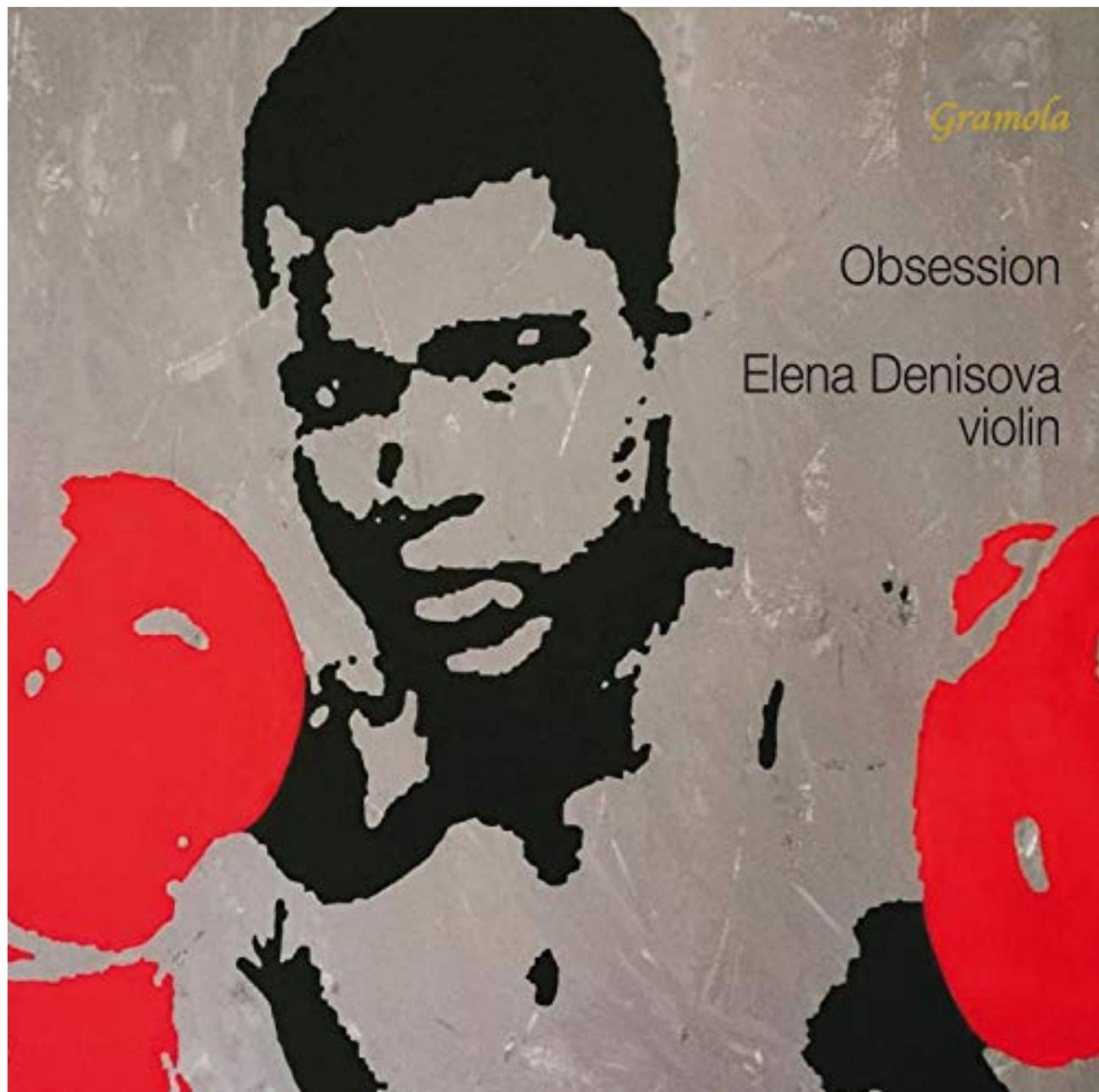


OBSESSION • Elena Denisova (vn) • GRAMOLA 99191
(70:19)



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Moscow-born (1963) violinist Elena Denisova has a slightly larger presence on record than her scant entries in the *Fanfare* Archive might lead one to believe. Ever an explorer of the music of little-known Russian composers (little known to us in the West, at least), she offers here on her latest release, three sonatas for solo violin by Ivan Khandoshkin (1747–1804), a Russian Empire violinist and composer of Ukrainian Cossack origin.

