

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 14 November 2023
7.30pm

Nikolai Lugansky piano

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Variations on a Theme of Chopin Op. 22 (1902-3)

8 Etudes-tableaux Op. 33 (1911)

*Etude-tableau in F minor • Etude-tableau in C •
Etude-tableau in C minor • Etude-tableau in D minor •
Etude-tableau in E flat minor • Etude-tableau in E flat •
Etude-tableau in G minor • Etude-tableau in C sharp
minor*

Interval

Piano Sonata No. 1 in D minor Op. 28 (1907)

I. Allegro moderato • II. Lento • III. Allegro molto



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Rachmaninov composed **Variations on a Theme of Chopin** during a happy period of his life, right after writing his Second Concerto. This is a dialogue with the great Polish maestro.

The *Variations* can be divided into 3 parts:

Part 1 — The theme and the first 10 variations. The sixth variation is one of Rachmaninov's lyrical masterpieces; it most certainly could not be confused with any other composer's work.

Part 2 — This is a huge slow movement with a small scherzo in the middle (15th variation), referring more to Mendelssohn rather than Rachmaninov's dark and heavy symphonic scherzos.

Part 3 — The third section begins with the great contrast of the 19th variation. After the slow part comes a *trepak*, which is a fast, bright, powerful dance.

The finale is a polonaise, which is a tribute to the Polish genius and also heavily influenced by Rachmaninov's homeland, reminiscent of *Eugene Onegin* or the finale of Tchaikovsky's Third Suite.

It's fascinating that these variations did not become as popular as, for example, the *Preludes* or the Second Sonata. Perhaps people at the time were spooked by their scale and complicated pianistic techniques.

The **Etudes-tableaux**, or 'study pictures', Op. 33, were written in 1911. There were nine pieces initially.

One of the mysteries of this opus is that he excluded three of these pieces, and even imposed a ban on playing them. These pieces were numbered 3, 4, and 5; after minor changes, number 4 became the sixth piece in Op. 39 (known as *Little Red Riding Hood*); numbers 3 and 5 were considered lost and were discovered only after Rachmaninov had passed.

They are pictures first, and *études* second. I think that this applies to Op. 33 to a greater extent since the image plays a more significant role than special pianistic techniques.

The first *étude*, written in F minor, is an incredibly harsh marching piece, which can be associated with a military parade, for instance.

The second piece, written in C major, is the exact opposite — it's cheerful, like a sun-drenched prairie; it's a melody that sounds very Russian but at the same time a bit Oriental.

The third *étude* is one of those pieces excluded by Rachmaninov from the cycle. It consists of two parts, C minor and C major — it could be called *Death and Transfiguration*, borrowing names from Strauss. Here Rachmaninov is reflecting upon life and death and questioning the existence of the afterlife.

This is followed by an *étude* in D minor. This is a piece of astonishing beauty. Its simple but very tight rhythmic formula is superimposed on a drawn-out and diatonic falling intonation, which makes up a long melody.

Then follows one of the shortest pieces in the cycle, an *étude* in E flat minor, which is sometimes called *The*

Snowstorm. This is one of the first pieces by Rachmaninov I ever played.

Immediately after this, another short piece follows — an E flat major *étude* subtitled *The Fair*. This is one of the few *études* that lacks the gloomy and dark subtext, filled with joyful bell chimes and a festive fuss; it ends just as jubilantly as it begins.

The next piece is a G minor 'study picture'. The action takes place presumably in autumn with its drooping nature and a small whirlwind that comes in the middle of this *étude*. Recalling Pushkin, 'Oh, mournful season that delights the eyes / Your farewell beauty captivates my spirit'.

The last piece is in C sharp minor. A terrifying play in terms of power, strength and movement. I see the echoes of his orchestral works here but above all, it reminds me of the opera *Francesca da Rimini*. There is absolutely no love left here.

The **First Sonata** was created just five years after *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*, but stylistically the differences are drastic. Five years prior, he was a young composer in his prime, whereas the First Sonata sounds almost like late Rachmaninov with an enormously gloomy, somewhat harsh and at times even hopeless mood.

The composer only briefly mentioned once in a letter that the work is inspired by Goethe's *Faust*: the first part refers to Faust, the second one to Gretchen, and the third paints the picture of the flight to the Brocken on Walpurgis Night. But this is only a small hint of what is happening in this grandiose sonata.

The first part was inspired by Faust's torturous thoughts on aging and the search for something that cannot be found, like truth. There is a plethora of themes in the sonata with one common side theme being the *Znamenny* chant — a melismatic liturgical singing tradition used by some in the Eastern Orthodox Church. There's only one instance at the very beginning of the play where the church choir is mentioned at all, but in Rachmaninov's piece, this choir becomes a very important reoccurring theme.

The second part is the brightest as it portrays the image of a young innocent girl. It is about the awakening of feelings and femininity in young Gretchen. The end of this part is a blooming love duet unclouded by future terrible events.

The finale is on a large scale, a horrible whirlwind movement with the theme of *Dies irae*, which has become a symbol of darkness and death itself. A disembodied theme comes up twice in this piece, which can be imagined as the spirit of the deceased Gretchen.

The sonata ends in the opposite way to Goethe's tragedy, or Mahler's Eighth Symphony — there is neither enlightenment nor forgiveness. The sonata ends terribly when the chorus and the *Znamenny* chant become a death sentence.

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