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Constantine Orbelian

PIANIST

Shostakovich, Mozart, Bach piano concertos

MOSCOW CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

DELOS

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Orbelian plays Shostakovich, Mozart, Bach Piano Concertos

Shostakovich: Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 25

1. Allegro moderado - Allegro vivace (5:50)
2. Lento (7:35)
3. Moderato (1:40)
4. Allegro con brio. Presto (6:32)

Constantine Orbelian, piano; Sergei Nakariakov, trumpet; Andre Korsakov, conductor; Moscow Chamber Orchestra

Mozart: Concerto for Two Pianos in E-Flat Major, K. 365

5. Allegro (9:42)
6. Andante (7:44)
7. Rondo: Allegro (6:46)

Constantine Orbelian, piano; Jonathan Shames, piano; Nanse Gum, conductor; Moscow Chamber Orchestra

Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 12 in A Major, K. 414

8. Allegro (9:41)
9. Andante (8:25)
10. Rondo: Allegretto (6:12)

Constantine Orbelian, piano; Andre Korsakov, conductor; Moscow Chamber Orchestra

J. S. Bach: Concerto No. 5 in F Minor for Keyboard and Strings, BWV 1056

11. Allegro moderato (3:21)
12. Largo (2:50)
13. Presto (3:26)

Constantine Orbelian, piano; Andre Korsakov, conductor; Moscow Chamber Orchestra

Total Playing Time: 79:48

When **Dmitri Shostakovich** (1906-1975) produced his ***Concerto No. 1 in C minor for Piano, Trumpet and Strings***, Op. 35 in 1933, he was on top of the musical world in Russia. Not only that, but at age 27, he was already a composer of international renown, in the wake of the *Symphony No. 1*: his glittering student masterpiece. In these post-revolutionary years, Soviet Musical culture was still sorting itself out, and Stalin's cultural goons had not yet begun their systematic terrorization of their nation's finest composers. Several years earlier, he had gotten a mild official "hand-slap" for his *Tahiti Trot* (his witty and whimsical take on "Tea for Two"), but the young genius was not to feel the regime's full wrath until Stalin and company viciously condemned his second opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, in 1936.

From then on, Shostakovich was forced to walk a tenuous artistic tightrope for the rest of his life, struggling to balance his creative integrity against the Kremlin's cultural dogma. But for now, his work – including two more regime-pleasing symphonies and his satirical opera *The Nose* (plus popular ballet, film and stage scores) had made him one of his country's musical darlings. And it was under such comparatively sunny circumstances that his first piano concerto came to sassy and vibrant life.

First performed in 1933 in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) with the composer (also a brilliant pianist) at the keyboard, the work is full of burlesque swagger and impish, often sardonic humor. Even then, Shostakovich understood the official predilection for crude, even banal themes – but part of his genius was his ability to elevate the banal into the realm of art. And so it is often the case here, with a good bit of "common" musical material transformed into episodes of brain-teasing sophistication.

But there are quite a few instances of more exalted thematic material as well, owing to the composer's well-known habit of borrowing themes from other composers, as well as from his own works. Here, he both begins and ends the work with modified themes from Beethoven: the first movement's opening downward

piano triad was apparently inspired by the opening bars of the "Appassionata" piano sonata, and the concluding frantic passages of the finale are based on his G Major *Rondo a Capriccio*, popularly known as "Rage over a Lost Penny." In between, there are quotes from several of Shostakovich's earlier scores – and even a tid-bit from Haydn.

Following the first movement's brief opening bright splash, the initial Beethovenian theme tries to cast a somber overall mood – but Shostakovich doesn't let that happen, leading the theme instead into material more typical of a music-hall. The trumpet enters, with intermittent snippets reminiscent of jazzed-up military bugle calls. The original theme reappears here and there, tugging the music back and forth between serious and saucy. It should be noted that the trumpet has not yet become a full partner to the piano at this point, instead providing mostly irreverent musical "commentary" here and there. The mood changes abruptly in the following Lento movement, where the music – save for a dramatic and more animated central climax – takes on a consistently subdued and melancholy tone. The trumpet, now muted, enters fairly late in the movement, its pensive melodic musings adding to the prevailing reflective atmosphere.

