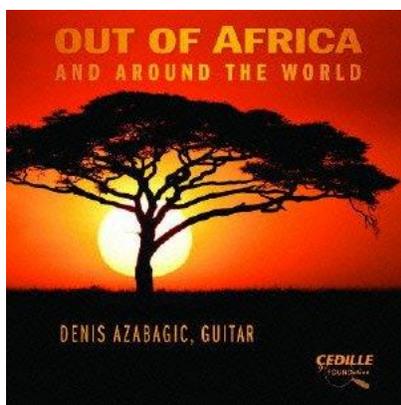




OUT OF AFRICA • Denis Azabagic (gtr) • CEDILLE 7005 (59:40)

OURKOUZOUNOV Folk Song Variations. IVANOVIC Café Pieces. RIVERA Canción. BOGDANOVIĆ Blues and 7 Variations. THOMAS Out of Africa



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Acclaimed guitarist Denis Azabagic's newest CD, *Out of Africa*, features attractive works by some of today's leading guitarist/composers. Bulgarian Atanas Ourkouzounov's contribution is a captivating series of Variations on *Pozaspa li iagodo?* (Are you sleeping, Strawberry?). The rhythmically driven, harmonically inventive first variation comes as a startling surprise after the gentle simplicity of the opening statement. A slow, minor-tinged variation follows, with interspersed harmonics dotting the sustained soundscape. Variation three combines flowing figures with a recap of the first variation's hectic pace, helped along by sharp accents and forceful dynamics. Next, a partly muted, subtly dissonant episode gives way to an invigorating half-Bulgarian, half-Greek Finale.

As revealed in the booklet notes, Vojislav Ivanovic's *Café Pieces* were undertaken as a lark but, be that as it may, the results far surpass their frivolous beginnings: heard as a group they comprise a beautiful suite of music in the South American style, filled with lovely melodies, exciting rhythms, and humor. At one point, *Tango Café* (the third of the set) seems to quote the Russian/Gypsy song *Ochi chyornye* (Dark Eyes), but that may be coincidental: in all other respects, it's a pitch perfect homage to Astor Piazzolla.

The mildly melancholy *Nostalgia*, a tremolo study, offers guitarists an appealing alternative to Tarrega's ubiquitous *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*.

Azabagic plays Carlos Rafael Rivera's *Canción* more than a minute faster than various YouTube performances, but with no diminution in sentiment or liquidity of phrasing. For such a short piece—1:35 as played here—that's a significant difference, almost twice as fast as the others.

In his synopsis of his *Blues and 7 Variations*, Dusan Bogdanović explains that "The seeming incongruity of idioms and compositional styles" reflects his interest "in developing a widely based musical world." That global perspective is immediately apparent in the 13-bar (instead of the traditional 12) Blues at the heart of the piece, cast in 9/8, a meter more common to the Balkans than the American South. Bogdanović's self-described "virtuoso set of variations" calls for great speed, fluency, and panache, attributes Azabagic has in spades; I'm guessing that this stunning performance will prove a benchmark for years to come.

Alan Thomas conceived his suite *Out of Africa* as a series of impressions inspired by African "styles of singing ... additive rhythms, irregular metric groupings, and pentatonic or pandiatonic scales." Besides being subliminally linked in this way, the various movements together paint a musical portrait of idealized daily life. *Call at Sunrise* welcomes the dawn with a catchy tune "presented in canon that gradually develops into a vibrant ostinato and vocalic melody" (Thomas). A joyous *Morning Dance* follows, and as the sun attains its Zenith, the sound of the oud is heard in the land: Azabagic convincingly imitates the characteristic microtonal sound by playing on a detuned string. I don't know if Thomas consulted the Arabic maqam system of modes as he composed the music, but either way it's a compelling bit of orientalism. After a last festive *Evening Dance*, the tender (and tenderly played) *Cradle Song* brings the suite to a quiet close. All told, Azabagic's idiomatic, technically flawless performances of this colorful repertoire should be required listening for guitar lovers everywhere. Robert Schulslaper

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