MILEN KIROV SPATIUM

Milen Kirov, piano



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- 2. Bulgarian Stride 5:26
- 3. Intermezzo I Raindrops 06:43
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TOTAL 70:34

Milen Kirov, piano

SPATIUM

Notes by John Henken

Music in the moment is the most ephemeral of arts. But those intangible vibrations compensate with remarkable shaping and staying power. They play with our perception of time and space, evoke memories, inspire visions, connect people and places, enlarge both our internal and external awareness, and linger long in heart and mind.

That may be an overly grand introduction for an album that reminds us at every moment of music's more primal pleasures of kinetic rhythms and ear charming tunes. But the stunning hybridity of Milen Kirov's music, with its complex, utterly idiosyncratic mix of multiple cultures past and present, provokes big thoughts as readily as it does tapping toes and smiling humming. (It also reminds us how hard it is to write about music – but great fun to try!)

"Spatium" is the Latin word for "space," which suggests the cosmos as well as geographical, personal, and chronological distances. "I liked the depth of its meaning," Milen says, "the multifaceted connotations that it evokes, and how it represents not only the feel and spirit of the pieces on the album, but also the distances between the land of my birth and the land of my current home, and between the three music traditions that find common ground in my work — Bulgarian, Western European "classical", and American blues and jazz."

Consider how Bulgarian modes and metres bump so flirtatiously into blues and jazz in so many of these pieces. The first two titles almost say it all: "Back to Bulgaria" and "Bulgarian Stride." The opener is sheer exuberance from 2005; the second a sly, gear-shifting cross-cultural take written in 2017. Later, "Back to Bulgaria" finds an up-tempo dance partner in "Take 7," also from 2005. "Thracian Blues" is a newer and more expansive treatment of Milen's Bulgarian/jazz "fusionary" ideas: three themes (the framing ones related), two pianos (one pianist!), and extended improvs. The astonishing thing about these pieces is how Milen maintains the integrity of his disparate traditions, integrating them into something strong and personal rather than dissolving them into a stylistically neutered wash.

Milen loves the music of Brahms, particularly the solo piano character pieces. He had their artful soul in mind when he labeled four of his newest pieces "Intermezzo". He is not the only one who will get vivid images of sprightly summer rain from the first one ("Raindrops"). Intermezzo II is a more solemn piece with an antique, bardic feel, suggesting the protecting warriors of Bulgarian legends. The third Intermezzo ("Spatium") is based on a 2001 composition for trumpet and piano called "Distance," and probes the title concept of this album in a liquid A-B-A ballad. (It is also fully notated, with no improvisation.) Intermezzo IV returns us to the dance floor with a sparkling Bulgarian/Latin mix.

The title of "Tonus Peregrinus" is another nod to Milen's thorough grounding in Western classical music. This "wandering tone" refers to an oddity of Gregorian psalm chanting, and so is a perfect symbol for an "outsider" music that wanders in cultural space. There is nothing medieval about Milen's atonal sonic chiaroscuro, however, but the title.

In addition to the "Spatium" Intermezzo, there are two other fully notated pieces on this album, indicating the range of his classical craftsmanship. "Pharos" was composed in 2012, while he was finishing his doctorate at the California Institute for the Arts. "It is entitled 'Lighthouse' because when I play it, I feel like I am on a ship in a thick fog, and as we are slowly moving, a distant light from a lighthouse appears and guides us closer to the shore, and we see more and more details from the coastline. But inevitably we lose sight of the

llight and get lost in the fog again." Also from 2012 is "The Shepherd and the Mountain", which uses a traditional mode and metre evoking the haunting sound of the kaval (a Bulgarian shepherd's flute). "When I was writing it, I was thinking of the Rhodope mountains near my hometown of Plovdiv," Milen says. "That is probably my favorite place in the world. It is an ancient mountain range with a lot of history and legends (the mountain of Orpheus, according to one) and it inspires some of my more melancholic and epic music."

There are also two completely improvised pieces on the album, and few improvisers are as architectural in their spontaneous creations, though Kirov can also groove and riff with the best. "For Grandma" is dedicated to the memory of his maternal grandmother, who died in May, 2017. A simple elegiac melody, born of his sorrow, allows Milen to give full range to his emotions when performing it, without further constraints. "Time" is another piece utilizing a setup with two pianos, one of them prepared with a rubber window seal. It is improvised over four chords and a relentlessly ticking ostinato pattern on the prepared piano, exploring our experiences of time in an arresting musical essay suggesting both mortality and eternity.

SPATIUM Notes by Milen Kirov

The title of this collection of pieces – some written specifically for the album, some older ones – comes from "Distance", a composition I wrote in 2001 for trumpet and piano. I re-imagined and reworked the piece for solo piano in 2017 and decided to use the Latin word spatium, because besides suggesting the distance between two geographical points or two people, it also means "space" (the English word comes from spatium), cosmos, an interval of time... I liked the depth of its meaning, the multifaceted connotations that it evokes, and how it represents not only the feel and spirit of the pieces on the album, but also the distances between the land of my birth and the land of my current home, and between the three music traditions that find common ground in my work – Bulgarian, Western European "classical", and American blues and jazz.

