



RAFFI BESALYAN

Pianist

Biography

Hailed as “a true heir of the mainstream of Russian pianism, like Horowitz” (*CHOPIN Magazine*, Japan), “a keyboard phenomenon that needs to be heard by everyone interested in pianists and the piano”, “a pianist of formidable ability” (*Fanfare Magazine*, USA), and “a master of his art” (*The Record Geijutsu Magazine*, Japan), Raffi Besalyan has established an international reputation as a magnetic and passionate performer. Active as a recitalist, orchestral soloist, and chamber musician, Besalyan appears in many important music venues worldwide. Critics on both sides of the Atlantic have praised his performances for their virility, poetry and extraordinary technical command.

Armenian-born American pianist Besalyan made his formal New York debut in Carnegie Hall after winning the Artists International Competition and was subsequently invited to perform at Merkin Concert Hall in the Artists International “Outstanding Alumni-Winners” series. *New York Concert Review* described him as “Technically brilliant... Besalyan played with a great deal of temperament, speed and power... audacious spirit and poetic substance, deeply felt tenderness...” Most recently, Besalyan made his Chicago debut in famed Orchestra Hall at Symphony Center as the featured guest artist for the Chicago International Music Festival.

Among his other competition awards are top prizes received from the Josef Hofmann International Piano Competition, the New York Frinna Averbuch International Competition, and the MTNA National Piano Competition.



In recent years, Besalyan has dazzled his audiences in North and South America, Europe, Russia, and Asia, appearing as a soloist with the following orchestras, among others: Osaka Symphony Orchestra (Japan); Orchestra Sinfonica Del Festival Di Chioggia in Venice (Italy); Yerevan Symphony Orchestra (Armenia); Belgorod Symphony (Russia); Kharkov Symphony (Ukraine); New Jersey Festival Orchestra; Owensboro Symphony (Kentucky); Tulare Symphony (California); and Moscow Chamber Orchestra. The *Armenian Reporter Int'l* – New York stated, “Standing ovation and cries of ‘Bravo’ and ‘Encore’ went to pianist Raffi Besalyan... mesmerized the audience with his gracious, delicate, yet powerful presentation of Rachmaninoff’s Concerto No. 3.”

Since his highly successful tour of Japan in 2001, Besalyan visits the country on a yearly basis for concerts and master classes arranged by IMC Music in Tokyo and MAS management. Articles about Raffi Besalyan have appeared in the *CHOPIN Magazine*, *Asahi*, *Sankei*, *Kobe*, *Nikkei* and *Yomiuri* newspapers. After one of the recitals in Osaka, *Sotokuan Press* wrote that, “The entire hall was devoured by Besalyan’s glorious touch and crystalline sound ... Besalyan was not just playing the piano, he was creating wonderful art, and treated the piano with his love for the music.”

Some of his performance highlights include the following recitals: The Embassy Series in Washington D.C.; “Keyboard Karma” series in Vancouver and “Overture Concerts” in Nelson, Canada; a concert tour and master classes in Japan, including a performance of Rachmaninoff’s 3rd Concerto with Osaka Symphony; solo recitals in Izumi Hall and Phoenix Hall in Osaka; recitals and master classes in Tokyo; a recital tour in celebration of Niigata Nippo newspaper’s 70th Anniversary; recitals in Rachmaninoff Hall and Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatory in Russia; performance at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C.; appearances with the Jasper Quartet for Brooklyn Friends of Chamber Music in New York and with Metropolitan Opera tenor Jon Garrison; live

broadcasts of solo recitals on WPR/NPR -“Sunday Afternoon Live from the Chazen” and fundraising recital for Madison Symphony Orchestra in Madison (Wisconsin); and solo/duo recitals with Sara Davis Buechner in New York City.

Besalyan’s debut solo album entitled “*Dance, Drama, Decadence*” (IMC Music label, Japan) has earned him international accolades since its release in June 2012. The album received the prestigious *Jun-Tokusen Award* from *The Record Geijutsu*, Japan’s leading classical music magazine and was chosen as “*Classical Album of the Month*” by one of Japan’s largest newspapers, *Mainichi Shinbun*. “*Dance, Drama, Decadence*” was selected as the “*Best New Release of the Month*” and premiered in its entirety on Tokyo FM “*Music Bird*”, a prominent radio channel. In addition, Ongaku no Tomo Publication of Japan recommended and archived the CD as a study reference for music students and professors. *Fanfare Magazine*, one of the largest, oldest and most respected classical music magazines in the US, featured Besalyan in an extensive interview followed by rave reviews of the album. Another glowing review appeared in *American Record Guide Magazine*. Besalyan was also interviewed by Wisconsin Public Radio’s Norman Gilliland on “*The Middy*”, and the CD was aired on WPR (Madison, WI) and KHPR (Honolulu, HI). “*Dance, Drama, Decadence*” features virtuoso works by Rachmaninoff, Liszt and Ravel and premiere recordings of colorful folkloristic pieces by Armenian composers Komitas and Baghdassarian.

Besalyan has also recorded with Sara Davis Buechner, *The Bach-Busoni Edition Vol. I* which was released by Koch International Classics in September 2008. Recently, he signed with GRAMMY® Award-Winning record label [Sono Luminus](#). Besalyan’s first recording of works by Rachmaninoff and Armenian composer Arno Babajanian for the label will be released in early 2015. Besalyan is an assistant consultant on several piano projects for Dover Publications.

Besalyan received his Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees from the Yerevan Komitas State Conservatory as a student of Sergey Barseghyan. He received an additional Master of Music degree from Rowan University under Veda Zuponic, and studied at the Manhattan School of Music with legendary American pianist Byron Janis and Sara Davis Buechner. His studies at the Moscow State Conservatory included classes with Alexei Nasedkin, Victor Merzhanov and Naum Shtarkman.

