

NWCR896

Alexander Tcherepnin



- Bagatelles, Op. 5 (1912-1918) (13:05)
1. I. Allegro marciale
 2. II. Con vivacità
 3. III. Vivo
 4. IV. Lento con tristezza
 5. V. Dolce
 6. VI. Allegro con spirito
 7. VII. Prestissimo
 8. VIII. Allegro
 9. IX. Allegretto
 10. X. Presto
 11. XI. Coda: Allegro marciale

12. *Message*, Op. 39 (1926) (10:22)
- Voeux* (Wishes), Op. 39b (1926) (9:58)
13. I. for my Saint
14. II. for my family
15. III. for sentiment
16. IV. for bourgeois happiness
17. V. for my work
18. VI. for life
19. VII. for peace in the Middle-East
- Five Concert Etudes, Op. 52 (1934-1936) (18:16)
20. I. Shadow Play
21. II. The Lute
22. III. Homage to China
23. IV. Punch and Judy
24. V. Chant
- Songs Without Words*, Op. 82 (1949-1951) (13:10)
25. I. Elegy
26. II. Rondel
27. III. Enigma
28. IV. The Juggler
29. V. Hymn to Our Lady
- Sonata No. 2, Op. 94 (1961) (11:30)
30. I. Lento—animato
31. II. Andantino
32. III. Animato—Sostenuto

Martha Braden, piano

Total playing time: 74:39

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Notes

Alexander Tcherepnin (1899-1977)

When pianist Martha Braden met composer-pianist Alexander Tcherepnin in 1949—she was twelve and he was fifty—she was simultaneously struck by his “electrifying playing”, and his “overwhelming music.” “The extremes of breathtaking-speed, power, and sheer volume of sound, on the one hand, and the lyricism, serenity, and humor, on the other, were not just qualities of his personality or his pianism,” Braden recalls. “They were actually embodied in the unique forms of the compositions themselves.”

Child of an artistic Russian family, a traveler and passionate scholar of cultures all over the world, Alexander Tcherepnin was an explorer and experimenter, and, finally, a master of sonority and form. A prolific and much-performed composer, who left four operas, thirteen ballets, four symphonies, numerous large orchestral and chamber works, and over two-hundred piano pieces (his concert programs were almost exclusively made up of his own works), Tcherepnin felt that music’s ultimate goal was to unite people, a mandate he accomplished within his own creative output. Living in Paris, London, Beijing, Shanghai, Tokyo, Chicago, and New York, and concertizing in hundreds of cities in between, he

assimilated the music he found, welding it into a distinctive voice, anchored in the Russian expression of his childhood. Modernist, Russian, Chinese, cosmopolitan (in the best Parisian sense), his music translates Eastern language for Western ears, and *vice versa*. No wonder Aaron Copland called him “an honorary American composer,” and that to Toru Takemitsu he was “a father figure of Japanese music.”

Tcherepnin’s rich, un-dogmatic childhood set the stage for his open-mindedness. His father, Nicolai, was a composer, conductor at the Maryinsky Theater, and professor of conducting at the St. Petersburg Conservatory; his mother, Marie Benois, was an amateur singer, daughter of the painter Albert Benois, and niece of the stage designer Alexandre Benois. Artists—both the traditionalists, and the flower of the avant-garde—flocked to their home. Family intimates ran the gamut from Rimsky-Korsakov to Prokofiev (Nicolai’s pupil), Benois, Bakst, Fokine, and Diaghilev. As an adult, Tcherepnin was a humanist, respectful of all spiritual traditions; in his childhood, various family members exposed him to Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Lutheran liturgies. Music was in his blood, and he knew music notation before he learned the alphabet. But as he had no formal theory training to speak of

until he belatedly entered the Conservatory at eighteen, his ability to invent and improvise was entirely uninhibited.

Enthralled by the dynamism and rhythmic ferocity of Prokofiev, the teenage Tcherepnin turned out piano concerti, fourteen sonatas, and dozens of miniatures, which his father referred to as “little fleas”, because of their wide leaps. When Tcherepnin arrived in Paris in 1921, his piano teacher, Isidor Philipp, assembled sets of these small works for publication. The first ten, the Bagatelles, Op. 5, have become a staple of the modern repertoire for students and concert-pianists alike. Tcherepnin described them as “absolutely anti-impressionistic, and anti-eclectic, rather like Prokofiev but with chromaticism.” Bagatelle No. 4 incorporates an aria from one of his juvenile operas. When his father heard the earliest, the wild and mechanistic No. 7, written when the composer was thirteen, he was persuaded that his son was a composer “by the grace of God.”

