade for Strings*. The performance was superb; I do not think I will hear a better one in my lifetime. Vladimir Gorbik, as always, conducts with great discipline, but never a lack of feeling; his interpretation was genuinely expressive without ever falling prey to sentimental, overly Romanticized swooning or gush. Aided by the rich acoustics of the performing space, he elicited a full, warm, and rich sound from his 19 string players, while always maintaining complete clarity in all the instrumental lines as well, perfectly balanced and with fine gradations of dynamics. Tempo choices were always moderate—I would have liked the introductory section of the third movement to be a little slower and more meditative, but that is a purely subjective preference—with rubato and agogic adjustments employed sparingly but tellingly. Ideally, there would have been two contrabass violins utilized instead of just one to give the bass line even more depth, but it was amazing how much richness of sound Gorbik obtained from just one player. The ensemble played with silken tone, precise execution, and heartfelt dedication, and received a much-deserved hearty sound of applause at the close.

James A. Altena is the Associate Editor of Fanfare magazine, the world's leading publication for reviews of classical music recordings. Since 2010 he has published over 1,100 reviews, including sets of the complete works of Bach and Verdi, and also contributed entries to an online discography of the complete recordings of conductor Bruno Walter.