

Invitation to the Dance

Alexander Ullman revels in the vivid colours and thrilling energy of spectacular piano transcriptions of Russian ballet classics in Rubicon Classics debut disc

“... a wonderful and mature young pianist, who will develop even more in the coming years”, *Piano News*, January 2018



Music and dance, inseparable companions for millennia, are the focus of a compelling new Rubicon Classics disc, set for release on 15 March 2019. Alexander Ullman, winner of the most recent International Franz Liszt Piano Competition, has built a fascinating debut album from musically diverse and technically demanding keyboard transcriptions of famous Russian ballet scores.

The 27-year-old British pianist's programme opens with Mikhail Pletnev's supremely virtuosic transcription of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker Suite*, made in the late 1970s, and unfolds with Stravinsky's Three Movements from *Petrushka*. This is followed by Six Pieces from

Prokofiev's *Cinderella* Op.102, one of three suites for solo piano created by the composer while he was working on the full ballet, and the album concludes with more Stravinsky in the form of Guido Agosti's dazzling arrangements of three movements from *The Firebird*.

“There are technical fireworks throughout the whole programme,” observes Alexander Ullman. “Although there's some respite in the Prokofiev, it's pretty full on. I didn't exactly make it easy for myself.” The challenge of overcoming technical hurdles, he adds, was amply offset by the rich rewards delivered by the art of transcription. “It was fascinating to see the many ways in which the composers and arrangers approached converting these orchestral works for piano. There's something very satisfying about imagining, then realising on the piano, pieces that were originally written for orchestra. I have enjoyed trying to strike an interpretive balance between conveying, as faithfully as possible, the composer's orchestral intentions and adapting his wishes to the piano's more monochromatic yet flexible expressive range. Each composition, I believe, requires an individual approach to this.”

The album offers Ullman's reflections on the Russian Piano School and its great legacy of transcriptions. “The three composers on the disc represent the evolution of Russian orchestral music,” he explains. “They're all supreme colourists and there's a line of development that connects each piece in the programme. I felt passionately about putting these pieces together. I love playing a broad variety of music and although some people associate me with Liszt, I have no desire to be known as a specialist.”

Alexander Ullman's disc grew from his desire to record *Petrushka*. “I first played the piece when I was 15 and have lived with it for a dozen years now,” he explains. “Everything works so well in his arrangement of the Three Movements from *Petrushka*, which he made for Arthur Rubinstein in 1921; I think everything fits and the expressivity of the music comes across so clearly because Stravinsky composed and worked out his ballets at the piano. I've performed it regularly, and developed a really strong feeling for the music and that remarkable period in Stravinsky's creative life.” The album's autobiographical associations can also be traced to a performance of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* which Ullman gave last year in Oslo in company with dancers from the Norwegian National Ballet, one of whom is his girlfriend. Together they have filmed a short video for the release. “Hopefully this video can make the recording accessible to some people who otherwise wouldn't come across it. I'm all for attracting new audiences, as long as classical music stays true to its values. Any attempt to dumb it down is doomed. It's absolutely possible to change how classical music is perceived, but classical music itself must not be changed in the process.”

Guido Agosti, who studied with Busoni, made his transcription of three movements from *The Firebird* in 1928. Alexander Ullman describes it as being less pianistic than Stravinsky's suite of *Petrushka* pieces. "It's more physically awkward for the hands. But Agosti melds the dances together with such imagination and an extraordinary sense for the structure. Then there's Prokofiev's *Cinderella*, which I think is much more of a piece for piano than the other transcriptions on the recording. This may sound like blasphemy, but I don't even think it's necessary to know the original ballet before doing justice to the music of the Six Pieces. For me it feels self-contained as a solo piano piece."

Alexander Ullman was born in London in 1991. His parents, while not professional musicians, bought him a piano. Young Alex taught himself the instrument at first and remembers that he would continue playing until he was commanded to stop. At the age of ten, he gained a place at the Purcell School of Music. "They really allowed you to evolve as an individual there," he notes. "I made the decision that I wanted to be a classical pianist and nothing else when I was 14. It was then that I really put in the extra hours of practice and study, getting up at 5.30 in the morning with a friend and spending the time before school practising. We became completely obsessed; it meant I was able to catch up with those who had started at a much younger age. That investment of time, energy and focus has to happen at some point in every young musician's life, and it makes all the difference."

After hearing Leon Fleisher in recital at Wigmore Hall a decade ago, Ullman applied to study with the legendary American pianist at the prestigious Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. He was one of two piano students from a pool of around 1,000 prospects to receive a place at the famously selective conservatoire. "All the other people on the day I auditioned with were from China," he recalls. "I was drawn as number eight, the luckiest number in Chinese culture. I don't think they were very happy! It was very imposing to study with Leon Fleisher, but he transformed the way I thought about music and its composers. Robert McDonald was another big influence, as was Ignat Solzhenitsyn. My four years at Curtis were very intense and hugely valuable. I received an excellent training and, because there are so few pianists there, spent an incredible amount of time playing chamber music with the other students. I'm so grateful for that experience now."

In 2011 Alexander Ullman won the Franz Liszt International Piano Competition in Budapest and graduated from the Curtis Institute the following year. He continued his training with lessons from Eliso Virsaladze in Fiesole before returning to London for postgraduate studies with Dmitri Alexeev at the Royal College of Music. He completed his Artist Diploma as the RCM's Benjamin Britten Piano Fellow in 2017 and took First Prize at the International Franz Liszt Competition in Utrecht soon after. "I'm so glad I studied with Alexeev when I did," he notes. "He has such a wealth of experience and the way we think about music is sometimes radically different. That was perfect for me. I began to play much more of the Russian repertoire when I was with him and that led to the choice of pieces for my first recording."

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Rubicon Classics, Worldwide release 15 March 2019

Alexander Ullman piano

Tchaikovsky *The Nutcracker* Suite

Stravinsky Three Movements from *Petrushka* Suite

Prokofiev Six Pieces from *Cinderella* Op.102

Stravinsky Three Movements from *The Firebird* Suite