

both of which gently push the boundaries of standard organ music. Like most organists, Decker has probably done her share of improvisation, and these works balance the freedom of spontaneous creation with the clear direction of a formal road map.

One wishes that would be the case in *Flores del desierto* (1998), a trio of tangos written in honour of Piazzolla. But unlike Decker's *Río*, where the dance form is thoroughly digested, *Flores* wears its inspiration on its sleeve. Piazzolla may have made the tango glide gracefully from the dance hall to the concert hall but the distance from the bordello (where the form first blossomed) to the cathedral (where this performance was recorded) is a bit harder to negotiate.

Although the pipe organ may share some family ties to the bandoneón (the "tango accordion"), it remains a different animal entirely. As a rhythmic instrument it brings to mind the dancing elephants in *Fantasia*. Perhaps, like the instrument itself, the organ tradition is too weighty to take such large steps. **Ken Smith**

## Petrova

'Enchanted Rhythms – Cello Music from Bulgaria'  
Cello Sonatas – No 1; No 2.  
Passacaglia on a Traditional Bulgarian Melody.  
Five Ancient Bulgarian Portraits  
Kalin Ivanov *vs* Elena Antimova *pf*  
MSR Classics © MS1156 (65' • DDD)

**Native elements abound in this lovely music from a gifted young composer**



I confess that the unpromising and somewhat misleading title "Enchanted Rhythms – Cello Music from Bulgaria" did not set my pulse racing. In fact this collection of works by the talented young composer Roumi Petrova is a real find and a very pleasant surprise.

Like her fellow Bulgarian cellist Kalin Ivanov, for whom all of these works were written, Petrova currently lives in New York. The 36-year-old composer is on the staff of the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music, having settled in the US after a professional sojourn in South Africa. The pungent folk flavour, flattened harmonics and rhythmic insistence of Petrova's native land are clearly palpable in all these works, written from 1996 to 2005. Yet the native elements are wielded with a fine-tipped brush, and Petrova's own melodic turns, fluent balancing of lines and structural economy are very impressive.

Petrova wrote her *Passacaglia* in response to Ivanov's request for a work intended for New York's Bulgarian community. The five-part work for cello and piano mines a sombre theme based on the song "Hubava si moia goro", with its origins unmistakable in the febrile rustic colour. Though the extremely close balance makes quiet playing difficult, Ivanov brings a

finely differentiated array of expression to this music, with an array of offbeat effects from *col legno* raps to what sounds like Ivanov being called upon to whistle in the syncopated central *allegro*. Ivanov produces a big, rich tone, his idiomatic fruity timbre and astringent edge bringing exciting bravura to the tearaway coda.

Petrova's experience as an expatriate artist in a new country is reflected in her Cello Sonata No 1, subtitled *On the Road*. The opening "Journey" is a quickish *allegro* with an indelible rising theme that stays in the memory, Petrova displaying deft and inventive writing for piano as well as cello. The concluding Rondo has a strong flavour of the *dumka*, with frequent tempo gear-shifts; there's a Bartókian cast to the emphatic, stamping cross-rhythms, which build up a considerable head of steam, yet the most individual section is the central movement. Originally intended as a lullaby, it was recast as an elegy following the death of Kalin's father. The stark, evocative piano chords immediately set the mood, with low, low cello notes – almost like a double-bass – set against tolling piano accompaniment. Petrova's writing is compelling and beautifully crafted, artfully blending the folk essence and elegiac inspiration, as in the mysterious middle section with its spare, hushed *pizzicati*; Ivanov's dark, rich timbre is eminently well suited to the dirge-like expression and the personal connection is unmistakable, with an extraordinary sense of solace and hard-won transcendence at the coda, magnificently played by Ivanov and Antimova.

The Second Cello Sonata, composed just last year, is cast in a lighter vein but still shot through with local influences. The chromatic opening is playful, with a gamboling main theme that sticks in the memory. The central "Lullaby", initially intended for the First Sonata, floats a touching, wistful melody played with utmost tenderness, setting the scene for a driving finale with a strong feel of gypsy dance.

Possibly the most impressive work here is Petrova's *Five Ancient Bulgarian Portraits*. The number of memorable works written in recent years for solo cello is not expansive but Petrova's delightful, ear-catching miniatures deserve to be added to that concise canon, gratefully written for the instrument and hugely communicative. "Three Maidens" is yearning and lightly virtuosic with a strong feel of folksong, followed by "Gypsy Man with Dancing Bear", an aptly driven *moto perpetuo*. "Women at Harvest" offers drone-like writing with a leaping melody in its middle section, followed by "Monk and his Servant", atmospheric and wryly satirical. The "Rebeck Player" finale conveys the fizzing bravura of that folk instrument, and Ivanov alternates bristling virtuosity and rich lyric lines in a *tour de force*.

The close creative relationship between Petrova and Ivanov is manifest in these committed performances and Elena Antimova's keyboard work is on the same elevated level. Cellists looking

for new recital material are strongly urged to investigate these works, as are all with open ears who will find in Roumi Petrova an intriguing, distinctive and greatly gifted new voice on the music scene. **Lawrence A Johnson**