In 2014, Dr. Besalyan joined the faculty of Georgia State University in Atlanta where he is currently Assistant Professor of Piano. Former faculty member of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and Rowan University in New Jersey, he also served on the faculties of Festival Musica in Laguna in Venice, Italy, and the International Summer Music Festival at Rowan. Besalyan has been active as an adjudicator for PTNA and Osaka International Piano Competition in Japan, International Chopin Piano Competition in Asia, competitions in Italy, and for various chapters of MTNA.



Select Reviews

“Besalyan is a true heir of the mainstream of Russian pianism, like Horowitz.” - *CHOPIN Magazine*;

“. . .this Armenian pianist’s debut album proves that he is a formidable pianist with a commanding presence and rich interpretive gifts. . .Besalyan is an artist to watch, for sure.” – *American Record Guide Magazine*

“This is phenomenal pianism from a keyboard phenomenon that needs to be heard by everyone interested in pianists and the piano.” - *Fanfare Magazine*;

“Indeed, he is a ‘true heir of the mainstream of Russian pianism, like Horowitz’ . . . Besalyan is a master of his art.” - *The Record Geijutsu Magazine*, Jun-Tokusen Award;

“Raffi Besalyan is one of the most outstanding pianists to emerge from Armenia.” - *The Record Geijutsu Magazine*, Jun-Tokusen Award;

“Besalyan has many wonderful elements in his playing that cannot be taught.” - *New York Concert Review Magazine*;

“There’s a physical strength and virility to Besalyan’s technical address mated to a bold spontaneity that can come only from a consummate mastery of the instrument and the musical notes.” - *Fanfare Magazine*;

“Raffi Besalyan is a pianist of formidable ability, and one would like to hear more of him.”- *Fanfare Magazine*.

PRESS MATERIALS | Reviews & Interviews



American Record Guide Review of “Dance, Drama, Decadence”

Besalyan has been lauded as the “true heir of the mainstream of Russian pianism, like Horowitz” (Chopin Magazine). Those are big shoes to fill, but this Armenian pianist’s debut album proves that he is a formidable pianist with a commanding presence and rich interpretive gifts.

As Besalyan was trained in the Eastern European piano tradition, it is no surprise that he has an affinity for Rachmaninoff, whose revised version of the Piano Sonata No.2 opens this program. Considering his background, one might expect melody and lyricism and an ear for luscious piano harmonies supplemented by dramatic force. His Rachmaninoff is impressive, with sweeping lines and vivid textures. Besalyan is absolutely in control of every tempo change, figuration, and dynamic marking, balancing restraint with emotion so that the sonata is full of pathos without sounding overdone. The following polka is vibrantly done.

Besalyan’s fiery Mephisto Waltz serves as another showcase of his technical abilities and discipline. It never feels rushed and retains coherency despite its temperamental nature. This is not just ferocious virtuosity, either: Besalyan draws forth tender moods, too. The closing Ravel is orchestral in scope.

There are pieces by two Armenian composers. Baghdassarian’s preludes follow Rachmaninoff’s aesthetic closely with emphasis on lyricism and lush harmonies. Besalyan presents these engagingly. His interpretation of Komitas’s ‘Garuna’ is exquisite—and extremely lucid. Following the Liszt, it offers a welcome respite from Faust and shows that Besalyan is able to summon the utmost delicacy.

The recording has a rich and pure sound, capturing every sonority. Besalyan is an artist to watch, for sure.

American Record Guide Magazine, March/April 2013

Pianist Fascinates and Charms Audience with Chopin and others

The first concert in a series of four concerts presented by Niigata Nippo newspaper featuring pianist Raffi Besalyan was held on the evening of November 22nd in Joetsu city's Joetsu Concert Hall. The large audience was captivated by Armenian pianist's performances of masterworks by Chopin and other composers.

Besalyan who has won numerous international competitions, showcased Chopin's Etudes, Debussy's "Clair de Lune" and Gershwin's own piano solo version of Rhapsody in Blue among others, enchanting the classical music fans with his delicate touch and powerful and authoritative playing.

Pianist Raffi Besalyan can next be heard at Nagaoka Lyric Concert Hall on Nov.24, Shibata Shimin Concert Hall on Nov.25 and Niigata Shimin Geijutsu Concert Hall on Nov.28.

Niigata Nippo Newspaper, Japan, November 23, 2012

Debut CD "Dance, Drama, Decadence" Receives Prestigious "Jun-Tokusen" Award from *The Record Geijutsu Magazine* Japan

Raffi Besalyan studied under Sergey Barseghyan at the Yerevan State Komitas Conservatory in Armenia and later continued his studies with Byron Janis in the US. He also studied under Nasedkin and Merzhanov at the Moscow Conservatory. A former faculty member of Rowan University, he is now a professor of piano at the University of Wisconsin.

Besalyan immediately displays his supreme virtuosity from the opening of Rachmaninoff's Sonata No.2 (revised version). Indeed, he is a "*true heir of the mainstream of Russian pianism, like Horowitz*" (*CHOPIN Magazine*) as is mentioned on the sleeve of the CD. Besalyan's sophisticated and exquisite tone colors that are full of nuance and the tasteful and rich singing manner in which he turns the phrases resemble Horowitz. Besalyan fuses his western suave and polished elegant qualities perfectly. Pianist's sorrowful, deeply colored interpretation of the 2nd movement is phenomenal. It leads us to a highly dramatic, emotional performance of the 3rd movement. Besalyan's dexterity and agogic accents bring out the humorous expressions in the Polka de W.R.

