

## Unresolved melancholies

## INTROSPECTION

by Alan Griffiths, Evgeny Ukhanov, piano

Available for download at:  
griffithscomposer.bandcamp.com/  
releases

Price: UAD\$25.00

## Reviewed by David James

Establishing a distinctive approach to solo piano composition is one of the most difficult challenges in contemporary composition. Such is the sophistication of compositions on the instrument over the last 200 years, finding radically new harmonic or textural possibilities is all but impossible.

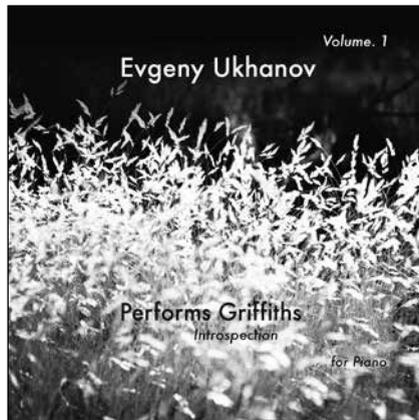
Accordingly, new avenues tend to be found by combining elements in new ways and in looking to achieve powerful levels of expression.

That is the approach taken by Alan Griffiths, whose album, *Introspection*, has just been released. The compositions were written over a 27-year period. They exhibit a consistent darkness of spirit that seems to have accompanied Griffiths during his musical explorations.

Griffiths' compositional style reveals a deep knowledge of 20th-century composers, especially of the Russians, and it is little surprise that he nominates Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich and Prokofiev as influences. Penderecki also gets a mention, as does, somewhat more whimsically, Faure.

As is to be expected with such influences, the harmonic language is ambivalent; tension and release is produced through intensity of expression. Many of the rhythms seem to have a Beethoven-like quality and Griffiths' use of trills is also reminiscent of the German master.

This may not be any kind of direct influence; rather it could be a ripple effect from the 19th-century composers' emulation of Beethoven's radical innovations. Nevertheless, the



music sometimes sounds like a more unresolved, ambiguous version of Beethoven's pianistic potency.

The music ebbs and flows, rising to pitches of excitement, then lapsing back into melancholy. That is scarcely an unusual expressive combination, but it is achieved with great skill. Had Griffiths not been confirmed as a New Zealander, one could have imagined him as a brooding Slav, reflecting on the underbelly of life and the deep loneliness woven into the fabric of existence.

The opening track is entitled *Reverie*. Composed in 1990, it presents a series of variations that are detectable but far from explicit. *Rhapsody & Fantasia* is described as a "lighter" piece, but the strain of melancholy is never far away.

Track three is *Meditations*, which consists of three parts. The opening is dissonant and meandering, and the resolutions are fleeting at best. The repetitions are effective and the use of space elegant. This is, however, music without a conclusion. One senses that Griffiths' meditations focus more



Composer Alan Griffiths.

on movement than direction; more energy than narrative.

Track four is *2/3 fugue*, which Griffiths says reflects his interest in Bach, although it is more like Beethoven's use of fugues in his later compositions than anything from the Baroque period. The heavy use of trills is used to create tension, and any counterpoint is deliberately fragmented, so it does not become the source of momentum.

In the middle of the piece there is an elegiac section that nicely contrasts with the more energetic expression in the opening sections. It is hard to imagine a composer of Griffiths' approach to be comfortable with the diatonic surety of Baroque counterpoint; and so it proves.

Track six is *A Touch of Tango*, which has hints of the South American musical form. The syncopation and close voicings are effective. This begins as a bouncy piece, but we are soon enough plunged back into introspection in the second section, albeit with a touch of elegance. We then return to the lively tango music, before arriving once more in a repeat of the inward turning, which dissolves into gloomy chords.

Track nine is a bitter-sweet offering entitled *Till We Meet Again*, which has occasional glimpses of Romantic lushness. Once again, the intensity seems deliberately to go nowhere. Much sound and fury, but little belief in story.

The pianist is Evgeny Ukhanov, whose touch is delicate when required, ferocious when needed. Ukhanov's tone is liquid, even luminous, and the precision of his attack is flawless throughout. His sensibility seems to perfectly match the composition and one senses that the artistic collaboration was a fruitful one.

The sound of the Steinway nine-foot concert grand is as imperious as one would expect. The sonority is exceptional and would no doubt be even more impressive in a live concert.

This is a fine first recording by Griffiths. He has established himself as an accomplished composer and his introspections justify close listening.

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