In 1918 the Tcherepnins fled the Russian Revolution for the Georgian city of Tiflis (now Tbilisi). There, Alexander was exposed to the music, and unusual scales, used by the local ethnic communities. He had always been an individualist, fascinated in particular by combinations of major- and minor-triads, which represented consonance for him, the simultaneous expression of happiness and sorrow. He said, “Only the major-minor triad (C-E \flat -E-G) gave me the sensation of finality and stability.” In Tiflis, Tcherepnin formalized his instinctive experiments, into his nine-tone scale, built on three overlapping tetrachords (C-D \flat -E \flat -E; E-F-G-A \flat ; A \flat -A-B-C), each having the same interval pattern. Another aspect of Tcherepnin’s search for formal order was his own brand of polyphony, which he called *interpoint*. “My music,” he has said, “was re-charged by my scales, discipline, and return to pre-Bach forms.” Still, his use of such devices was never a strait-jacket: “I became neo-classic in form, but not expression.”

In Paris, Tcherepnin was an immediate sensation, as an avant-garde composer, and as a performer. Anna Pavlova commissioned his ballet *Ajanta’s Frescoes*, danced it at London’s Covent Garden, and continued to perform it throughout her career. Tcherepnin’s first symphony, premiered in Paris in 1927, touched off a near-riot; the second movement, scored for un-pitched percussion, provoked at once jeers, applause, and critical comment ranging from “indescribably noisy,” “cacophony,” and “Bolshevism in music,” to “the apotheosis of rhythm.” Tcherepnin’s preoccupation with rhythm and *interpoint*, is similarly evident in the dramatic *Message*, Op. 39: its irregular phrases, wild leaps, and subtle gradations of percussive playing, are welded into a large architectural structure, that culminates in three sharp knocks on the piano lid. Martha Braden thinks of spy movies in connection with *Message*: for her, the repetitive rhythmic figures spell out the message in Morse code. The humble scale and relaxed character of *Voeux (Wishes)*, Op. 39b, written around the same time, show a more intimate, humorous, side of Tcherepnin. The composer decided at publication to omit the seventh wish— “... *pour le paix en Orient*” (“... *for peace in the Middle East*”)—when hostilities ended there in 1926. It seemed quite appropriate to include this still-unpublished piece here, given that Tcherepnin’s “wish” is still far from realized.

By the time Tcherepnin arrived in China in 1934, on one of his world-wide concert tours, he was weary of technical experiments, and ripe for what he later called his “folk-cure.” He was so taken with China (and with a young Chinese pianist, Lee Hsien-Ming), that he canceled the rest of his tour, and remained there for several years, even after Ming left to study in Brussels and Paris. Concerned about the impending dilution of Chinese music, he became assistant to the Chinese minister

of culture. As a professor at the Shanghai Conservatory, he educated a generation of Chinese composers in techniques expressing their native styles in modern forms. He also set up competitions in China and Japan, to encourage young composers; and founded a publishing house to disseminate their music throughout the world.

Tcherepnin’s own work became imbued with Chinese techniques and sensibilities. The five Concert Etudes, Op. 52, use the pentatonic scale, and gracefully translate Chinese ideas for Western ears. *The Lute* is based on a Chinese tale of friendship between a woodcutter and a mandarin, and the lute that symbolized their bond; it recreates the resonating strings of the Chinese instrument *kou-chin (Guqin)*, by sustaining a single chord throughout the piece, creating “a sea of sound”. *Homage to China*, dedicated to Lee Hsien-Ming, whom Tcherepnin married in 1938, mimics the sound of the mandolin-like *pipa*, which is played with picks or fingernails, while *Punch and Judy* is based on a traditional Chinese puppet-theater air.