The pianist's choice to include some pieces by Armenian composers Komitas and Baghdassarian in the program is an interesting factor. Baghdassarian's Prelude in B minor is a virtuosic piece combining Rachmaninoff-like lyrical singing melodies. Besalyan's playing of the Prelude in D minor with its Armenian folk-like melody is simply splendid. In his pure expression, Besalyan becomes one with Komitas' "Spring". It is a magnificent interpretation, full of pathos.

The "show" of a performance of the piano solo version of Ravel's La Valse proves yet again that Besalyan is a master of his art. **Tsutomu Nasuda**

Raffi Besalyan is one of the most outstanding pianists to emerge from Armenia. After completing his graduate studies at the Yerevan State Komitas Conservatory in his homeland Armenia, Besalyan moved to America to further his education there. He has won various prizes in numerous competitions prior to his appointment at the University of Wisconsin, where he is currently a professor of piano. Besalyan has been repeatedly visiting Japan since 2001, and this CD was also recorded here in Japan in Plaza North Hall, Saitama.

The program opens with a performance of Rachmaninoff's Sonata No.2, which gives the listener a real taste of the so-called Russian pianism. The playing is powerful and vigorous in every way. Here, Besalyan demonstrates brilliant virtuosity and employs his precise touch. He also reveals abundant emotional commitment to the music, which is strongly evident in the memorable interpretation of the second theme of the first movement (and its recurrence). These are the qualities that inevitably draw the listener's attention to Besalyan's performance. His playing is at a superior level throughout.

After Rachmaninoff's Polka de W.R., the program continues with Three Preludes by Armenian composer Baghdassarian. Despite the fact that Baghdassarian lived in the 20th Century (1922-1987), his style, with its romantic elements and tendencies, is very similar to Rachmaninoff's to an extent that you may easily think that you are listening to the works of the latter. Nevertheless, Besalyan performs the works by these two composers with much love and affection. Then there is the Liszt Mephisto Waltz No.1, and, let me tell you, this is also stunning! After "Spring", the work by another Armenian composer, Komitas, Ravel's La Valse ties up the entire program.

This substantial and satisfying recital gives you enough reasons to place the spotlight on this pianist. **Jiro Hamada**

This large piano has an impressive sound and a brilliant tone. I get an image of the instrument that is vibrating richly and singing in the air freely. The attack is clear and clean. You can also sense the grand scale. The alluring tone that is carefree and tender has velvety qualities, spreads in front of the eyes and puts you in comfort. This is a piano with vivid colors. **Kazuo Kanzaki**

Special Critics' Choice Award

The Record Geijutsu Magazine Japan, July 20, 2012

"Dance, Drama, Decadence" is *Mainichi Shinbun's* Classical Album of the Month

In his debut album, Armenian pianist Besalyan plays Rachmaninoff's Piano Sonata No. 2 and other works, articulating the wistful romanticism with a kind of nostalgic tone. The expressive interpretations of Baghdassaryan's Preludes and Komitas' "Spring", compositions from the pianist's home country, also deeply touched my heart." **Tokihiko Umezu, *Mainichi Shinbun Newspaper Japan, August 22, 2012***

“Dance, Drama, Decadence” Recommended by *CD Journal Japan*

This superb debut album consists of works that represent Besalyan’s true strength. ***CD Journal Japan*, August 2012**

Fanfare Magazine Interview (Nov/Dec 2012 Issue)

Raffi Besalyan has much in common with Sergei Rachmaninoff. Both were trained in the great Eastern European piano tradition, with its focus on intensity and drama. They also share a passion for melody and lyricism, regularly subduing their turbulent piano textures in favor of graceful melodic lines. And both crossed the Atlantic to bring these Eastern qualities to appreciative American audiences.

Dance, Drama, Decadence is the name of Besalyan’s newly released debut album, and it’s no surprise to find Rachmaninoff at the top of the program. “I always felt a very strong affinity for Rachmaninoff long before moving to the US” Besalyan recalls. “I remember hearing his C# minor Prelude for the first time when I was ten and being in awe. It was definitely a love from the first sight, or rather first hearing. Immediately after that I went to the library, borrowed the score and learned the work within a week or so. It felt incredibly satisfying physically and emotionally to play Rachmaninoff! This was the time when I firmly decided to become a professional pianist.”

Besalyan hails from Armenia, where he began his training, before moving to the US, with a very important stop *en route* in Moscow. “In 1996, at the end of my conservatory years in Armenia, I saw a poster advertising the 2nd Rachmaninoff International Piano Competition in Moscow, and was determined to enter it. After hearing my performances at the competition, a piano professor from the States extended an invitation for me to come to the US to further my career. I have been extensively performing Rachmaninoff’s music around the world and teaching it to my pupils for many years now.”

He’s not the first pianist, of course, to take Rachmaninoff’s sensuous music to his heart. Besalyan locates his own interpretations within a tradition that has developed on both sides of the Atlantic. Vladimir Horowitz is one of his heroes. Besalyan describes him as a “temperamental virtuoso with an enormous color palette and an extreme range of sound and dynamics.” Another influential figure was the American pianist Byron Janis, a pupil of Horowitz and an heir to his passionate interpretive approach, which, Besalyan points out, is clearly demonstrated in Janis’ famous recordings of the Rachmaninoff concertos. “I am proud to say that I have had the privilege of studying with Mr. Janis at the Manhattan School of Music in New York. Mr. Janis’ colorful and brilliant performances that are full of great imagination became a huge inspiration to me.”

