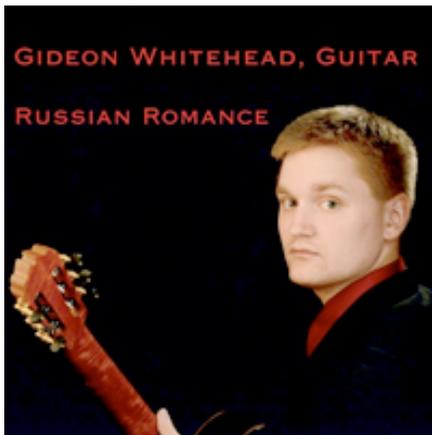


CD Review

Gideon Whitehead, classical guitar:
Russian Romance

by Daniel Hathaway



Classical guitarist and Cleveland Institute of Music alumnus Gideon Whitehead has produced his debut CD, *Russian Romance*, a project funded by a modest Kickstarter campaign and apparently produced on a shoestring (the proposal included the purchase of recording equipment, another member of the Whitehead clan was the recording engineer and the album was recorded in a Michigan church). Though charmingly homegrown, *Russian Romance* sparkles with professionalism and introduces unusual repertoire that will be of interest both to guitarists and lovers of classical guitar music.

Whitehead wrote at the beginning of that project, "For me, it is much more than simply recording an album of music that I love to play — it is a means for me to introduce some really incredible music that has (as far as I can tell) been almost completely ignored by musicians outside of Russia. I know of only a few guitarists who are familiar with this repertoire and I know of absolutely no musicians outside of the guitar community who have ever heard of all but a couple of these composers."

So right. Those composers include Andrei Sychra, Sergei Rudnev, Nikita Koshkin, Grigori Korchmar and S. Osipov, and they're all names new to these ears. In an interview with this publication, Whitehead noted that the classical guitar tradition in Russia "dates back to the nineteenth century with guitarist, composer and teacher, Andrei Sychra (1773–1850) who is considered to be the grandfather of the Russian guitar." Sychra is represented here by his *Grand Fantasia*.

A little online research revealed that Sergei Rudnev (*The Old Lime Tree*) is a contemporary guitarist and composer, born in Tula in 1955. Also a guitarist-composer, Nikita Koshkin (*Usher Waltz*) was born in Moscow in 1956. Grigori Korchmar, a well-known composer and pianist in St. Petersburg (*White Nights Serenades*), was born in 1947 in Baltiysk. "S. Osipov" (*Russian Romance*) is something of a mystery, though there's an Osipov Russian State Folk Orchestra.

I mention these basic facts because the album comes with no liner notes. If those were available, they might also explain why the CD contains a suite by the German baroque lutenist, Sylvius Leopold Weiss, who seems never to have set foot in Russia. We know

from Whitehead's remarks at a recital last March that a Weiss student became lutenist at the Moscow court, where the *Partita in g* is preserved in a manuscript, but other listeners may wonder!

Weiss's honorary Russian status gives him the opening slot on the album and Gideon Whitehead plays the introductory *Andante* and four dance movements that follow fluently, with clear articulation, and a good sense of the individual pace and character of the *Courante*, *Paysane* and *Gigue*. By way of contrast with the more elegant movements, he gives the *Polonaise* a distinctly rustic quality.

Rudnev's *The Old Lime Tree* is a charming set of variations full of sentiment and heart-rending harmonies that Whitehead invests with copious rubato. In an *animato* variation, he brings out its interesting inner voices.

Sychra's portentously-titled *Grand Fantasia* is based on snatches of melody from Carl Maria von Weber's opera, *Der Freischütz*. Whitehead achieves fine variations in tone and texture and presents Weber's tunes prettily.

Edgar Allen Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher* was the inspiration for Koshkin's *Usher Waltz*, and both the composer and performer have a field day with its demonic gestures, ghostly harmonics and twangy pizzicatos.

Korchmar's five night pieces, based on a Pushkin poem (*Evening Romance — Waltz Echoes — Nocturne — Scherzo of Shades Infernal — Hymn to the Rising Sun*) paint little vignettes of St. Petersburg during the summer when the sun never quite sets. Whitehead captures its range of styles, from jazzy to sentimental to virtuosic, keeps things chugging along at a fast clip in the *Scherzo*, and makes a climactic moment out of the richly voiced chords that reach up to greet the rising sun.

Russian Romance ends this attractive and unassuming album with a simple folk song that reveals Whitehead's talent for communicating directly with the listener. In this and some other pieces, the guitarist might have given more prominence to the melodic line, which gets lost now and then in the underlying texture — something to think about for the next album.

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