Back to Bulgaria – This is one of my most performed and beloved compositions. I wrote it in one sitting in the Summer of 2005, as I was excited to be flying back to Bulgaria for a visit for the first time in three years. I decided to include it in the album as a piece that bridges in a very strong way jazz and blues with Bulgarian music.

Bulgarian Stride — I wanted to write a slower stride piece that has a bluesy feel but uses a bit unusual harmonic structure. The introduction is quite chromatic, while the rest of the piece, in A-B-A form, is based on one of the modes of the octatonic scale. There is an extended improvised "solo", over the harmonic progression of the piece. The title alludes to the ornaments found in Bulgarian traditional music but also to the difficult history of the country and the people — sometimes moving forward slowly but steadily, sometimes with pauses or little back tracking, sometimes with big strides in a fast tempo, but always retaining some humor even in the dark passages.

Intermezzo I, "Raindrops" – As an avid lover of Brahms' music, I am especially drawn to his shorter solo piano character pieces such as intermezzos, capriccios, ballads, rhapsodies... I find them to be packed with much character, soul, substance, and compositional ingenuity, despite their brevity. Some of the pieces I was composing for this album reminded me of the spirit of those Brahms pieces, and this gave me the impulse to group them under the title Intermezzi.

Anytime I play Intermezzo 1, I get very vivid images of summer rain from my childhood in Bulgaria. The type of rain that comes suddenly, but not angrily. Just a happy rain, with the sun still shining through the clouds. Because these images and associations are so strong, I decided to add the word "Raindrops" to the title.

The piece is a simple dance-like melody in binary form in 5/8 over an ostinato pattern. There is a bridge that connects the different improvised sections and the last time the bridge is played, it extends into a hemiola section where one hand is in 5/8, the other in 4/8, and reaches a climax in the very high register of the piano, before the recap of the melody comes back in.

Pharos ("Lighthouse") — This piece has a meter of 7/8 (3+2+2) and is a sort of harmonic tapestry woven entirely from the pitches of Karjagar maqam (a mode found in the music of the Middle East and Balkans) in D. It is entitled "Lighthouse" because when I play it or listen to it, I feel like I am on a ship in a thick fog, and as we are slowly moving, a light from a lighthouse appears and guides us closer to the shore, and we see more and more details from the coastline. But inevitably we lose sight of the light and get lost in the fog again. This piece was written in 2012, while I was finishing my doctorate at CalArts. It is one of the three compositions on the album that are completely notated with no improvisations.

Intermezzo II – Based mostly on D Dorian, this piece has an ancient character, a certain feel that makes me think of the legends of great warriors protecting Bulgaria through the centuries. The meter is 8/8 (3+2+3), used in music from Southwestern Bulgaria, a region of turbulent history and proud, brave people who have fought many a battle for their lives

and freedom. It has a simple binary form with an improvised introduction and extended improvised section in the middle.

For Grandma – This piece is dedicated to the memory of my maternal grandma Jena, who passed away on May 4, 2017. I have plenty of memories of her and the summers I spent with her and my grandfather in their village Guslar in Dobrudja (Northeastern Bulgaria). After her passing, I wanted to write something in her honor, and this simple melody came to me. I did not want to write anything down, I just wanted to give full rein to the emotions I feel when performing and thinking of her. It is a deeply emotional piece for me, and because of this, I rarely perform it live.

Take 7 – This is a piece in 7/8 that I wrote back in 2005. I recorded it once with percussion but always wanted to record it solo. It adds some energy and dance character to the album, with its up-tempo and vaguely Latin-sounding groove. But at the same time, it keeps the album's feel of spaciousness, timelessness, and connection between multiple cultures and traditions.

Tonus Peregrinus (Wandering Tone) – Also known as the ninth tone, the Tonus Peregrinus is a reciting tone in Gregorian chant. When I came across its name and translation in an anthology of Western music, it made me think how my own music wanders in the space between American, Western, and Eastern European cultures, between old and new, between notated and improvised. I also liked the fact that this church mode was an "outsider", not fitting in the norms and group of the original eighth modes.

The piece itself is atonal, aleatoric, and the most abstract composition of the entire album. It is based on two layers — a harmonic layer played in the extreme low and high range of the piano and held with the sostenuto pedal, and a melodic layer played in the middle. The thematic and harmonic material is based on fourths. Slowly both layers start growing and merging towards each other until the sostenuto chords reach the middle of the keyboard, and the melodic layer has split into two, played by both hands on both sides of the middle harmonies. And then the process of inching slowly back towards their original places and structures begins, but this time the melodic layers are improvised.

Intermezzo III, "Spatium" – As I mentioned at the beginning, this piece is based on a free-flowing, almost "jazz ballad-like" composition for trumpet and piano called "Distance". I always liked the chromaticism of the original piece, the unexpected use of some functional harmonies, the mood... So I decided to rewrite it for the album, as I tried to tap into the deeper meaning of the word "distance". Completely notated, it has a ternary form, where B is a bit more energetic and flowing, while the surrounding A sections are freer in tempo

and interpretation - more sparse, almost pointillistic.