The very short third movement – and airy episode of seemingly aimless piano noodling leading downward into a somberly throbbing strings passage – serves more as an interlude (or prelude) than a complete movement. But then comes the headlong finale, as the piano and strings explode into a frantic, carnival-atmosphere tumble. The trumpet – still not quite an equal partner to the piano – butts in repeatedly, as if goading the other musicians forward, until it gets its own gauche-sounding dance-tune. From there the musical chicanery piles up, with piano and trumpet seeming to compete as reluctant partners in crime. The final furious flurry of notes leaves the listener hanging on by the fingernails as the combined forces hurtle to a frantic finish.

The remainder of this CD's program can serve as something of a tutorial in the early development of the piano concerto as we know it. After all, **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) was the first composer to produce concertos for keyboard instruments (other than the organ). Then – with a little help from Haydn and Bach's famous sons – **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756-1791) ushered in the use of the rapidly developing fortepiano as an instrument capable of holding its own against the full orchestra of his day. Moreover, in the course of his 27 piano concertos, he did more to perfect the genre's final form than any other composer.

Both of the Mozart concertos offered here are works of his early maturity. The ***Concerto No. 10 in E-flat major for Two Pianos*** was composed in 1779, not long after the composer had reluctantly returned to his position at the court of Prince-Archbishop Colloredo in Salzburg after his extended journeys to Paris and several German cities in fruitless search of employment. Despite his deep dissatisfaction in the service of his musically insensitive royal boss and the recent death of his mother, music of sublime quality continued to gush from him. He wrote this double concerto to perform with his older sister Maria Anna ("Nannerl"), who – by some accounts – was at least his brilliant brother's equal as a keyboard virtuoso (the pair had toured and performed together as children). At around 25 minutes in length, the piece is quite substantial for both its genre and time. Having absorbed both French and Italian influences during his previous periods of European travel, the concerto is the first of two experiments in the double-concerto format (the second is his *Sinfonia Concertante for Violin and Viola in E flat*, K.364).

As usual in Mozart's concertos, the orchestra begins the opening Allegro movement by outlining the main themes to come. Both pianos then enter together with the initial orchestral theme, in brusque and attention-getting fashion. As the music unfolds, the listener soon notes the spontaneous, but nearly seamless flow of the dialogue between the two pianos. While the two soloists are often heard playing together, only one instrument is heard in many passages – such that the

listener, lacking the visual perspective of an actual concert hall, is often hard-pressed to tell which soloist is at work. Suffice it to say that each player gets his fair share of charming and gracious solo action. Another characteristic of the piece is that – given the richness of the piano parts – the orchestra doesn't have as much to say as it does in most of Mozart's other concertos. The movement continues in lyrically expansive fashion until its marvelous double cadenza brings it to an emphatic close.

In the central Andante movement, the orchestra again remains mostly a background presence. The prevailing mood is one of warm contentment, with the two pianos alternating between exquisitely unified communion and sublime exchanges of relaxed commentary, as if two close friends are exchanging quiet confidences. The finale is a dandy, rollicking Rondo – full of high spirits and energetic drive briefly broken by a minor-hued dramatic interlude. Another brilliant double cadenza brings the work to a close, leaving the listener feeling almost bereft.

But not for long, in this program – as we are next treated to the same composer's ***Piano Concerto No. 12 in A major, K. 414*** – this time, with only Maestro Orbelian at the single piano. By the time he wrote it in 1782, Mozart had relinquished his Salzburg post for good, and moved to Vienna to seek his fortune as a freelance composer: a risky proposition in an era when not even the finest musicians were able to survive without noble patronage.