So how better to open his debut CD than with one of Rachmaninoff’s most famous compositions? “I could not think of any other work than his bold and magnificent Sonata No.2 to open the program on my debut CD!” Besalyan says. He has opted for the revised 1931 version of the work, which is shorter than the original. But that greater concision really helps it to pack a punch. Besalyan quotes Rachmaninoff on the revision “...in this sonata, so many voices are moving simultaneously, and it is too long. Chopin’s Sonata Op.35 lasts 19 minutes, and all has been said.” “I completely agree with this statement,” Besalyan continues, “even though there are some gorgeous passages with lush harmonies in the original

version, I still feel that the revised version is so much better in terms of the form and structure. I personally like the compactness of the 1931 version.”

To Western ears, the distinctions between Russian and Armenian approaches to piano playing can be difficult to gauge, so how do Russian audiences respond to Besalyan’s Rachmaninoff interpretations? “They think my playing is temperamental and powerful,” he says. “In Russia, Armenians are considered very temperamental and hot blooded,” a view that listeners to Besalyan’s Rachmaninoff are likely to share. When performing in Russia, Besalyan is also often commended for the flexibility of his phrasing. A particularly Armenian quality? Perhaps. “One Russian critic even said that my rendition of Rachmaninoff’s *Corelli Variations* reminded him of ancient Armenian Chants.”

Rachmaninoff’s Second Sonata is followed on the disc by music from four other composers, two of whom are Armenian, Edward Baghadassarian and Komitas Vardapet. Baghadassarian is not yet a household name in the West, in fact he’s not even in Grove, so Besalyan fills us in on the composer’s background.

“Edward Baghadassarian (1922–1987) was a graduate of the Yerevan State Conservatory where he double majored in piano and composition. He later studied at the Moscow Conservatory and afterwards joined the faculty of the Yerevan Komitas Conservatory. Among his works are a Symphonic Poem, a Sonata for clarinet and piano, an Overture for symphony orchestra, a Rhapsody for violin and orchestra, 24 Preludes for piano, the ballet *Chess*, a Piano Concerto, romances, choral works, incidental music and movie scores.”

Baghadassarian’s piano music, at least under Besalyan’s fingers, sounds a lot like Rachmaninoff. He has the same intensely lyrical approach and an impressive ability to voice his harmonies to create an expansive resonance from the piano. So was Rachmaninoff an important influence?

“I feel that most Soviet era composers were more or less influenced, perhaps inspired, by the late Russian Romantic music, including Rachmaninoff’s. I believe it was hard to resist the lush harmonic language and the sweeping melodic lines, not to mention the exquisite pianistic writing. Despite all of these influences, one can undeniably recognize purely Armenian folk characteristics – unique harmonies, melismatic melodic twists stemming from ancient Armenian sacred music, and the many dance-like sections.”

Komitas, Armenia’s famous composer-priest, has a higher profile on the international music scene. His is fine music, again based on a natural gift for melody. But has the recent rise in his profile been the result of the many recordings on labels like ECM, or does it indicate a resurgence in Armenian national identity among classical musicians?

“I think it is both. In recent years, more and more gifted Armenian musicians have had the opportunity to go outside of the country and promote their cultural and musical traditions. Komitas, who is the father of Armenian classical music, and whose works have become symbols of the nation, deservedly receives quite a lot of attention. Songs such as *Garun a* (Spring) and *Krunk* (Crane) are particularly recognizable.”

Besalyan performs the music of both composers with passion and commitment, making the best possible case for their work. He clearly doesn’t think they need special treatment, as between the two Armenians he sandwiches music by one of the greatest piano composers of all time, Franz Liszt. Do the challenges posed by Liszt differ from those posed by Rachmaninoff?

“I do enjoy playing Liszt and include his works in my concert programs often. I tend to like his compositions that are programmatic and more theatrical in nature, such as the *Mephisto Waltz* that is on this CD, his B minor and *Dante* Sonatas, and some of the Transcendental Études.

Both Liszt and Rachmaninoff were considered among the greatest pianists of all time. Even though very challenging, their music is extremely pianistic and settles under the fingers comfortably (of course, assuming that one has developed a certain level of technical fluency). It is the artist’s challenge not to make Liszt’s music sound purely virtuosic. One must approach Liszt’s works with a subtle taste for color and rubato, and also tonal sensitivity and imagination. Some of the challenges presented in Rachmaninoff’s music are the more polyphonic writing, dense chordal textures and complex forms. Both composer’s music is quite temperamental and emotional, and it is the pianist’s obligation to deliver performances that are full of excitement and fire and are multidimensional in nature.”

The program concludes with Ravel, the solo piano version of *La Valse*. Many think of this work as the final summation of the Romantic era. Is this why Besalyan has chosen it to end this program of Romantic works?

“You could say that. *La Valse* is the summation, or perhaps the “decay and destruction” of the Romantic era. Also, since the title of my CD is “Dance, Drama, Decadence”, I felt that this composition in particular fits all three categories and concludes the program with an exclamation point.”

It certainly does that. Besalyan often mentions color among the qualities required of a pianist by composers like Rachmaninoff and Liszt. Does he aim for an orchestral color palette from the piano when he performs this transcription of the famous orchestral score?

“I look at the piano as an orchestra of its own. I do always aspire to produce orchestral sounds and colors when playing the piano literature. In the case of *La Valse*, it feels natural and necessary to do so. I do also enjoy the theatrical component of this work (*un poème chorégraphique*), as it was originally conceived as a ballet. To me Ravel’s own words describing this work are the most inspirational: “...one should only see in it what the music expresses: an ascending progression of sonority, to which the stage comes along to add light and movement.””

