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Chamber brings out best in obscure Russian works

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Russian music, in gloomy, antic and globe-trotting expatriate varieties, all of it off the beaten path, made for another intriguing Chamber Music Milwaukee program Thursday evening.

Top-notch playing and singing brought out the best in these obscure works, starting with soprano **Tanya Kruse Ruck** in Shostakovich's "Seven Songs on Poems by Alexander Blok," from 1967. With two exceptions, Blok's poems express disillusion and depression, and Shostakovich matched them with lots of heavy, low grumbling in piano (Jeffrey Peterson) and cello (Stefan Kartman). Kruse's vocal heft, dark luster and bold phrasing of the many declarative lines suited both the poetic sentiments and the musical impulses. Two lyrical, leavening songs, "We Were Together" and "Music," throw needed light upon this grim cycle. In the former, violinist Bernard Zinck twined his lines sensitively around the singer's chant.

Elena Kats-Chernin (b. 1957) spent her early years in Soviet Uzbekistan, her teens and college days in Australia, then studied and worked in Germany for 15 years. She's been based in Australia since 1994.

We've heard her vivid sonic imagination and fairly simple, broad-stroke style here at Present Music concerts. Her "Velvet Revolution," heard Thursday, fits with what we know of her. The six short movements, for violin (Zinck), horn (Gregory Flint) and piano (Kuang-Hao Huang), feature instantly graspable central ideas. Kats-Chernin doesn't so much develop them as recolor and reposition them intact, and she moves on to the next before they wear out their welcome. The approach makes her music striking and memorable, in the way of a good logo.

The first movement (called "Hymn," for reasons that escape me) comprises rumbling in the piano, trembling on the violin and rapid-fire repeats on the horn, all compelling in their odd, static intensity. In the finale ("Anarchy," which seems apt), Kats-Chernin gives the three instruments slashing, distinct musical gestures and sets them to tumbling over one another again and again in shifting relations. She ends with a brief, soothing coda that comes out of nowhere.

Prokofiev might have had Stravinsky on the brain in 1923, when he composed his Quintet in G minor, for clarinet (Todd Levy), oboe (Margaret Butler), violin (Zinck), viola (Lewis Rosove) and bass (Zachary Cohen). Some of the textures and gestures recall Stravinsky's "A Soldier's Tale," and the mysterious opening to the Adagio and the savage stomping of the third movement sound like bits of "The Rite of Spring." But the melodies, with their acrobatic diving and darting to unlikely, somehow

ironic cadences, make the quintet unmistakably Prokofiev.

This is brilliant, virtuosic music; the players breezed through the many notes and the tricky ensemble rhythm. Beyond that, they knew that each of Prokofiev's lines had specific targets and trajectories as they zoomed off on tangents, overlapped and finally came to rest in places we never imagined they would.

This series, a presentation of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Music Department, is held at the UWM Zelazo Center. E-mail Tom Strini at tstrini@journalsentinel.com.

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