It is the second of three concertos (Nos. 11, 12 & 13) written in close succession after his arrival in Vienna, all of which were composed with a double purpose in mind; namely that they could also be played *a quattro*, with just piano and string quartet, thus expanding their performance possibilities. As such, all three are of more modest dimensions than the previous No. 10 – though their evolving musical substance points the way to Mozart's later concertos. It's worth noting that Mozart probably created all of his piano concertos for his own use. Given (by the standards of his

day) his own supreme keyboard abilities, the resultant luxury of being able to write for himself helps to explain the consistent levels of virtuosity found in all of his mature concertos. These pieces were among the main fare offered to the admiring Viennese public in his Lenten concert series of 1783.

The opening movement begins with Mozart's customary orchestral exposition of the primary themes, before the piano makes its appearance with the first of them. Again, typical of Mozart, he wastes no time in spinning cunning keyboard elaborations of the theme while leading it in ingeniously divergent directions. As he develops this and the remaining themes, he never fails to surprise and delight at every turn. Contrast comes with a climactic minor-key modulation before returning to the opening melody and finishing off with an exhilarating cadenza.

The following Andante movement – in the (then) rarely used key of D minor – is Mozart's musical memorial to Johann Christian Bach (the most famous of JS Bach's brilliant sons). Mozart considered him a mentor, having met and briefly worked with him as a youth during an earlier trip to London. The "London Bach" had passed away earlier in 1782, and Mozart based this movement on a theme from one of his overtures. In keeping with its elegiac purpose, the movement is uniformly moving and mournful: as lovely a tribute as anyone could wish for. But the scintillating final rondo, with its infectiously playful spirit, restores the concerto's mostly sunny outlook.

As mentioned above, JS Bach's seven piano (originally harpsichord) concertos – completed in Leipzig between 1729 an 1726 – were the first works in the then-emerging "concerto" format to feature solo keyboard parts. But it should be noted that these works, as Bach intended them to be performed, were very different beasts than what we most often hear nowadays as works for modern piano and substantial string orchestra.

You should know that none of these works were originally composed as keyboard concertos; most of them were Bach's own transcriptions of either violin or wind concertos that he had already written during his prior period of employment at the Cöthen court (1717–1723), where his output was mostly instrumental. But, on top of his new (and extensive) sacred music duties as Cantor of Leipzig's St. Thomas church, Bach was also appointed to lead the Leipzig Collegium Musicum: the city's leading secular music institution. In that capacity, he was responsible for supplying music for the Collegium's regular concerts – usually held at a local coffee house. Recycling previous material no doubt saved him precious time and energy; besides, it was a common Baroque-era practice to rearrange previous works – either one's own, or by other composers. By then, at least two of his gifted sons were old enough (and proficient enough as musicians) to assist him both by copying out performers' parts as well as performing in these concerts.

While we classify these concertos as "orchestral" works nowadays, there is solid evidence that – as performed then – they would've come across to us more like chamber works. We know that – in both Cöthen and Leipzig – Bach's instrumental resources were often limited, such that string players were usually limited to no more than two per part. Besides, considering the harpsichord's distinctly limited volume, more players than that would likely have overbalanced the soloists. But the modern piano's louder sonorities have enabled these works to be performed with much meatier supporting ensembles.

The outer movements of the ***Concerto No. 5 in F Minor***, BWV 1056, are believed to be transcriptions of a now-lost violin concerto in G minor; the central Largo was probably adapted from an oboe concerto, and it also appears as an instrumental "sinfonia" in his *Cantata No. 156*. The opening Allegro moderato movement, while animated, is suffused with the sort of gravitas found in much north German music – especially Bach's. The somewhat turbulent music – in keeping with its minor key – projects a vague sense of disquiet and agitation. In stark contrast, the heavenly

slow movement – now in major mode – floats a limpid keyboard melody over a soft bed of plucked string textures. The darkly exuberant final Presto brings the work to a resounding close with the kind of solemn gusto that, it seems, only Bach could have produced.