Intermezzo N – This is a fun little up-tempo piece in Mixolydian, with an A section in 11/8 and B section in 7/8. It has a bit of the character of Bulgarian dances with faster tempo and fun ornamentation. Here, I allude to a Latin samba with some figures in the left hand, and with a montuno-like rhythm in the improvised solo.

The Shepherd and the Mountain – Utilizing the traditional Karjagar maqam mode and a 3+2+2 (7/8) rhythmic pattern, this piece is a simple elegiac melody evoking the nature and ornamentation of the Bulgarian kaval (shepherd's flute), accompanied by a descending harmonic progression. Composed in 2012, this is the third of the completely notated pieces on this album. When I was writing it, I was thinking of the Rhodope mountains near my hometown of Plovdiv. It is probably my favorite place in the world. It is an ancient mountain range with a lot of history and legends (according to legend, this is the mountain of Orpheus) and it inspires some of my more melancholic and epic music.

Thracian Blues – I had written a piece for one pianist on two pianos (one prepared), called "Vortex", and in 2012 wanted to play around more with the different sound of each piano. I wanted a piece that is fun, improvised, with a bluesier, funkier sound but based on Bulgarian rhythms. I came up with a little melody on the spot and improvised over it. Since I was born in the Thracian valley, known for up-tempo and exciting dances, I decided to call it "Thracian Blues".

When I started planning the album and decided to include pieces for one pianist and two pianos, I thought of the original "Thracian Blues", which was never written down. I decided to create a new one – with the same spirit, but with three brand new melodies. The first one is in 11/8 with a brighter, bluesier sound, and the second is in 7/8 in the mode of D Hijas – a darker sound with an augmented second between the 2nd and 3rd degrees. The third theme is a version of the first, but now played in 7/8 and with some small pitch changes. There are large improvised sections between each theme.

Time – This is another piece utilizing the setup with two pianos, one of them prepared with a rubber window seal. It is based on a progression of four chords and is entirely improvised. I wanted to create an open, more atmospheric sound, with an underlying ostinato pattern on the prepared piano – like a clock, measuring seconds and minutes, not evenly, but in 7/8. I wanted to close out the Spatium cycle with a composition that raises questions about the phenomena of time, the linearity of it, the depth, the cyclical nature, about our perception of time, space time, and all other aspects and definitions of this fourth dimension.

Dr. Milen Kirov

Pianist / Composer / Producer / Educator

Described as a "pianist with superhuman coordination", Dr. Milen Kirov is an awardwinning Bulgarian-American performer, composer, and educator with an inimitable artistic voice and celebrated creative output. His career redefines the role of the performercomposer in 21st century by transcending genres, labels, and artistic boundaries. Combining his Bulgarian music heritage and concert pianist background with contemporary composition, jazz, world music, and improvisation, Dr. Kirov has carved a thriving career as a unique and respected artist.

Milen Kirov has won awards from the Bulgarian National Radio Composition Competition; Bulgarian National Music Competition "Sv. Obretenov"; MTNA Performance Competition; Reno Chamber Orchestra Concerto Competition; Liberace Scholarship Competition; J. Huntzinger Concerto Competition, and has received numerous grants and commissions from organizations such as the American Music Center and Montecito Music Festival among others. In June of 2015 Dr. Kirov was awarded a Certificate of Congressional Recognition by the United States Congress for his work as a director of an international music ensemble, and for "showcasing Bulgarian culture and continuing Los Angeles' tradition of multiculturalism", Milen has performed throughout Europe and North America and has written and recorded music for several films including "Human Error" — a Robert M. Young film, official selection of the 2004 Sundance Film Festival; "A Cigar At the Beach" — an award-winning film by Triskalion Entertainment, and "Woody Allen: A Documentary" directed by Emmy-winning filmmaker Robert Weide, part of the celebrated PBS' American Masters series.

As an artist and producer, Dr. Kirov has released 4 albums and several singles as a soloist and bandleader, and has appeared as a guest artist on numerous other records on labels such as Sony BMG, MRi, and A.i. Music. Milen's compositions and performances have been featured on dozens of radio and TV stations on four continents. Some of the diverse artists he has performed and/or recorded with include Perry Farrell, Ellis Hall, Miroslav Tadic, Dragomir Yosifov, Steve Ferrone, Mike Keneally, John Bergamo, Theodosii Spassov, Money Mark, and James Gadson, among others. Dr. Kirov is also known as a keyboardist who utilizes a wide range of acoustic, analog, and digital keyboard instruments such as harpsichord, pipe organ, accordion, Hammond organ, Fender Rhodes piano, and synthesizers.

Born in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, in a family of musicians, Milen Kirov started playing the piano at age four and attended High School of Music "D. Petkov" and Academy of Music, Dance,

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