

A FEARFUL FAIRY TALE

“ Some stories have almost faded in my memory,
while others I am sure will stay with me forever. ”

Sergei Prokofiev

from *Tales of an old grandmother*, Op. 31 (1918)

- [1] **Yuri Bagri** Fairy tale about the forgotten homeland
I. The first snow
- [2-8] **Nikolai Myaskovsky** Yellowed leaves, Op. 31
I. Andante
II. Un poco sostenuto, malinconico e abbandonamente
III. Andante cantabile
IV. Molto vivace e fantastico
V. Molto calmo, ma non troppo lento
VI. Vivo
VII. Moderato
- [9] **Elena Firsova** A fearful fairy tale, Op. 171 *for Helena Basilova*
- [10-11] **Sergei Prokofiev** Tales of an old grandmother, Op. 31
I. Moderato
II. Antantino
- [12-14] **Leoš Janáček** Pohádka (fairy tale), JW VII/5 *with Maya Fridman*
I. Con moto
II. Con moto
III. Allegro
- [15] **Alfred Schnittke** Piano sonata No. 1, Op. 129
I. Largo
- [16] **Nikolai Medtner** Three tales, Op. 9
II. Allegro alla serenata, con alcuna licenza
- [17] **Nikolai Medtner** Four tales, Op. 34
II. Allegro cantabile e leggiero
- [18] **Nikolai Medtner** Four tales, Op. 26
III. Narrante a piacere
- [19] **Nikolai Medtner** Two tales, Op. 20
II. Pesante. Minaccioso
- [20] **Yuri Bagri** Fairy tale about the forgotten homeland
II. Winter dance

A FEARFUL FAIRY TALE

album notes by Wouter de Jongh

Whole dimensions to existence are missed if one considers only what is. Aside from the unbearable pretence of proposing to know what that 'is', life is not static, nor is living or music within that. Fairy tales are stories we tell to connect these dimensions, to pierce through different ways of understanding, times, places; between different versions of ourselves; between us and the other, family and strangers; a princess and her maid; between what we think is real and what transcends that. Some lives as does some art, exemplify this multitude of realities, and the ability to connect them.

There are two words for truth in Russian: Pravda for objective truth and Ishtina for transcendental truth, that what you know but cannot explain. While Helena's previous solo albums - with music from Janacek and Scriabin - were each in their own way quite personal to her, this time she wanted more Ishtina than Pravda. She wanted a story that was not just personal for her but representative of her. And Helena's personal story is one of multitudes. Of departures and forgetting, discovery and loss, of glimmers of understanding, and feelings of coherence in oceans of confusing false certainties.

This collection of music is meant as a story in itself, each piece included for the power it has to forge a connection that needed the story to be forged. And so it was with the piece that inspired the album. When she was seven years old, a little girl named Lenochka lived in a Moscow apartment with her grandparents - both chemists - and her mother, a pianist as well. The little girl had learned to play the piano there, much like she had learned to live and dream and feel. What she hadn't learned yet was of lands farther away than the mystical countries in the fairy tales she used to read or listen to on LPs played in their central living room. Nor did she yet know of loss that is almost more than what is left. A loss that sheds more and in a way, makes you the loss and what is lost the loser.

Her mother came to her one night and said "Dear Lena, we are going to a land quite different from here, where you will feel you will not recognise anything or be recognised. But you will see, in time this place will grow on you and you will recognise it, and it will recognise you." A young composer by the name of Yuri Bagri was not so sure. He had gotten to know little Lena and feared that she would never become a story herself if she would not remember her home. So when they met, one month before she was to leave, he handed her a piece of music. 'Fairy tale about the forgotten homeland'. "Lest you forget Russia" he said. With this music, Helena won her first piano competition when she was 10. It showed her the possibilities of expressing something new, to own the music she played and to stay connected to Russia. Until the music was lost. Until the music was found again in 2018, between the sheet music of her father's she was researching, and she decided to play it once again.

Each subsequent piece has its own story. *Yellowed Leaves* by Myaskovsky is like a hidden pearl that is rarely seen, shaped over time to develop a deep and mystical rhythm. The seven pieces each feel like stages one goes through, discovering something new that is both exciting and frightening in every one of them; the journey through a vast country in search of a lost piece of yourself.

A fearful fairy tale, by London based Russian composer Elena Firsova, was written for Helena in 2018. In search for mysticism and sound colour, she incorporates the sound of prophetic birds and menacing Russian church bells.

Prokofiev seems somehow more optimistic, energetic in any case. He is enchanted by fairy tales, they spark associations in him and subsequently in us, his audience. About *Tales of an old grandmother* he wrote: 'Some stories have almost faded in my memory, while others I am sure will stay with me forever'. Prokofiev's view on remembering is one of both melancholy and possibility.