— Lindsay Koob

"**Constantine Orbelian** stands astride two great societies, and finds and promotes synergistic harmony from the best of each." (*Fanfare*) For over 20 years the brilliant American pianist /conductor has been a central figure in Russia's musical life. Longtime Music Director of the Moscow Chamber Orchestra and the Philharmonia of Russia, Orbelian is a frequent guest conductor with other illustrious Russian orchestras: the State Symphony Orchestra of Russia, the Russian National Orchestra, the Baltic Symphony Orchestra, the Hermitage Orchestra, and many others. He tours with American stars in Russian music centers, and Russian stars in North American music centers, and extends these splendid collaborations to tours in Europe, UK, Japan, Korea, and other music capitals throughout the world.

Orbelian's appointment in 1991 as Music Director of the Moscow Chamber Orchestra was a breakthrough event: he is the first American ever to become music director of an ensemble in Russia. This "American in Moscow" is well known as a tireless champion of Russian-American cultural exchange and international ambassadorship through his worldwide tours. In January 2004, President Putin awarded Orbelian the coveted title "Honored Artist of Russia," a title never before bestowed on a non-Russian citizen. In May 2010, Orbelian led the opening Ceremonial Concert for the Cultural Olympics in Sochi, Russia — the first event setting the stage for Russia's hosting of the Olympic Games in 2014. In July 2012, Orbelian received the Russian Order of Friendship (ROF) medal, in recognition of his long-standing activities in the forefront of Russian musical culture.

"Orbelian has star quality, and his orchestra plays with passion and precision," *The Audio Critic* wrote of his acclaimed series of over 30 recordings on Delos. Among his recent concert and televised appearances are collaborations with stars Renée Fleming and Dmitri Hvorostovsky, and with Van Cliburn in Cliburn's sentimental return to Moscow. *Opera News* calls Orbelian "the singer's dream collaborator," and commented that he conducts vocal repertoire "with the sensitivity of a lieder pianist." Orbelian's frequent collaborations with Hvorostovsky include repertoire from their Delos recordings "Where Are You, My Brothers?" and "Moscow Nights," featured on many tours and telecasts, including historic live telecasts from Moscow's Red Square.

Recently Orbelian turned to film to create more of his unique American/Russian collaborations. His first film production, "Renee Fleming and Dmitri Hvorostovsky: A Musical Odyssey in St. Petersburg," was filmed in St. Petersburg's most glorious palaces, and stars Renée Fleming and Dmitri Hvorostovsky in opera scenes and arias. The film is in some ways a culmination of Orbelian's efforts in St. Petersburg, since he is founder and Music Director of the annual Palaces of St. Petersburg International Music Festival.

Born in San Francisco to Russian and Armenian emigré parents, Constantine Orbelian made his debut as a piano prodigy with the San Francisco Symphony at the age of 11. After graduating from Juilliard in New York, he embarked on a career as a piano virtuoso that included appearances with major symphony orchestras throughout the U.S., U.K., Europe, and Russia. His recording of the Khachaturian piano concerto with conductor Neeme Järvi won "Best Concerto Recording of the Year" award in the United Kingdom.

From his 1995 performance at the 50th Anniversary Celebrations of the United Nations in San Francisco, to his 2004 performance at the U.S. State Department

commemorating 70 years of diplomatic relations between Washington and Moscow, and a repeat State Department appearance in 2007, all with the Moscow Chamber Orchestra, Orbelian continues to use his artistic eminence in the cause of international goodwill. In 2001 Orbelian was awarded the Ellis Island Medal of Honor, an award given to immigrants, or children of immigrants, who have made outstanding contributions to the United States.