In addition to his successful career as a performer, Besalyan devotes much of his time to teaching. He is a member of the Faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point where he is Associate Professor of Piano. Besalyan received his own musical education through a very different system, and recalls the rigors of the intensely structured program he followed in Armenia. As a child, he won a place at a special music school for gifted children, which provided high quality teaching and a continuity between the school syllabus and the conservatoire that followed.

“Music education in Russia and Armenia is more performance oriented.” Besalyan says “By the time students enter the conservatory they are pretty well equipped technically on their instrument and have a thorough musical background. At the conservatory they polish and refine their skills with an established professor on the way to becoming artists or teachers themselves.”

It’s an intensive system that makes high demands on the pupils. Things may be a little more relaxed in the States, but Besalyan detects a desire among his students for Soviet-style rigor.

“Many students come to study with me expecting the Russian approach. They know my expectations of them, they know it is not going to be only “fun”, but hard and serious work in order to achieve a certain quality. They want and expect constructive criticism all the time.”

One of the valuable links to Russian and Armenian pianism that Besalyan is able to offer his students is the repertoire he loves. His pupils come from all over the world, but many have come to share his passions. He currently has a Korean student studying some Baghadassarian Preludes, and he has also mentored a number of American students in the music of Komitas.

Rachmaninoff is a favorite for many of his Japanese pupils, and Besalyan’s own concert schedule suggests that Japanese audiences also share the passion. He regularly performs in Japan, and finds that the late Romantic repertoire goes down particularly well there.

“Yes, in Japan they definitely value the late Romantic piano music, especially Rachmaninoff’s.” And they obviously value Besalyan’s interpretations just as much; his new album has been awarded the “Jun- tokusen” special commendation by Japan’s leading classical music magazine, Record Geijutsu.

The album was recorded in Japan, and from Besalyan’s description of the project, it sounds like a great place to make and record classical music. “Record sales are healthy there,” Besalyan says, “because in Japan classical music is almost equally as popular as the other genres. Many young people are quite knowledgeable about classical music (almost everyone in Japan takes serious private music lessons as a youngster), and they attend classical concerts and buy records as well.”

And as you might expect, Japanese sound engineers have both the technology and the expertise to achieve the highest recording standards. “The equipment is definitely of high quality and the crew is very meticulous.” Besalyan enthuses, “I had a great recording engineer in particular. He had a great ear, as well as excellent taste and knowledge of music and of his craft.”

So can we expect any further recordings in the near future? Besalyan’s growing fan base, especially in Japan, makes that prospect all the more likely. He’s in discussion right now with the label about a follow-up disc. Possible repertoire includes piano sonatas by Prokofiev and Scriabin. It turns out that Gershwin is very popular in Japan. He’s one of Besalyan’s favorite composers too, so some Gershwin Preludes are likely to make the cut. Then of course there’s the Armenian repertoire, and Besalyan is certainly planning to get some more of his compatriots’ music on the new disc. “Nothing is finalized yet” he adds with a note of caution “but there is definitely interest, so hopefully we can realize this project in the near future.”

Gavin Dixon, *Fanfare Magazine*, Nov/Dec Issue 2012

Fanfare Magazine Reviews of “Dance, Drama, Decadence”

Besalyan travels to Japan often to appear in concerts and conduct master classes, so it's understandable that he would be engaged by a Japanese record company to produce his first solo commercial recording. He is no stranger to the U.S. Besalyan has appeared in New York, Washington, D.C., and Chicago, and he is an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Japan's *Chopin Magazine* hailed Besalyan as a “true heir of the mainstream of Russian pianism, like Horowitz.” Of his diverse training, however, which ranges from Armenia's Yerevan Komitas State Conservatory and the Moscow State Conservatory, to New Jersey's Rowan University, the influence I hear most strongly in Besalyan's playing is that of Byron Janis, with whom he studied at the Manhattan School of Music.

There's a physical strength and virility to Besalyan's technical address mated to a bold spontaneity that can come only from a consummate mastery of the instrument and the musical notes. Horowitz, agreed, was a brilliant technician and an equally brilliant showman. But he was also careful. One never felt that Horowitz took unnecessary risks, like playing faster than he knew he could navigate a piece without mishap. What makes listening to Besalyan so exciting is that he plays very fast, almost daringly so, such that you expect a mishap to occur at any moment, and yet it never does. There is great authority, absolute control, and huge tonal resource to Besalyan's Rachmaninoff Sonata that reminds me of Janis's “Rach-3.”

For those who may not know Rachmaninoff's *Polka de V. R.*, it's a short virtuosic arrangement of a piece by Franz Behr titled *Lichtäubchen*, a scherzo polka. The tune was a favorite of Rachmaninoff's father, Vassily, hence the “V. R.” in the title.

Baghdassarian's three short preludes are breathtakingly beautiful, a real discovery. Clearly influenced by Rachmaninoff—hints of the Russian composer's Second Piano Concerto flit by in the B-Minor Prelude—other influences come to the fore in the E-Major Prelude, namely early Scriabin, Medtner, and even a brush against the cheek of Debussy. I, for one, would really like to know more about this obscure composer and hear more of his work, because these preludes are gorgeous, and Besalyan plays them with sweeping romantic gesture, expression, and poetry.

Garuna (Spring) is one of Komitas' songs, which has here been arranged as a solo piano piece by Robert Andreasian. It, too, like the Baghdassarian preludes, is a really lovely, touching nocturnal song without words.