The same is true of Janáček's *Pohádka*. His music is playful, hopeful and light at times, which serves as a counterpoint for equally poignant instances of drama, gravitas and desperation. As in most of Prokofiev's work, here Janacek imbues his music with a strong sense of history, culture and folk tales. In this case it is an epic poem by the Russian author Vasily Zhukovsky entitled The Tale of Tsar Berendyey. Helena plays the piece with Maya Fridman on cello. Together they embody this fruitful tension between hope and desperation.

An important mystical strand runs through Russian fairy tales, which is certainly also true for Alfred Schnittke. Schnittke and Helena's father knew each other well, further rooting his special place in Helena's own musical world. Together this means that on this album, the first movement of Schnittke's *Piano Sonata no. 1* represents Helena's most intimate connection to a deeper layer in music, reminding her of home. The movement builds up until the moment at 04:00, where after many chords, clusters, dissonance and misty atmosphere, a very clear chorale emerges like a Russian choir chanting with sadness and melancholy, religious, hopeful and in defeat all in one, from a church balcony in a small Russian town.

Before ending the album where it began, in the snow with Bagri's Winter Dance, Medtner's beautiful fairy tales could not be omitted. The lyrical, ephemeral first three pieces present us with dreamy landscapes, a Russia almost too good to be true. And so it is. *Fairy tale op. 20 no. 2* - subtitled 'Song or tale of the bell, but not about the bell' - is 'Minaccioso'. Menacing again. Bells again. A song that means one thing, and is about another, again.

There are no fairy tale endings. Not because everything has ended badly but because fairy tales don't end. They simply close a gateway between two realities that continue to exist in parallel. One's past, another country, different versions of the same piece, music lost and found, friends and family, in life and art. This album - of stories and a story in itself - is Helena's tribute, to fairy tales and her homeland.

Once upon a time there was a very inquisitive King who spent all his time eavesdropping at the window. There was also a merchant, who had three daughters, and one day they were talking to their father, and one said: "If only the King's bread-bearer would marry me!" The second one said: "If only the King's valet would cast his eyes upon me!" But the third said: "I want the King himself: I would bear him two sons and one daughter."

Now the King was listening to all this conversation; and after a few days he did exactly as they had wished: the eldest married the King's bread-bearer, the middle one the King's valet, but the youngest married the King himself.

The King married very happily, and after some time his Queen was about to bear him a child. He was sending for the midwife of the town, but the elder sisters asked him why he should; they would act as midwives. As soon as the Queen had born him a son, the midwives took him away and told the King his wife had born a pup; and they put the new-born babe into a box and threw it into a big pond in the King's garden.

At this the King was very angry, and wanted to have his wife blown to bits at the cannon's mouth; but — it so happened — some other princes were on a visit, and persuaded him to forgive a first offence. So the King pardoned her for the nonce, and gave her a second chance.

One year went by, and the Queen bore him another son, and the sisters again took it away, and told him she had born a kitten. The King was angry at first, this time he was sore enraged, and was agog to punish his wife, but once more he was won over.

So he gave her a third chance. This time the Queen bore a very beautiful daughter, and the sisters took it and told the King she had born an unheard-of monster.

Oh! there were no bounds to his fury now; he ordered the hangman in and bade him hang his wife on the spot; but once more some visiting princes overruled him and said: "Would it not be better to put an oratory up near the church and put her into it, and let every one who goes to Mass spit into her eyes?" So he did; but, so far from being spat upon by every passer-by, every one brought her fine loaves and pastries.

But, when her three children had been thrown into the pond in the King's garden, they were not drowned, for the King's gardener took them home and brought them up. They were fine children; you could see them growing up, not by years, but months, not by days, but by hours. The King's sons shot up, youths no men could imagine, guess, or draw, or paint; and the Tsarévna was such a beauty! Almost terribly beautiful! One day, when they were older, they asked the gardener to let them build themselves a little home behind the town. The gardener consented, and they erected a big, splendid house, and led a merry life in it. The brothers used to go hunting hares, and one day they went off and left their sister alone at home.

A visitor knocked at the door: the sister opened the door and saw an old hag, who said: "You have a pretty little place here; three things are lacking."

"What are they? I always thought we had everything!"

The hag replied: "You still need the Talking-Bird, the Singing-Tree, and the Water of Life."

And then the sister was left all alone once more; when her brothers came home, she said: "Brothers, we lack nothing save three things."

"What are they?"

"We haven't a Talking-Bird, a Singing-Tree, and the Water of Life!"

The elder brother said: "Sister, give me your blessing, and I'll go and discover you these marvels. If I die, or am killed, you will know by this knife dripping blood. There it is, stuck into the wall."

So he went, and wandered away, far, far away into the forest. At last he came to a gigantic oak-tree; and on the tree there was an old man sitting, whom he asked how he was to procure the "Talking-Bird, a Singing-Tree, and the Water of Life."

