

## Cesar Cui - 25 Preludes, Op. 64 (Biegel) [2002]



01] Prelude No.1 in C major: Allegro maestoso 02] Prelude No.2 in E minor: Moderato assai  
03] Prelude No.3 in G major: Allegro 04] Prelude No.4 in B minor: Allegro 05] Prelude No.5 in D major: Allegretto 06] Prelude No.6 in F# minor: Andante 07] Prelude No.7 in A major: Allegro non troppo 08] Prelude No.8 in C# minor: Allegro 09] Prelude No.9 in E major: Andantino 10] Prelude No.10 in G# minor: Allegro non troppo 11] Prelude No.11 in B major: Allegretto 12] Prelude No.12 in Eb minor: Allegretto 13] Prelude No.13 in F# major: Andante 14] Prelude No.14 in Bb minor: moderato 15] Prelude No.15 in Db major: Andantino 16] Prelude No.16 in F minor: Andantino 17] Prelude No.17 in Ab major: Larghetto 18] Prelude No.18 in C minor: Allegretto 19] Prelude No.19 in Eb major: Allegretto 20] Prelude No.20 in G minor: Allegro non troppo 21] Prelude No.21 in Bb major: Allegro 22] Prelude No.22 in D minor: Lento 23] Prelude No.23 in F major: Allegro non troppo 24] Prelude No.24 in A minor: Moderato 25] Prelude No.25 in C major: Allegro non troppo Jeffrey Biegel – piano

This review is really an attempt to decide whether it is worthwhile listening to César Cui's Preludes for Piano. Are they pieces that deserve our attention, or would it have been better that they were consigned to the pile of 'salon' music that will never be played again except by specialists and those seeking to repristinate a forgotten talent (or lack of talent).

The programme notes given with this CD are not very encouraging in gaining a favourable impression of this composer. They point out that César Cui is all but forgotten. Richard Anthony is quoted at length, "... as a composer, he was the weakest member of the Five, and by so wide a margin that we wonder at the respect and even deference which he commanded from the group...the poorest composer...the loudest talker." Not a very good advert!

Just who was César Cui?

In the mid 1850's there was a group of composers in Russia known as the 'Mighty Handful', 'The Kouchka' or 'The Five'. In actual fact there were six, although Stasov was their spokesman rather than a composer. The others were, Balakirev, Borodin, Moussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and, of course, our present concern, César Cui.

César Cui was no child prodigy who dedicated himself to music from an early age. In fact he was a career soldier. He graduated from St Petersburg Engineering School and the Academy of Military Engineering and held the rank of Lieutenant-General. He was an authority on fortifications and wrote a number of treatises and articles on this subject. His personal interest was music. Much of his life was dedicated to the Imperial Russian Musical Society and to the writing of criticism.

Perhaps the biggest enigma of Cui's life is that he was not a Russian at all. He was the son of a Lithuanian mother and a French officer who had been wounded during Napoleon's ill-fated campaign.

He was born in 1835. He studied music initially with his sister and then with a local violinist. Finally he completed his education with lessons from the Polish composer Moniuszko. His army training interrupted his musical education. It was at St Petersburg that he met Balakirev and the other members of the Mighty Handful.

Nearly a third of Cui's published repertoire are works for piano. There is no major orchestral work; apart from the four Orchestral Suites and the Suite Concertante Op. 25. His chamber music appears to comprise a collection of lesser pieces for violin or cello and piano. However, there are three string quartets of which I have never heard any reports. The Internet catalogue gives the titles of some nineteen operas, none of which seem to have survived into the current repertoire. Many of his later stage works were written for children - as performers and as audiences.

However, it is with the piano works that we find a constant thread through Cui's creative life. The titles of these works exemplify all that was common in the nineteenth century. There are reams of Impromptus, Waltzes, Morceaux, Polonaises and Mazurkas. The programme notes describe much of this piano music in the following terms: "... it is a gentle utterance, looking back nostalgically to the past, intimate rather than public, favouring silken boudoir over panelled

concert room. Technically undemanding, romantically clichéd, harmonically conventional, tonally unsurprising, more diatonic than chromatic ..."

And this description fits well with the odd pieces of César Cui's music that I have come across in music stool and second-hand music shops. The first of Cui's pieces I ever heard was played to me by an elderly pianist from a volume of the one-time famous 'Star Folio' books. Nothing fundamentally wrong with it - but not breaking horizons. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, there are mountains of similar music. Worth a hearing, but not vital enough to be systematically revived and recorded.

But what can we say about the Preludes? It is perhaps interesting to look at what else was being composed at this time by other Russian composers. The programme note gives us a convenient list. Dating from around this time are Rachmaninov's Preludes Op. 23, the Piano Sonata in f minor Op.5 from the pen of Nicolai Medtner and a large number of Scriabin's works including the Preludes Opp. 31, 33, 35, 37, 39 and the Fourth Sonata. So perhaps we can deduce that it was the time of the Prelude. The most famous set of this form was, of course, Chopin's (if we discount Bach for the time being) and this must have been in Cui's mind as he set pen to paper. However Cui does not use the same key relationships as Scriabin or Chopin. These two composers liked to use successive relative minor relationships, whereas Cui pairs each major key with its mediant minor. So for example, C major is followed by E minor, G major by b minor.

I feel that this arrangement does lend a sense of unity and tonal satisfaction. And of course the work comes a full circle or key cycle; the last prelude is in C major. But less of technicalities - is this music good bad or indifferent?

The stylistic content of the preludes varies considerably. There are waltzes, studies, marches and, quoting the programme notes, 'whispered dreams and bouquets melancholic remembrance.'

If we have to situate this music by stylistic comparison we would find names such as Rubinstein and Balakirev or Chopin and Schumann surfacing. It is not to be compared to Scriabin or Rachmaninov. However this is not a criticism. It would be a poorer world if everyone wrote a pastiche of the C minor Piano Concerto or the redoubtable C# minor Prelude.

Most of these Preludes by Cui deserve to be played; some seem to be within the gift of a talented amateur.

This is a re-release of an old Marco Polo disc from 1993. I must confess that although the playing is quite superb, the piano does sometime sound as if it is in a telephone box. There is a certain brittle, hard quality to some of the passage-work. However the quieter preludes do seem to come across better than the more boisterous ones. It is extremely sensitive playing with a definite sense of magic being created once again with the more restrained preludes.

So what of the original question - are these Preludes worthy of our attention? The answer is a resounding 'yes' - with one caveat. Please do not expect an 'undiscovered' set of Rachmaninov or Scriabin preludes. They are much nearer to Schumann and Chopin than the two Russian masters. But as a series of miniatures related to each other by a subtle key relationship they are second to none. They deserve to be heard as a cycle. However if this is asking too much there are any number of possibilities for an interesting and effective selection.

I do not suppose that César Cui is ever going to reach the heights of musical popularity - although there are some signs that a few of his operas are making a minor comeback. However, it is unfair to write off his work simply because he was perhaps the least of the Mighty Handful. He was a miniaturist and as such deserves recognition. If all he ever wrote was the ninth prelude in E major he would claim our attention and respect. ---John France, musicweb-international.com

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