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 **United Kingdom Bach, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Debussy, Babadjanian: Nikita Lukinov (piano). St Mary's Perivale, London, 8.5.2025. (CC)**



Nikita Lukinov performing in St Mary's Perivale

Bach – Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp minor (*Well-Tempered Clavier* Book I)

Tchaikovsky – *The Seasons*, Op.37b: *May*; *June*

Mussorgsky – *Night on a Bald Mountain* (arr. piano)

Debussy – *Préludes* Book II: *Ondine*; *Images*, Book I: *Reflets dans l'eau*

Arno Babadjanian – *Six Pictures*

The delightful St Mary's Perivale was the venue for Nikita Lukinov's recital: the church has long housed a series of recitals that are livestreamed: you can find this one [here](#).

The repertoire chosen was fascinating, not least the Babadjanian. Pianist Nikita Lukinov began his musical education in Voronezh, Russia at the age of six before moving to London (Purcell School) and then to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, where he studied under Petras Geniušas. His debut disc (on KNS Classical) was released in the same month he completed his Master's Degree; he is now the youngest staff member at his *alma mater*.

How better to start than with Bach? The five-voiced C-sharp minor (as Lukinov explained three themes, that of the Cross, of Christ's body, and reincarnation, all explained and illustrated by Lukinov prior to his performance. The Yamaha piano at St Mary's is a fine one and allows for linear clarity (heard in both Prelude and Fugue). Languid and peaceful, Lukinov's reading of the Prelude gave the music plenty of space. He left just the right amount of space between Prelude and the Fugue, allowing for the slowly unfolding Fugue to unwrap itself. St Mary's is a tiny venue, though, and the piano seems particularly bright in its upper-middle register, which could be quite harsh. No doubting Lukinov's grasp of the piece, though.

Tchaikovsky's *Seasons* (really, months) remain criminally undervalued and underplayed. As Lukinov said, these pieces represent the essence of Tchaikovsky. We had two here: *May* and *June*, each movement of the set has a subtitle. For *May*, it is 'Starlit Nights'. Cast in G major, this is a dreamy reflection, a kind of Russian (Robert) Schumann in its quasi-improvisatory demeanour. Nice to hear the Yamaha so in tune in its upper reaches, too; just as nice was Lukinov's charming staccato descents. *June* is subtitled 'Barcarolle', and Lukinov pinpointed that specifically Russian melancholy. Lukinov evidently feels an affinity to the Tchaikovsky miniature: he included seven of the 18 pieces of Tchaikovsky's Op.72 on his debut recording.

So far, though, so soporific, perhaps. A bit of heft was required, and it certainly arrived in this form of Mussorgsky's *Night on a Bald Mountain* in an unspecified arrangement for solo piano. This is a convincing take and all credit to Lukinov for keeping the bass clean and yet providing a sense of grandeur alongside the paganist revelry. Most effective was the slower, calmer ending with its ever-so-Russian bells: the evocation of a witchy Black Mass contrasted to the peace profound of the conclusion was well-realised.

Offering contrast again, Debussy has a completely different soundworld, the delicate yet occasionally spicy and even menacing 'Ondine', and the eminently watery 'Reflets dans l'eau', that was well and imaginatively pedaled.

It is a nice sleight of hand to give us Mussorgsky's *Night* and then someone else's *Pictures*! Arno Babadjanian (1921-83) was a Soviet composer, one of the so-called 'Armenian Mighty Five' (the others were Khachaturian, Edvard Mirzoyan, Lazar Saryan, and Adam Khudoyan. Although one does not come across Babadjanian's name too often, it is worth noting no less a figure than Yuri Egorov recorded this music (along with his Second and Eighth Sonatas). You can also hear the composer himself play the *Pictures* [here](#). The composer recorded his own Piano Trio with David Oistrakh and Serge Koussevitzky, so he attracted the *crème de la crème* of Soviet artists to his music (bizarrely, there was an eight-inch vinyl of that performance issued by Le Chant du Monde). Babadjanian was also a film music composer: there is a complete film, *Bride from the North*, with its decidedly jazzy bent on YouTube.

The *Six Pictures* (1965) are seminal to Armenia: richly varied, they opened a number of doors for Armenian music to pass through. From dodecaphony (in the movement 'Folk Song'!) to echoes of Prokofiev at his most frenetic and, well, mad, but with some jazz thrown in for good measure (the 'Toccatina'), this is a remarkable piece. The first movement, 'Improvisation', put me in mind of Ravel's 'Scarbo' (*Gaspard de la nuit*) in its gestures, followed by what might be interpreted as a 'hyper-toccatina' (you could almost, but not quite, invoke Nancarrow here). The angular 'Folk Song' does have a dodecaphonic air about it (it is twelve-tone, but not all twelve-tone pieces sound so, depending on the row used). The ensuing 'Toccatina' was given with a harder touch. The music contains hints of jazz, maximally contrasting to the highly expressive 'Intermezzo' and the creeping chorale that follow, the latter's harmonies forbiddingly beautiful. A final 'Sasoun Dance' offers up a sort of stuttering Armenian take on Bartók. A terrific performance – Lukinov's technique is fearless. There is a recorded performance by Hayk Melikyan on Grand Piano issued relatively recently, a disc which presents the complete piano music of Babadjanian.

An encore: from Mussorgsky's *Pictures*, 'Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks', absolutely delightful. The Mussorgsky *Pictures* were actually featured in Lukinov's recital last year, coupled with Beethoven's Piano Sonata in C, Op.2/3, and available [here](#).

Nikita Lukinov's website is [here](#) (interestingly I note he spells his name 'Lukinoff' in the website's URL; the joys of transliteration, perhaps, or the unavailability of the 'Lukinov' domain name?). There you will also find a link to that debut album on KNS Classics, *Kaleidoscope*.

Colin Clarke

Featured Image: Nikita Lukinov performing in St Mary's Perivale