



A TRIBUTE TO MIKHAIL VYSOTSKY

1791-1837

JOHN SCHNEIDERMAN &
OLEG TIMOFEYEV

SEVEN-STRING GUITARS

Prima
CLASSIC

A TRIBUTE TO MIKHAIL VYSOTSKY (1791–1837)

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1.	Along the Street/I Walked on Flowers	04:22	7.	I Love Pear in the Garden	05:13
2.	Show Yourself the Clear Moon	05:12	8.	Last Night I Was at the Post	07:05
3.	Mother, I Have a Headache	05:01	9.	I Used to Know No Worries	07:31
4.	Variations on a Tyrolean Theme	06:05	10.	Akh, What is My Heart Doing	08:50
5.	The Cossack Went Beyond the Danube	05:36	11.	My Strip of Land	05:53
6.	I Loved Rose More Than Any Other Flower	06:18	12.	In the Valley (Arr. by Oleg Timofeyev)	07:27

Total time: 74:38

(Nos. 1–8 performed by John Schneiderman, Nos. 9–12 by Oleg Timofeyev)

A TRIBUTE TO MIKHAIL VYSOTSKY

(1791–1837)

Today we are witnessing the slow yet inevitable revival of the seven-string guitar tradition, both in Russia and in the West. Due to the ease with which one can access online archives, the treasury of scores from the first half of the 19th century is just a couple of clicks away from any interested guitarist. Yet, in order to understand this original layer of musical culture in its complexity one needs to learn more about the Russian society of that time.

No matter how celebrated was this or that artist in the early-19th-century Russia, only those of noble birth were sufficiently documented. Mikhail Vysotsky was of humble birth, and although he was a true celebrity of his epoch, most of the relevant biographical information comes from anecdotes and memoirs. It is important to remember that more often than not those are of questionable reliability. Vysotsky's artistic glory turned him into a living Muscovite legend, and the adoration of him as a player, composer, and improviser was spread across the broad social strata which included university

students, merchants, military officers, and Roma ("Gypsies"), among others.

Vysotsky grew up as a serf, although his father was not a simple peasant but rather a steward at the estate of a progressive landlord of the time, Mikhail Kheraskov. According to some sources, Kheraskov was Vysotsky's godfather, and this is why the latter was also named Mikhail. Supposedly, Kheraskov's estate was bubbling with cultural life, often hosting the promising young writers and musicians. It was in that liberal milieu that Vysotsky encountered an excellent guitarist-composer, Semion Aksionov. Once we compare their scores (see, for example, the last item on this album), Aksionov's influence on the young Vysotsky is rather self-evident. Still, it is debatable whether or not the young boy took systematic music lessons from his senior fellow musician, or whether young Misha Vysotsky, the natural as he was, got inspired for life after only one or two encounters with Aksionov.

Vysotsky was manumitted shortly after his landlord's death in 1807. During the Napoleonic invasion of 1812 he was already a free man living in Moscow, the city which he apparently never left. His arrival in Moscow coincided with the explosion of fashion for the seven-string guitar that was introduced by the guitarists of the previous generation, such as Joseph Kamensky, Vasily Alferiev, and Andrei Sychra. Due to his extraordinary musical gift, Mikhail Vysotsky was in demand as a performer and teacher. Most of his performing activities must have taken place in informal settings among the merchants, students, and Gypsy (Romani) choirs. As a teacher he was extremely popular, although the evidence suggests that he was not a very committed pedagogue. Disorganized and impractical in daily life, Vysotsky drank himself to death by 1837.

Vysotsky started publishing guitar music as early as 1812, but the bulk of his music saw the light of day in the mid-1830s. Similar to his teaching habits, Vysotsky did not show much care and neatness in his publications, and most of them are full of obvious mistakes or ambiguities. Altogether, there are about a hundred published compositions: preludes, fantasias, dances, transcriptions of piano music and opera arias, and

variation sets. A few more survive in manuscript form in archives across Russia. After a careful examination of his entire output, one is left with the impression that this original composer reached the peak of his ingenuity in his variation sets on Russian folksongs, the only genre that is presented in this album.

Generally speaking, the Russian folksongs split into two main categories: the upbeat dance songs and the drawn-out dragging songs (*protiazhnye*). As we will see presently, certain songs are somewhere in-between in terms of their genre or character.