In 1949, Tcherepnin and his wife took up an invitation to teach at DePaul University in Chicago. Once again, he was captivated by a country, and in 1950 he and Ming agreed to extend their one-year appointment indefinitely. Tcherepnin became an American citizen in 1959, taught in Chicago until 1964, and thereafter divided his time between New York and Europe. In America, Tcherepnin was invigorated by his fellow composers and his students. The excitement of the early years in America made for an especially fertile compositional period. Spurred by many commissions, he composed numerous works for large forces: “I sought broader forms, more complex rhythms, and a synthesis of everything I had learned as a composer.” The *Songs Without Words*, Op. 82 (1949), display his formal daring in their avoidance of repetition, extremes of dynamics and range, and orchestral tone colors, yet they are also expressive and pianistic: note the darkness of *Elegy*, the glassy surface and ranging undercurrent of *Rondel*, and the vast cathedral of *Hymn to Our Lady*.

Tcherepnin never gave up his search for a new formal means of expression. “It is the form, and not musical language, that makes a composition long-living,” he wrote. “Every musical language becomes outdated sooner or later, but the message, expressed by it in adequate form, survives.” Sonata No 2, Op. 94 (1961), commissioned by the Berlin Festival, and premiered by the composer, is the culmination of yet another series of experiments: the eight-step scale (two non-interlocking tetrachords), and a formal linkage of movements, through the pitches D and E. Internal influences proved as powerful as the cultural ones that inspired Tcherepnin over the years. That two-note central idea was actually the result of a disconcerting inner-ear ailment. For more than two years before he wrote the sonata, Tcherepnin had two pitches, a whole tone apart, ringing in his ears, a symptom which vanished upon the completion of the work.

Tcherepnin returned to his native Russia only once before his death: in 1967 he was invited by the Russian government to tour, beginning with a special concert that drew the cream of the Soviet musical establishment. In 1991, the Art Center of Moscow formally recognized all three generations of Tcherepnin composers—Nicolai, Alexander, and his sons, Ivan and Serge—celebrating their reinstatement with a major Moscow concert, and acknowledging at last this Russian, yet international, voice of a singular composer whom Willi Reich hailed as a “musical citizen of the world.”

—Heidi Waleson

Note: these liner notes have been updated from the original version in the 1991 Newport Classics CD release.

American pianist **Martha Braden** combines imaginative virtuosity with a rare sense of continual discovery that lends vitality to her interpretations as she pioneers in expanding the standard repertory of twentieth-century masterpieces. This recording of Tcherpnin's piano music joins her acclaimed CDs devoted to unjustly neglected keyboard works by Ross Lee Finney, and David Kraehenbuel. A top prize-winner at the Bartók-Kabalevsky and Ibla international piano competitions, Braden has presented five New York recitals since her debut at Carnegie (now Weill) Recital Hall, given at major venues including Lincoln Center. Singled out for ongoing support by the late, great, Michigan philanthropist, Irving S. Gilmore, she has received a series of Gilmore, and Gilmore Foundation, grants to underwrite her concert and recording activity.

While Braden's extensive concert schedule spans the US, Mexico, Europe, and the Far East, an urge to share her discoveries has led her to undertake a series of innovative educational initiatives as well. Most recently, drawing on a lifetime of observing the joy, insights, and personal empowerment that children can experience through music, she is developing A

Pocketful of Music: classics composed for children, 1730-2002. Young adults, on the other hand, were Braden's concern during a three-month tour of the People's Republic of China, undertaken as the Tcherpnin Society's first foreign-exchange artist, and sponsored by the Chinese Ministry of Culture. Appearing in China as guest-soloist with the Pan Asia Symphony Orchestra, she also presented numerous concerts and master classes, and gave a series of lecture-recitals on the history of Western keyboard music.

In the past few years, Braden has had gratifying success with two-and three-day college residencies. Students frequently comment that in sharing her areas of expertise—virtuoso performance, exploration of twentieth-century music, and creative pedagogy—she illuminates just those concerns that are most crucial in her students' own budding careers.

In her educational endeavors, Braden follows in the tradition of her early teacher, the legendary piano-pedagogue, Frances Clark. Subsequently she studied and coached with Ernő Balogh, Ross Lee Finney, Ming Tcherpnin (Lee Hsien-Ming), and Julius Hereford. She has recorded for the SONY-Newport Classic, CRI, and New World labels.

Production Notes

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