The old man replied: "Possible it is, but not easy; many go, but few return."

But the young man persisted and left the old man. The old man gave him a rolling-pin, and told him to let it roll on in front of him, and follow wherever it went. The pin rolled on, and after it walked the Prince: it rolled up to a steep hill, and was lost. Then the Prince went up the hill, went half-way up; and, as he went along, he heard a voice: "Hold him, seize him, grip him!" He looked round and was turned into stone.

That very same hour blood began to drip from the knife in the cottage, and the sister told the younger brother that the elder was dead.

So he answered: "Now I will go, sister mine, and capture the Talking-Bird, the Singing-Tree, and the Water of Life!"

So she blessed him, and he went on and on for very many weary miles, and met the old man on the tree, who gave him another rolling-pin: and the pin rolled up to the mountain; and both were lost, pin and Prince!

The sister waited for many years, but he never came back, and she thought he, too, must have died. So she set out to find the Talking-Bird, Singing-Tree, and Water of Life. She arrived at that same oak-tree, saw the old man sitting on it, greeted him, and shaved his head and brows, as she brought scissors and a mirror with her.

"Look," she said, "what a change it makes in you!"

He looked into the mirror: "Yes," he said; "I am quite a fine man now. I've sat here thirty years: never a soul cut my hair, you guessed my need."

Then she asked him: "Grandfather, how can I get the Talking-Bird, the Singing-Tree, and the Water of Life?"

He answered: "How can you get them? Cleverer folk than you have been after them, and they have all been lost."

But she persisted: "Please tell me!"

So he gave her another rolling-pin, and told her to follow it: she would hear cries of "Catch her: scotch her," but she must not look round, for fear of being turned into stone. "At the top you will see a well and the Talking-Bird. As you come back, you will see lofty stones standing upright; sprinkle them all with the Water of Life."

So on she went: the pin rolled on, far or near, long or short, it reached a steep mountain; and the girl climbed up and heard cries: "Where are you going? We shall kill you! We shall eat you up!"

But still she went on and on, reached the summit, and there she found a well and the Talking-Bird. She took it and asked it: "Tell me how to get the Singing-Tree and the Water of Life."

The Bird replied: "Go straight by this path."

She did, and came upon the Singing-Tree, and in it all sorts of birds were singing. She broke off a sprig, pulled up a water-lily, and put some of the Water of Life into the cup of the flower, and turned back homewards.

As she clomb downhill, she saw boulders standing upright, and sprinkled them with the Water of Life; and her brothers jumped up alive and said: "Oh, what a long sleep we have had!"

"Yes, my brothers, but for me you would have slept on for ever. And look here; I have got you the Talking-Bird, the Singing-Tree, and the Water of Life!"

The brothers were overjoyed, went home and planted the Singing-Tree in the garden; it overspread the whole garden, and all kinds of birds began singing. One day they were out hunting and the King met them by chance. He fell in love with the gay huntsmen, and invited them home. They said they would ask their sister, and come at once if she consented.

So they went back home. The sister met them and greeted them, and the brothers said: "Please, sister, may we go and dine with the King? He has asked us in."

She said "Yes," and they went. At the banquet, the King gave them the place of honour, and they begged he would honour them with a visit. Some days later the King went. They gave him a rich spread, and showed him the Singing-Tree and the Talking-Bird.

He was amazed and said: "I am the King, and have nothing as good!"

Then the King looked at them and said: "Who is your father?"

They said: "We do not know." But the Talking-Bird broke in and said: "They are your children."

Then the King looked at the maiden and wanted to marry her. Again the Talking-Bird said: "You may not; she is your daughter."

The King then saw how matters stood; was overjoyed; took them to live with him for ever. As to the two evil sisters, he had them shot; but his wife he released from the chapel, and took her to himself again, and they lived merrily on for many years of happiness.

This album is dedicated to composer Yuri Bagri.

I want to thank him for having written me a unique piano work when I was only seven years old. It meant more to me than I could ever have realised at the time, taught me about storytelling in music, and inspired me to record this album.

I also want to thank my mother Irina, who made the fairy tale of my life possible, and nurtures me with music until the day of today.

Helena Basilova



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CREDITS

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EQUIPMENT

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amplifiers	Hegel H30
cabling	Furutech custom microphone cables Furutech LineFlux XLR Furutech NanoFluc NCF Furutech FS-a36
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TRPTK proudly uses Sonodore microphones, KEF loudspeakers, Hegel amplification, Merging Technologies AD/DA conversion, Furutech cabling and power conditioning, and JCAT network equipment at their recording and mastering facilities, carefully optimized by Acoustic Matters.

All recordings are done in DXD (352.8 kHz 32 bits) in immersive 5.1-channel surround sound, and all masters are generated from the original DXD Studio Master, without any dynamic compression or limiting of the signal. In both stereo and surround sound, our aim is to truly create an immersive experience.

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