Vysotsky is not the only one who wrote variations Russian folksongs, but there is little doubt that he was head and shoulders above his colleagues in this genre. It is tempting to think that due to his low-class origin, Vysotsky was closer to the country folk and therefore had special insights into the peasant songs. However, according to many accounts of foreign visitors, Russia of that time was a place of constant singing everywhere. Coachmen in carriages, rowers in boats, women washing the laundry—everybody was singing in villages, towns, and cities. These folksongs became a subject of serious study at the end of the 18th

century, and most guitarists–composers found their themes not out in the street or riverside, but in published collections.

In this aspect, Mikhail Vysotsky was not different from his other colleagues. But did he have more familiarity with the songs than his high–society peers, both in terms of melodies and lyrics? To what extent can we consider his elaborate variations as a musical response to the songs’ literary narratives? To help the listeners come up with their own answers, I shall provide a general synopsis of the lyrics of each song.

The first item on the program, **Along the Street (Track 1)**, is one of the most celebrated Russian dance songs of all time. It is enough to mention, for example, that the great Spaniard Fernando Sor included variations on it in his guitar duet *Souvenir de Russie*. In addition, it is also the very tune to which Natasha Rostova performs her famous “Russian dance” in Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. The plot of this song can be described as “a courtship in a rural setting”: a young maiden is walking to a well to get water, while a lad is courting her and offers his company. She tells him that her father is standing by the gate and is calling her to weed out the beds of onion and garlic. It

is clear from the lyrics that she is not against courting in principle.

Unlike the first song on the program, **Show Yourself, the Clear Moon (Track 2)** is a dance song of literary origin: its lyrics were written by Sergei Glinka (1776–1847) who tried to imitate folk poetry here. It is sung from the perspective of maiden who asks the moon to show her beloved the path to her house. The beloved is described as particularly sweet because one of his presents to the speaker of the poem was a pair of warm mittens.

Mother, I Have a Headache (Track 3) is a slow song that deals with the hardship awaiting a promiscuous woman who has a cruel and jealous husband. From the woman’s complaint to her mother, we learn that she was caught cheating on her husband and severely beaten. Desperate, she ran to her father-in-law, but that brute only beat her some more. At the end, she came to her mother, complaining that everything hurts but that she still wants to have fun.

Tyrolean choirs were popular in Russia of the early 1800s, and there were several Tyrolean songs that were particularly liked by the Russian guitarists. The seven–

string guitar is tuned DGBdgbd', and by combining the stopped strings with the open ones one can reach an effect similar to yodeling. Vysotsky's variations on a **Tyrolean Theme (Track 4)** is a perfect example of such a sub-genre.

Ukrainian songs and dances were also considered exotic during Vysotsky's times. Among them, **The Cossack Went Beyond the Danube (Track 5)** was arguably the best-known one, to the extent that many Western composers—including Beethoven!—wrote virtuosic variations on it. The lyrics here are a dialogue between a Cossack who is taking off to a war, and his girlfriend who is in distress and does not want to let him go.

The lyrics of the next song, **I Loved Rose More Than Any Other Flower (Track 6)** come from a 1795 poem by Ivan Dmitriev, a little-known yet productive Russian poet of the pre-Pushkin generation. From the title alone the reader may expect an amorous allegory, but the poem actually is nothing but a moralistic fable. The rose in the poem is charming and pleasant, but one day, defying all botanical laws, it gets cross-bred with the sagebrush (*artemisia absinthium*). The rose

neither dies nor wilts, it still looks good, but alas, its lovely aroma is forever gone. The anonymous musical theme is very Western in its chorale-like character, a perfect starting point for Vysotsky's melodic mastery.

By contrast, **I Love Pear in the Garden (Track 7)** is a genuine peasant song that started appearing in published collections already at the end of the 18th century. Similar to many Russian song titles, the garden motive in the first line is misleading. This is a light, upbeat game-song on the timeless topic: whom will a maiden choose for her husband? She turns down a peasant, she is not happy with a landlord either, but for some reason she chooses the church clerk: "he will be writing papers, I will be counting the money." This tongue-in-cheek plot is contrasted by Vysotsky's exquisite melodic lyricism in his variations. Especially stunning is his last variation in which the guitarist uniquely uses the open strings of the guitar achieving a tremolo-like sonority, the effect that was adapted by Vysotsky's younger contemporaries.