Recorded 1991-92, Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory
Producer: Edward Shakhnazarian

Also available featuring Constantine Orbelian on DELOS

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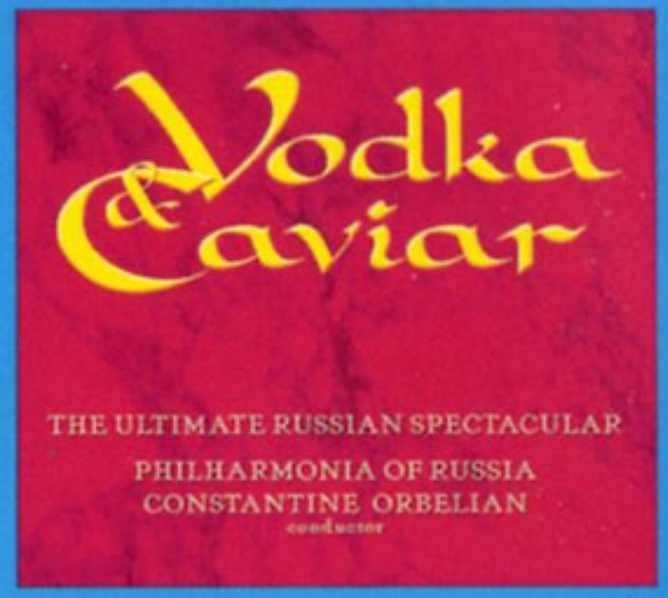

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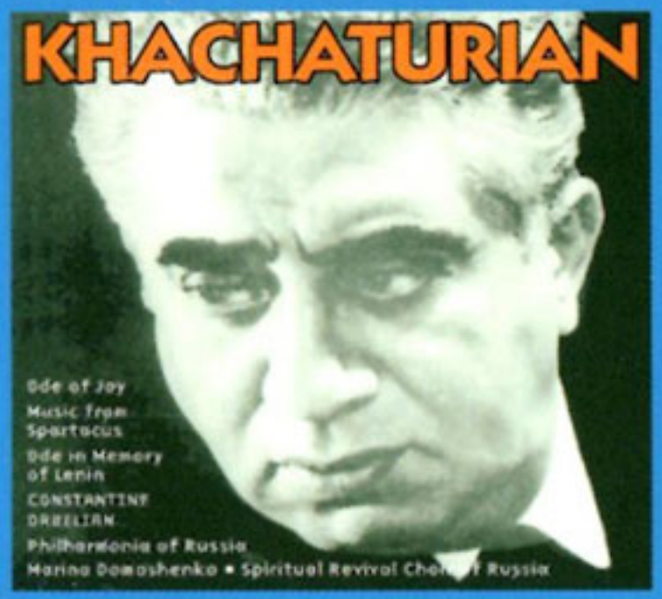

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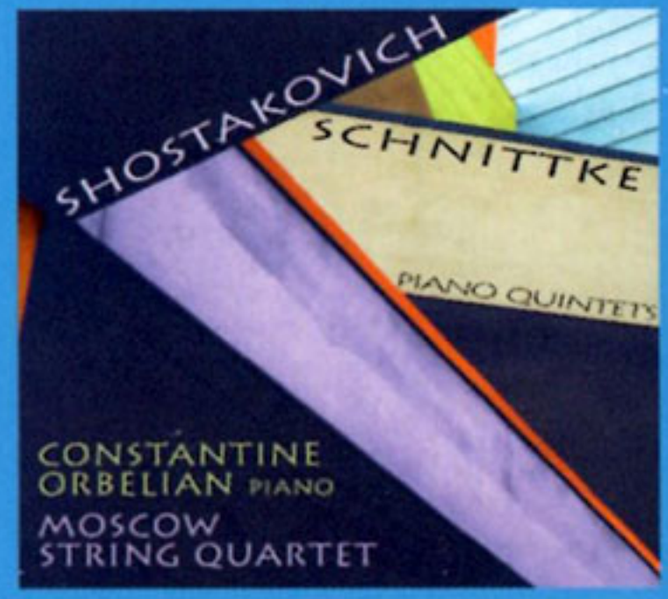

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