



Igor Stravinsky: Works for Violin

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I happen to be one of those (probably rare) listeners for whom Stravinskian Neoclassicism constitutes daily bread. I could listen to this kind of music literally every day, and a disc of Stravinsky's violin music is enough to put me in seventh heaven. While this recording does not include the cool and cerebral Duo concertant, Stravinsky's masterpiece in the violin-and-piano medium, it does make us aware of what a good piece the often overlooked Divertimento is. It is an arrangement of movements from the ballet The Fairy's Kiss, which is in turn based on early piano pieces and songs of Tchaikovsky. Like many of Stravinsky's works in this medium, it originated as an effort to create repertoire for him and violinist Samuel Dushkin to play on their tours together. Similar to much of Stravinsky's work from Petrushka on, the five-movement suite is a sort of apotheosis of 19th-century salon music. Notable is how Stravinsky often lets Tchaikovsky's melodies speak for themselves rather than throwing them off-kilter in his usual fashion. There is more sweetness and affection than irony in this particular homage.

These performances by the Russian violinist Liana Gourdja are thoughtful, measured, and alive to the quiet moments of reflective beauty in Stravinsky's music. Many a violinist has tried to play Stravinsky as if he were Borodin or Glazunov, and so Gourdja's restrained, sensitively varied tone is most welcome. The partnership of Gourdja and Katia Skanavi is defined by filigree counterpoint, careful articulation, and wit. Listen, for instance, to the delightful rubato they apply to the Pas de deux of the Divertimento. The last movement of the Divertimento is a delightful romp, the two musicians enjoying its quirky eccentricity.

My test for a Stravinsky violinist is how he or she handles something as simple as the Serenata or Gavotta of the Suite italienne. Pieces like these (one might also mention Ravel's Tombeau de Couperin) reflect a distinctive post-World War I mood, a nostalgic backward glance backward to a gentler epoch. It was from such works that the Neoclassical movement grew. When done just right, the haunting quality of these pieces can make your throat ache; Gourdja and Skanavi achieve this.

In the concerto, Gourdja reveals the Russian hearth that lies behind the work's Neoclassical facade, as shown in the many passages of joyous "fiddler on the roof" scratching and scraping. In these passages Gourdja flashes and slashes, not attempting to make the rough places plain. (Compare her tensile declamation of the Aria I with Hilary Hahn's smooth cantilena on her Sony recording.) On the debit side, the more deliberate tempos often result in a loss of energy and drive. This is particularly true of the Capriccio, which lacks the brio and sense of catharsis it has in

some performances; one has the impression that Gourdjia wants this movement to go faster. There are, moreover, a couple of crucial moments—such as the opening of *Aria II*—where Gourdjia and the orchestra are not glued together as closely as they might be.

For listeners who are primarily interested in the concerto (which is not “rarely performed,” as the blurb on the back of the disc has it) there are many other versions to choose from; my favorites are those by Hahn and Anne-Sophie Mutter, both of which outshine this one. But what sets this disc apart is the unique combination of pieces. Where else can you find this assortment of miniatures—transcriptions of movements from earlier works including *Mavra*, *Petrushka* and *The Firebird*? Stravinsky’s reinvention of a Tango (transcribed from the original for piano) has playful mischief, and the *Chanson Russe* (transcribed from *Mavra*) a songful pathos in these accounts.

So, a few reservations about the concerto but none whatsoever about the other works, especially the *Divertimento* which sounds most satisfying. Gourdjia’s playing combines Classical restraint and Russian fervor. It’s unfortunate she avoided the *Duo concertant*, and I hope she records it in future. With excellent recorded sound, this disc is recommended to Stravinskians as well as violin lovers who are normally resistant to Stravinsky.