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Photo: Misha Donat

Margaret Fingerhut

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Chandos
DIGITAL

Russian Piano Music

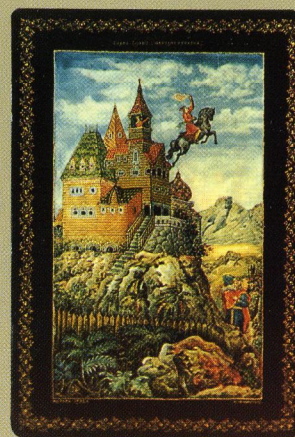
Balakirev • Borodin

Cui • Moussorgsky

Rimsky-Korsakov

(THE MIGHTY HANDFUL)

MARGARET FINGERHUT, Piano



Russian Piano Music

- MILY BALAKIREV (1837-1910)**
 [1] **Toccata in C sharp minor** (4:23)
 [2] **In the Garden** (5:03)
 [3] **Polka in F sharp minor** (3:58)

- MODEST MOUSSORGSKY (1839-1881)**
 [4] **A Teardrop** (*Une larme*) (4:43)
 [5] **A Children's Prank** (2:32)
 (*Une plaisanterie*)
 [6] **In the Village** (*Au village*) (4:24)
 [7] **Nanny and I** (1:02)
 (*Souvenir d'enfance No. 1*)
 [8] **First Punishment** (1:31)
 (*Souvenir d'enfance No. 2*)

- CÉSAR CUI (1835-1918)**
Four Preludes (from *25 Preludes Op. 64*)
 [9] **No. 9 in E major** (3:07)
 [10] **No. 10 in G sharp minor** (1:52)
 [11] **No. 2 in E minor** (2:35)
 [12] **No. 8 in C sharp minor** (2:26)

- NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV (1844-1908)**
 [13] **Scherzino Op. 11, No. 3** (0:59)
 [14] **A Little Song** (2:00)
 [15] **Novellette Op. 11, No. 2** (2:02)

- ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833-1887)**
 [16] **In the Monastery** (5:48)
 (from *Petite Suite*)
 [17] **Scherzo in A flat major** (2:58)
 [18] **Nocturne** (from *Petite Suite*) (3:06)

"THE MIGHTY HANDFUL" was the name given to five Russian composers who formed a specifically nationalist group in the 1860s and devoted themselves to a concept of music that had its basis in the songs and dances of the people. Although Balakirev was the figure-head of "The Five" he is less noted for his own music than for being an inspiration to others, whilst César Cui, another member of Balakirev's circle, is remembered principally for his vituperative criticisms of Tchaikovsky's work. It therefore remained for the others in the group – Borodin, Moussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov – to emerge as greater composers than either of their colleagues with orchestral and operatic masterpieces which fully established their names in the international repertoire.

However, as this recital shows, all five members of "The Mighty Handful" wrote highly attractive piano music which, although occasionally influenced by European keyboard models, nevertheless combined melodic charm with a special brand of Russian colour.

BALAKIREV's intense commitment to the Russian nationalist cause led him to establish a Free School of Music in 1862 in direct rivalry to the more academically-inclined Conservatory of the Russian Musical Society. In this dominating role, he exercised enormous influence not only over the other members of "The Five" but also Tchaikovsky, whose *Romeo and Juliet* owed much to the older man's advice and encouragement.

His most famous piano work is *Islamey* but his catalogue includes a number of other keyboard compositions which are undeniably artistic and always beautifully written for the instrument. The **Toccata in C sharp minor** is one such piece and has a deceptively graceful opening which gives way to a display of technical fireworks. **In the Garden** – an *Idyll* dating from 1884 – is a Lisztian study which epitomises Balakirev's

elegant, quasi-oriental style. The **Polka in F sharp minor** is one of the composer's earliest pieces and features a bitter-sweet melody in which the Russian element is ever-present.

MOUSSORGSKY showed an early aptitude for music but was destined for the army where he acquired a taste for hard drinking. In 1857, he met Balakirev and resigned his commission in order to study music in earnest but his decline from alcoholism caused his composing career to suffer and he left many half-finished projects which needed other hands to put them into performable contexts.

His most celebrated piano work is *Pictures at an Exhibition* but several of his lesser-known pieces – such as those presented here – fully deserve a hearing. **A Teardrop** was written in 1880 and combines a simple Chopinesque structure with an appealing Tchaikovskian melancholy. **Children's Prank** dates from the composer's twentieth year and is full of impish fun. **In the Village** is a fantasia in which the opening folk-song leads into a grandiose passage reminiscent of *The Great Gate of Kiev* and concludes with gypsy-like dances. **Nanny and I** – the first of two early *Childhood Recollections* – is dedicated "To the Memory of my Mother" and serves as a whimsical appetiser to the virtuoso **First Punishment** – a brilliant allegro ominously sub-titled "Nanny shuts me in a dark cupboard"!