Of Liszt's four *Mephisto Waltzes*, the No. 1 played here by Besalyan is the most popular. It, however, along with the No. 2, is one of the two scores that were originally composed for orchestra and only later appeared in piano arrangements. The Nos. 3 and 4 are the ones originally composed for piano. Being as familiar as I am with the No. 1 in its orchestral guise, it's hard for me to cotton to it on piano, but the devil's costume fits Besalyan well. His pitchfork thrusts and jabs, his barbed tail lashes wildly, and his horns gore savagely, creating a fevered dance of seduction between Mephistopheles and Faust.

Ravel's famous *La Valse* is another work originally conceived for orchestra and only later transcribed for piano by the composer. Its first keyboard version, however, was not for solo piano but a two-piano reduction that was likely intended as a rehearsal score to a ballet Ravel was promoting to the great impresario Diaghilev that never materialized. It was only then that Ravel made the solo piano arrangement, an extremely difficult work that's had fewer advocates on disc than the two-piano version.

Whether one feels a solo piano can ever do justice to the toxic fumes and vapors Ravel brews in his original orchestral score, the piano version is one of the ultimate technical challenges to test a player's mettle, and Raffi Besalyan rises to the occasion with incredible panache and a performance that seems to transcend the possibility that this can be one man with only two hands and 10 fingers producing these sounds.

This is phenomenal pianism from a keyboard phenomenon that needs to be heard by everyone interested in pianists and the piano. **Jerry Dubins, *Fanfare Magazine*, Nov/Dec Issue 2012**

Judging by the concert reviews posted on his website, Besalyan frequently programs the three Baghdassarian preludes included here. They sound a lot like Rachmaninoff, with no hints of even conservative modernism. Notwithstanding their anachronistic style, these pieces are evocative, idiomatically pianistic, and well worth hearing. The B-Minor Prelude is technically demanding and gives the pianist an opportunity to display his excellent technique. Komitas is a national institution in Armenia and performed the same role there as did Bartók and Kodály in Hungary and the Mighty Handful in Russia, collecting and transcribing folk melodies and incorporating them into his compositions. He was primarily a vocal composer, and the piece offered here is one of his songs (its title translates as "Springtime"), in a piano transcription by Robert Andreasian. I know nothing of the song text, but the mood of the music, far from unalloyed joyfulness at the arrival of the season, is tinged with sadness and regret. In any case, it's a rewarding piece, colorful and poignant. At the beginning there is a hint of Debussy, who reportedly had a high regard for Komitas, but the rest sounds rather like Russian piano music of the late 19th century.

Like Earl Wild (Ivory Classics) and Olga Kern (Harmonia Mundi), Besalyan performs the Rachmaninoff Sonata in its 1931 revision, and he yields nothing to those rivals in technical prowess. If his rendition seems less overtly brilliant, it is partly because he places more emphasis on the darker colorations of the left hand. The many tempo contrasts built into the sonata are less wide in Besalyan's performance, with resulting gains in continuity and integration. Besalyan is easily competitive in this league, and his interpretation is perhaps the most satisfying of the three overall. He dispatches the Rachmaninoff Polka with a winning combination of grace and energy and is more persuasive than Kern, whom I find too lightweight here even for this lighthearted piece.

In the Liszt *Mephisto Waltz*, Besalyan impresses with clear articulation, well-judged tempo choices, and technical command. As in the Rachmaninoff Sonata, he succeeds in imposing unity and continuity on a piece that can seem episodic but still characterizes individual passages sensitively and effectively. He does not hurry the opening pages but supplies plenty of excitement and energy as well as flowing lyricism where they are needed. More than many interpreters, he treats this piece as music of substance rather than a mere vehicle for virtuosic display, although his virtuosity is not in question. Besalyan's Mephisto is polished and gentlemanly sort.

Ravel's *La Valse* is more often heard in a four-hand or two-piano arrangement, but Besalyan here tackles the composer's 1921 transcription for a single pianist. In Besalyan's hands, it works very well as a piano piece. He seems to have no difficulty with its fearsome technical challenges, and I am once again impressed by his tempo control and ability to maintain linear continuity while characterizing individual passages effectively.

The recorded sound on this disc is well balanced and highly realistic. On the evidence of this recital, Raffi Besalyan is a pianist of formidable ability, and one would like to hear more of him. In the meantime, I recommend this release for its compelling performances and as a sampling of this pianist's artistry. **Daniel Morrison, *Fanfare Magazine*, Nov/Dec Issue 2012**

Rachmaninoff's piano music needs passion, but it also needs control. Raffi Besalyan is one of the few pianists active today who is able to give both in equal measure, and without any feeling of compromise. His tempos are fluid, but they never go to extremes, nor do his dynamics. He is able to draw a huge range of colors from the piano, which gives a real sense of purpose to Rachmaninoff's accompanying textures, preventing them from ever sounding frivolous. Besalyan also has a keen sense of the inner life of Rachmaninoff's melodies, giving them the rubato they need to breathe, but always keeping half an eye on their structural significance too.

This debut CD opens with the revised version of Rachmaninoff's Second Sonata. That's a very popular choice for debut recital CDs, so there is an onus to make the interpretation a distinctive one. And that's exactly what Besalyan does. It's the discipline of his playing that separates him from most of the competition, but the discipline never stifles the emotion. The articulations and dynamics are all finely judged, and patiently graduated in the longer crescendos. Contrasts between sections articulate the structure well, especially in the first movement where the turbulent first subject is ideally complemented by the delicate and lyrical second. Pedaling is generous, but again clearly thought through with great care in advance.

The program continues with Rachmaninoff's *Polka de V. R.* before moving to music by one of Besalyan's Armenian compatriots, Edward Baghdassarian. Unless you are following the track listing, you are unlikely to notice where the Rachmaninoff ends and the Baghdassarian begins, such are the stylistic similarities between them. That doesn't make the latter particularly distinctive, but it does mean that all the musical virtues Besalyan brings to the Rachmaninoff can be applied here with equal effect. And while Baghdassarian won't win any points for originality, the skill with which he continues Rachmaninoff's aesthetic is laudable.