Last Night I Was at the Post (Track 8) is another *protiazhnaia* (dragging song), but its plot has a surprising optimistic if not mysterious twist. Because of the country's enormous physical size, there was a well-

developed system of postal stations in Russia, or the places where coachmen could give passengers a rest and change the horses. The same system was used to deliver mail. In the narrative of the song, the first-person protagonist goes to such a station and receives a letter from presumably his former lover. This lover writes that she is sick and barely alive. Crying, our hero rushes to her house, but she jumps out of bed completely healthy. This is where the narrative ends, leaving the listener of Vysotsky's variations to contemplate: is this grave, expressive music also supposed to be tongue-in-cheek?

The author of the lyrics **I Used to Know No Worries (Track 9)** is Aleksei Merzliakov (1776–1830), another pre-Pushkin poet trying to write in a folk idiom. This plot is utterly transparent: the first-person protagonist is a maiden who reflects that the time to fall in love has come for her. She even responds to the reproaching adults surrounding her, saying that they, too, used to be of the same age at some point. In her argument with such people, she says: “as you cannot live without the sun, I cannot live without my beloved!” As a piece of music, this variation set is full of expressive beauty. It opens with a strong, emotional introduction, and

it closes with a virtuoso variation, as if displaying the gamut of feelings of our tormented protagonist.

Akh, What is My Heart Doing (Track 10) presents a peculiar case. The subject matter of this song is similar to that of the previous one, only placed chronologically later: now the female protagonist is not just suffering from love, but is tormented by jealousy. “If you fell in love with another one,— the narrator asks, — how is she better than me? Perhaps she lives closer, and visits you more often? Or perhaps her kisses are sweeter than mine?” In the collection of folksongs published by Lvov and Prach, the song **Akh, What is My Heart Doing** is classified as a *protiazhnaia* (dragging song) and is assigned the tempo Andante. However, Vysotsky's published version of this set bears the tempo Moderato. In preparation of this recording, I used a manuscript version that came from the Glinka Museum of Musical Culture in Moscow. To one's surprise, the tempo there is Allegretto. In addition, in the manuscript version the song had an Introduction, a Coda, and a couple more variations than in the printed version, including a variation in parallel minor. One is left wondering, was the composer even aware of the narrative's bitter subject?

My Strip of Land (Track 11) is a genuine peasant *protiazhnaiia* (slow song) probably of more ancient origin than other songs on this album. To the amusement of foreign visitors, the agriculture commune in 19th-century Russia was extremely archaic. In the center of the village there were the peasants' dwellings, and the individual strips of land were running outwards like the sun's rays. The peasants did not own the land, so every year it was decided at a village meeting who would be responsible for which strip. The speaker of the lyrics is a woman, whose strip was not plowed this year and now it is covered with unwelcome bushes and trees. The woman goes to pick mushrooms instead, and sees someone—but we are not given an unambiguous sense, whom in particular. In some regions of Russia this is a ritual song, sung in slow round dances, particularly for the celebration of the Kupala Night (the summer solstice).

Our album is concluded with the magnificent set of variations on **In the Valley (Track 12)**. The lyrics of this song (also by A. Merzliakov) were published in 1811 and became extremely popular. The author of the original melody is unknown, although there is a plethora of songs from about that time showing very similar melodic and harmonic features, and some of them are attributed to

known composers. In Merzliakov's poem, a lonely young fellow is compared to a lonely oak tree growing in a valley. His beloved has died, and none of the worldly achievements, riches, or respect in the society can replace her. This particular song became a ground for an unannounced competition between the three giants of seven-string guitar in Russia: Andrei Sychra, Semion Aksionov, and Mikhail Vysotsky. Sychra's version is in B Minor, it is very technically developed, and has been generally considered the winner. Aksionov's version is in D Minor, it is much more modest than Sychra's, but it was published 12 years prior to Sychra's version. Vysotsky's published version seems to develop Aksionov's ideas, starting from the choice of key (also D Minor). For this album, however, I combine the printed version of the piece with a version from a Vysotsky manuscript found in the State Historical Museum in Moscow. Although not as flashy as Sychra's, Vysotsky's take on **In the Valley** has many expressive and lyrical moments.