CUI was born in Poland of French descent and at the age of sixteen was sent to the St. Petersburg School for Military Engineers where he combined the study of military science with his work as a composer and writer on music. Paradoxically, although his music is virtually unknown today, he wrote more of it than any other member of "The Five", including ten operas, an assortment of orchestral works, songs, chamber music, and a vast number of piano pieces.

Even more curious is the fact that this great espouser of Russian nationalism turns out to have been the most eclectic composer in the Balakirev circle. Echoes of Chopin and Schuman abound throughout his *Twenty-Five Preludes* of 1904, yet at the same time there is much in the set that is well-constructed and agreeably melodic, suggesting that perhaps Cui's music has been under-rated and is worthy of further investigation. Of the **Four Preludes** selected for this recording, the first is a kind of romantic "song without words"; the second has a stormy, wind-swept character; the third an appealing Russian lyricism; and the last is written in a grand, Rachmaninovian manner.

RIMSKY-KORSAKOV also showed a talent for music early on, but like Moussorgsky and Cui took up a military career, entering the St. Petersburg Naval College in 1856. He managed to continue his musical studies during off-duty moments and in due course met Balakirev who conducted his First Symphony at a Free Music School concert in 1865. Eventually, he retired from the navy and went on to lead a distinguished musical life which was noted in particular for such brilliant orchestral works as the *Spanish Caprice* and *Scheherazade*.

Qualities which inhabit this latter music are also to be found in the first of the three piano pieces heard next. **A Little Song** dates from 1901 and its ostinato rhythm, like a repetitive Arab Drum, accompanies a soulful, oriental melody. The **Novellette in B minor** is an effective composition of Schumannesque inspiration, whilst the **Scherzino** is a study of humorous character, rather like a musical snuff-box.

BORODIN was another member of "The Mighty Handful" who followed two simultaneous vocations, though it wasn't a military career which took up his time but a passion for chemistry and because of his work at the St. Petersburg Academy of Medicine and Surgery his composing

output was greatly restricted. "I am", he once said, "a Sunday composer", yet despite this he emerged with a strong musical personality and was to influence many younger Russian composers.

Borodin's *Petite Suite* – a collection of seven characteristic pieces – dates from 1885 and the first of them is entitled **In the Monastery**. This impressionistic music is sub-titled "The Church's vows foster thoughts only of God" and invokes the tolling of bells and a distant chapel choir. The **Scherzo in A flat major** is an arrangement of a lost orchestral piece which recalls the "Polovtsian Dances" from *Prince Igor*. Margaret Fingerhut ends her recital with a delightful encore – the **Nocturne** which concludes the *Petite Suite*. This is sub-titled "Lulled by the happiness of being in love" – words which the music expresses in the most tender and charming way.

EDWARD JOHNSON

MARGARET FINGERHUT

Margaret Fingerhut is one of England's most popular and acclaimed young pianists. She has appeared with numerous orchestras, including the London Symphony Orchestra in the Barbican Centre, Royal Albert Hall and Fairfield Halls, and the Philharmonia Orchestra in the Royal Festival Hall. She records regularly for BBC Radio 3, the BBC World Service and Radio London, and has been heard throughout America in live broadcast recitals for the network of Radio WFMT, Chicago.

Born in London, Margaret Fingerhut attended the Royal College of Music where she studied with Cyril Smith and Angus Morrison and won many prizes, including the Hopkinson Gold Medal and the Joy Scott Prize for Chopin. Several awards, one of them the Boise Foundation Scholarship, enabled her to study with Vlado Perlemuter in Paris and

Leon Fleisher in Baltimore.

In 1978 she was invited by Yehudi Menuhin to participate in his "Live Music Now" scheme. In 1981 she was chosen as a "Young Musician of the Year" by the Greater London Arts Association and since that time has maintained a busy schedule of recital and concerto appearances throughout Great Britain and the United States.

This is Margaret Fingerhut's first gramophone recording. A further release will be the premiere recording of Arnold Bax's "Winter Legends", with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Other recordings for Chandos will also include the Grieg Piano Concerto and Manuel de Falla's "Nights in the Gardens of Spain", both with the London Symphony Orchestra.

A Chandos Digital Recording.

Recording Producer: Brian Couzens.

Sound Engineer: Ralph Couzens. Assistant Engineer: Philip Couzens. Recorded in The Maltings, Snape on July 15 & 16, 1985.

The Little Grey Horse and *Nothing Rustles in the Field*

by I. Formichev, from *Mstyora* courtesy of the SCR collection.

Sleeve Design: Roderick White. Art Direction: Janet Osborn.

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