We can have no such qualms about the originality of Liszt's music, and his *Mephisto Waltz* No.1 sets the pianist some very different challenges. But Besalyan again takes a disciplined and clearly articulated approach. Liszt gives him the opportunity to conjure up some entirely different colors from the piano, which he again does with impressive poise. While the results are technically accurate, the sheer quantity of control can oppress this music slightly. There is little of Liszt's demonic side in this reading, and if Besalyan were to show off his virtuosity more, that might be more in the spirit of the work.

After an exquisite and beguiling miniature from Komitas (a staple for most Armenian musicians), Besalyan concludes his program with an impressive rendition of Ravel's piano version of *La Valse*. Besalyan's ability to subtly grade his dynamics is an invaluable asset in a work based on a gradual crescendo lasting some 13 minutes. And the patience with which he paces the work gives him (and us) the chance to appreciate the beautiful harmonies and textures along the way. At the climax he finally lets his enthusiasm run away with him, to dizzying effect in those glorious final pages. **Gavin Dixon, *Fanfare Magazine*, Nov/Dec Issue 2012**

CHOPIN Magazine, July 2008, Japan: Genuine Descendant of Russian Pianism

Armenian-born pianist Besalyan possesses truly lucid and beautiful sound that reminds you of perfectly matched pearls. It was in the Rachmaninoff group in the first half, where the pianist displayed this quality with tremendous conviction. From the penetrating chords and piercing harmonies in the G minor Prelude Op.23 No.5, the beautiful melody leafed out and floated in the air, pouring out deeply personal inconsolable feelings. The depth of the melody in the bass of the G sharp minor Prelude Op.32 No.12 was admirably contrasted with the brilliance of the arpeggios in the higher register.

The rampant image of Mephisto roaming at will appeared from Besalyan's tenacious and unyielding chords and octaves, and his capricious, and at times, leisurely changes of the mood in Liszt's Mephisto Waltz. One could even hear the high-pitched satanic laughter.

The audience was dazzled and fully captivated by Besalyan's bell-like tone in the music by Armenian composers Komitas and Baghdassarian, which were performed with magnificent imagination and splendid colorful changes of tonality.

Earl Wild arrangements of Gershwin Songs were snappy and tasteful.

In Besalyan's rendition of Prokofiev's Seventh Sonata the "violence" and the "cool-headedness" were brought out with much power and set apart vividly from Prokofiev's hollow and distorted melodies.

I must say that Besalyan is a true heir of the mainstream of Russian pianism, like Horowitz.

Izumi Hall, Osaka, Japan, April 13, 2008

CHOPIN Magazine, July 2008, Japan

Web Music Reviews: Raffi Besalyan and Yuri Segawa Duo Recital

Since his successful concert tour in Japan in 2001, Armenian-born pianist Raffi Besalyan has been invited back every year to play concerts and teach master classes. He has been steadily establishing his name and musical career in this country, and on August 29, 2010, Besalyan and his wife violinist Yuri Segawa Besalyan made their duo debut in Phoenix Hall in Osaka.

Recital began with Debussy's Sonata for Violin and Piano. Besalyan's accompaniment was solid and reliable from the start. His tender tone and gentle sonorities were filled with colorful nuances throughout. Segawa's true abilities were revealed as the movements progressed; her sound attained the necessary warmth and she brought the music to an exciting finale.

Darkly passionate and colorful works of Armenian composers Babajanian and Komitas are highly folkloristic. As a native Armenian, Besalyan deeply felt this music and enchanted the audience with his temperamental phrasing. The convincing performance demonstrated that the feelings and

emotions expressed by the two musicians were mutual-Segawa felt precisely the same way as her husband did, her violin sang with great affection, passion and yearning. Komitas's "Crane" was glorious. Both Besalyan and Segawa brought the rich ethnic music to life and performed it with great pathos.

Last in the first half of the program was Scriabin's Piano Sonata No.3. Distinctly dynamic and symphonic in nature, Besalyan's magnificent sound filled the entire hall. He manipulated the leaping rhythms with intensity throughout all four movements, and built the music into a solid three-dimensional architecture employing his warm, deep touch at the keyboard. Besalyan aimed for the portrayal of Scriabin as a masculine "Russian Virtuoso" on the edge, rather than only a "sensuous romantic."

The second half of the program began with Besalyan's account of three Chopin Etudes Op.25-the famous "Butterfly", the "Octave" Etude and the "Ocean". Besalyan's Chopin had a solid core, it sang with a rich juicy tone. Here again, his playing was dynamic, the music came alive throbbing with excitement. These are perhaps some of Besalyan's best qualities.

Next was Ysaye's "Poem Elegiaque" for violin and piano. Segawa's melancholic expression and skillful use of portamento combined with her profound emotional approach captivated the audience with persuasive power. She executed the technical passages, double-stops and octaves with vivid colors. Her beautiful singing tone had a strong appeal and was quite seductive. This was very different from Segawa's interpretation of Debussy. Indeed, Besalyan and Segawa are a married couple, they were in complete harmony with each other once again-the timing and direction of their phrasing in absolute unison.

Ravel's own transcription of "La Valse" for piano solo rounded off this memorable recital. Here, Besalyan vigorously and persistently pulled out the poisonous characteristics of Ravel's "La Valse" with its seditious rhythms in the lower register and brilliantly sparkling magnificent passages. It was again, exceptionally entertaining. Besalyan's impellent power and boldly emotional performance aroused the entire atmosphere. The pianist used the instrument to its full capacity to create a wide range of marvelous sounds and colors. Besalyan drove the work to a fiery, dramatic coda with overwhelming intensity. It was definitely a jaw-dropping performance of a masterpiece!