Oleg Timofeyev

Iowa City, Iowa, United States of America,
September 2024

OLEG TIMOFEYEV

Oleg Timofeyev is a musicologist, guitarist, composer, documentary film director, and the world authority on the Russian seven-string guitar tradition. Dr. Timofeyev holds an M.A. in Early Music Performance from the University of Southern California and a Ph.D. from Duke University. The recipient of two IREX Fellowships, two Fulbright Research and Teaching Fellowships, he has won the coveted Noah Greenberg Award for his albums “Music of Russian Princesses at the Court of Catherine the Great.” In addition, he has recorded more than twenty solo and ensemble recordings featuring the music for the Russian seven-string guitar, to critical acclaim worldwide. Dr. Oleg Timofeyev has taught at universities and conservatoires in the US, Russia, and Ukraine. In addition to a book on Russian-Romani guitar playing (Centerstream, 2018) and a critical edition of collected works by Matvei Pavlov-Azancheev (with Stefan Wester, DGA Editions, 2020), Timofeyev recently published the historically first monograph on the seven-string guitar in Russia (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023).



JOHN SCHNEIDERMAN

“Obviously what we’re dealing with here is extreme virtuosity.”

(John Schneider, KPFK)

“Schneiderman’s performance was dazzling. His fluent, unassuming virtuosity was entirely at the service of the music; and the dizzying gigue which closed the work left this listener breathless.”

(Times Colonist, Victoria, BC)

“Few indeed are those who show such versatility and accomplishment on such a range of instruments as does John Schneiderman. He has uncovered an astonishing range of neglected repertoire and brought these seemingly dusty pages to life in creative and refreshing ways. John Schneiderman is an important figure in American plucked string history...a “multiple threat” performer, researcher and pedagogue at the highest level...”

(Eliot Fisk)

Critically acclaimed virtuoso of plucked instruments since age nine, **John Schneiderman** specializes in the performance practice and repertoire of eighteenth-century lutes and nineteenth-century guitars. Based in California, Mr. Schneiderman is in demand as a soloist and chamber musician collaborating on recordings and performances throughout North America.

Beginning his performance career as a banjo, guitar, bass and fiddle player, the young Schneiderman was a familiar face on the stages of bluegrass and folk festivals throughout California. Mr. Schneiderman studied with British guitar pedagogue and author Frederick Noad, and continued his studies at the Schola Cantorum in Basel, Switzerland, with the great modern pioneer of the baroque lute, Eugen Dombois. Mr. Dombois’ precise and detailed approach to the repertoire continues notably to influence Schneiderman’s interpretations today.

He is a member of *Galanterie*, *The Czar's Guitars*, *Les Deux Amis*, and the *Schneiderman-Yamaya Duo*. He has performed with the Los Angeles Opera, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Los Angeles Master Chorale, Los Angeles Baroque Orchestra, Musica Angelica, Seattle Baroque, Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, Chanticleer, Musica Pacifica, El Mundo and the American Bach Soloists. His extensive discography, much of it rarely or never before recorded lute and guitar music, includes albums on the Titanic, AudioQuest, Centaur, VGo, Dorian Sono Luminus, Brilliant Classics, Profil:Edition Günter Hänssler, and Hänssler Classic labels. Mr. Schneiderman is currently on the faculties of the University of California, Irvine and Claremont Graduate University, and has been on the faculties of Irvine Valley College, Orange Coast College, California State University, Long Beach and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

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CREDITS

Tracks 1–8:

Performed by John Schneiderman

Recording Engineer: Hideki Yamaya

Recording Studio: The Gustlin House

Recorded March 2022, Santa Ana, California

Guitar: Jan Tulacek, Dobříš, Czech Republic, 2019, after Johann Gottfried Scherzer, Wien, 1858

Tracks 9–12:

Performed by Oleg Timofeyev

Recording Engineer: Hideki Yamaya

Recording Studio: IARMAC

Recorded December 2023, Iowa City, Iowa

Guitar: Johann Gottfried Scherzer, Wien, ca. 1860

Strings: D'Addario

All tracks mastered by Edgardo Vertanessian

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