The Italian trained Khandoshkin landed a job in the orchestra at the court of Catherine the Great, eventually rising to the position of the court's *Kapellmeister*. His bio tells us that Khandoshkin's violin works are comparable to those by his contemporaries, namely by Tartini's student Antonio Lolli, whose stunts on the violin preceded those by Paganini.

Presumably, that makes Khandoshkin another link in the chain of Italian violin virtuoso/composers that extended from Corelli to Tartini, Locatelli, Lolli, and Nardini, and culminating in Paganini.

The three Khandoshkin sonatas on this disc are not short études or caprices; they are extended, fully worked-out three-movement compositions, each testing the player's technical skills and endurance. The endurance part is of particular note, for while I'm not sure that Khandoshkin makes demands on the instrument and the player that were never made before, he draws out the trials to exhausting lengths. The concluding movement of the G-Minor Sonata, for example, unfolds over nine and a half minutes. Its obvious model is the Chaconne from Bach's D-Minor Partita for Unaccompanied Violin.

Khandoshkin's movement begins in a slow tempo, setting forth in a broad chord progression what sounds like the basis for a set of variations. Unlike Bach's Chaconne, however, which gives the player some relief with variations on one string at a time, Khandoshkin's movement is almost solid double-stops from

beginning to end, and when the final fast-tempo variations arrive, they're shot through with wicked string crossings and exposed octaves.

String crossings and bariolage-like effects, indeed, seem to have been a specialty of Khandoshkin, who ups the ante with increasing double-stops at a very rapid tempo—listen to the second movement of the G-Minor Sonata. Open octaves, the bane of string players because there's nowhere to hide—even the slightest microtone out of tune will make one grimace—are buried everywhere among the double-stops, like landmines. The one envelope that Khandoshkin doesn't seem to push, at least in these three op. 3 Sonatas, is exploration of the instrument's end-of-the-fingerboard range that was pushed by Locatelli and then, of course, by Paganini. We also don't encounter left-hand pizzicato or ricochet bowing and other bow tricks that Paganini made famous. But trust me; Khandoshkin's sonatas are difficult and virtuosic enough, and Elena Denisova relishes every bar of them with astonishing technical control, real rhythmic drive and excitement in the fast passages, and uncommon grace.

The rest of Denisova's program is bound to be more familiar to listeners. Two caprices are drawn from Paganini's op. 1, including the famous concluding one, No. 24, which threatens a full rap-sheet of assaults against both instrument and player. But this player, Elena Denisova isn't afraid or deterred. She also adds a *semi-nice* touch to her recital of solo violin works by starting off with Fritz Kreisler's *Recitative and Scherzo Caprice*, which the famed violinist composed in 1911 and dedicated to Eugene Ysaÿe. I say a *semi-nice* touch, because 12 years later, in 1923, Ysaÿe repaid the compliment by dedicating the fourth of his Six Sonatas for Solo Violin to Kreisler, but for some reason Denisova chose to end her program with the second of Ysaÿe's sonatas instead, the one dedicated to Jacques Thibaud.

The Khandoshkin sonatas were recorded in Budapest in 1996, everything else much more recently in Vienna in 2017. Both recording venues were churches, and the sound of Denisova's violin can be a bit over-reverberant in the echoey decay time, which, I presume, the engineers did their best to tame. But that cannot take anything away from Elena Denisova's consummate technical command or her highly engaging way with these works. A strong recommendation is in order. **Jerry Dubins**

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