Besalyan and Segawa were called back several times by the continuous applause of the audience. It was unforgettable when Segawa said, "even though we sometimes argued during our practice, we worked very hard to bring-up this music." The duo recital was full of warm love from the wife and the husband who share their life and love for the music.

August 29, 2010 (Review written on August 30, 2010)

Phoenix Hall, Osaka, Japan, Cremaster 5 「男前な音楽」 *Web Music Reviews*

YouTube Videos

Gershwin/E. Wild, Etude “Embraceable You”:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7D4nocoFejM>



Komitas, Garun a (Spring)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08ehJPBZqoE>



Rachmaninoff, Piano Sonata No. 2, Movement 3
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbfzFMiUGLo>



Rachmaninoff Concerto No. 3, Movement 3
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gsnl-oUsaYA>



Rachmaninoff Etude-Tableau Op. 39 No. 1 in c minor
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HpO3Y4W7xs&feature=c4-overview&list=UUp4-CvFaNt0oGukKCUNES5A>



Rachmaninoff Etude-Tableau Op. 33 No. 6 in E-flat minor
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7RkwjNplaE&feature=c4-overview&list=UUp4-CvFaNt0oGukKCUNES5A>





Past Performances

- Solo Recital at the Embassy of Armenia, Washington, D.C. in honor of Aram Khachaturian's 110th Anniversary
- Various city concert tour in celebration of Niigata Nippo Newspaper's 70th Anniversary, Japan
- Solo/Duo Recital with Yuri Segawa, violin in Phoenix Hall, Osaka, Japan
- Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue, Larry Harper, conductor, South Milwaukee Performing Arts Center
- Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue, Larry Harper, conductor, Orchestra Hall, Chicago, IL
- Rachmaninoff: Second Concerto, Central Wisconsin Symphony Orchestra (Conductor Patrick Miles)
- Fundraising Recital for Madison Symphony Orchestra, Farley's House of Pianos, Madison, WI
- Mendelssohn: Concerto for Violin and Piano with Yuri Segawa, violin, and Tulare Symphony, Visalia, CA (Conductor Bruce Kiesling)
- Rachmaninoff: Second Concerto, UWSP (Conductor Patrick Miles)
- Rachmaninoff: Second Concerto with Homestead Symphony, Mequon, WI (Conductor John Emanuelson)
- Solo Recital, Tubac, AZ
- Rachmaninoff Third Concerto with Osaka Symphony, Japan (Conductor Shungo Moriyama)
- Beethoven "Choral Fantasy" with Oratorio Society of New York, Costa Rica
- Solo Recital in Izumi Hall, Osaka, Japan
- Solo Recital in Sun Square Hall, Sakai, Japan
- Solo Recital in Capitol Theater, Nelson, BC, Canada
- Liszt First Concerto with Tulare Symphony, Visalia, CA (Conductor Lawrence Golan)
- Stravinsky Concerto for Piano with Wind Instruments, UWSP (Conductor Brendan Caldwell)
- Falla "Nights in the Gardens of Spain" and Turina "Rapsodia Sinfonica" with Owensboro Symphony, KY (Conductor Nicholas Palmer)
- Solo Recitals on Wisconsin Public Radio "Sunday Afternoon Live from the Chazen", Madison, WI
- Guest Artist for Vivace Festival in Izumi Hall, Osaka, Japan
- Solo/Duo Recital with Sara Davis Buechner, New York
- Concert with Jasper Quartet for the Brooklyn Friends of Chamber Music concert series, New York
- Solo/Duo Recital for "Keyboard Karma" series with Sara Davis Buechner, Vancouver, Canada
- Performance for the Steinway Art Case Piano show, Rowan University, New Jersey
- Recital with violinist Yuri Segawa, Rowan University, New Jersey
- Guest Artist for SJMTA
- Festival "Musica in Laguna" in Venice, Italy
- Solo Recital, "Soutokuan Music Art Station" in Osaka, Japan

- Solo Recital, Syougai Gakusyu Center in Osaka, Japan
- Solo Recital, Merkin Concert Hall, New York
- Benefit Recital for Young Pianist Foundation, New Jersey
- Rachmaninoff “Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini” with Kharkov Symphony Orchestra, Ukraine (Conductor Gavriel Heine)
- Solo Recital for Shandeleo Festival, New York
- Solo Recital, Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, New York
- Rachmaninoff Third Concerto with Belgorod Symphony, Russia
- Solo Recital, Takatsuki Cultural Center in Osaka, Japan
- Recital with Metropolitan Opera tenor Jon Garrison
- Brahms First Concerto with Orchestra Sinfonica Del Festival Di Chioggia in Venice, Italy (Conductor, Pietro Perini)
- Liszt First Concerto with New Jersey Festival Orchestra (Conductor, Gavriel Heine)
- Guest Artist for Wisconsin Music Teacher’s Association 100th Anniversary Convention
- Wisconsin Dells, WI
- Franck Piano Quintet with the North Shore String Quartet, Performing Arts Series @1800 Theater-Sentry, Stevens Point, WI
- Solo Recital for “*Wisconsin’s Premier Pianists*” Concert Series, Green Bay, WI
- Solo Recital in Frank Lloyd Wright’s historic Taliesin Theater, Spring Green, WI

Raffi Besalyan, Pianist

Visit: www.raffibesalyan.com

www.youtube.com/user/taomusicarts

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