

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 17 March 2023  
7.30pm

Daniil Trifonov piano  
Sergei Babayan piano

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Suite No. 1 (Fantaisie-tableaux) Op. 5 (1893)

*I. Barcarolle • II. La nuit ... L'amour •  
III. Les larmes • IV. Pâques*

Suite No. 2 Op. 17 (1900-1)

*I. Introduction. Alla marcia • II. Valse. Presto •  
III. Romance. Andantino • IV. Tarantelle. Presto*

Interval

Symphonic Dances Op. 45 (1940)

*I. Non allegro • II. Andante con moto. Tempo di valse •  
III. Lento assai - Allegro vivace*

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Before the advent of recording and broadcasting, music lovers often got to know orchestral works through transcriptions. At first sight, **Rachmaninov's** Suite No. 1 might appear to be ideally suited to that amateur domestic audience – and as a young composer who had recently embarked on a professional career, Rachmaninov would have been keen to write a work that might sell widely. Yet the suite's use of two pianos – and the technical demands it makes of its performers – mean that it belongs more properly to the concert hall.

It was premièred in November 1893 by Pavel Pabst, professor of piano at the Moscow Conservatory, and the composer himself. Its dedication is to Tchaikovsky, whose death just a few weeks beforehand robbed Rachmaninov of an important patron and source of inspiration. Originally entitled *Fantasie-tableaux*, the suite suggests its composer's affinity with the visual arts. Yet as Rachmaninov confessed in an interview given in America in 1925, he was yet more drawn to literature: 'Of all the arts I love poetry the best after music... Poetry inspires music – for there is so much music in poetry. They are like twin sisters.'

When first published, each movement was prefaced by a verse epigraph. The first – from Lermontov – evokes a gondola gliding over the Venetian lagoon by night. Byron hymns the erotic frisson of a nocturnal assignation. Melancholy tears, shed – again – at night, are the subject of a poem by Tyutchev that inspired the third movement. The mood lifts in the finale, a celebration of Orthodox Easter that cites the Slavophile poet, Khomyakov, and surely also echoes the coronation scene from Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*.

The bravura march that opens the Suite No. 2 gives little indication of the years of depression that Rachmaninov had endured after the disastrous premièred of his First Symphony in March 1897. A period of therapy in the first months of 1900 alleviated his emotional turmoil, and the successful premièred of two movements of the Second Piano Concerto that December further confirmed Rachmaninov's sense of creative renewal. The conductor on that occasion was his cousin, the pianist Alexander Siloti, and it was Rachmaninov and Siloti who gave the first performance of the suite in November 1901.

The first suite had drawn on three Russian poems, and in its audible evocation of various scenes, it paid homage to the tradition of quasi-realistic mood pictures that had been so central to 19th-century Russian music. The equally atmospheric second suite contains many moments of delicate impressionism – especially in its third-movement *Romance*, which is more of a watercolour than a thickly textured oil. This is preceded by a waltz that has the gossamer lines of a Mendelssohn scherzo. Like so many artists from the European North, Rachmaninov was drawn to the light and warmth of the Mediterranean, and the finale is a sprightly *Tarantelle* that captures the sights and sounds of a sojourn in Italy that he made in 1901.

The frequent journeys that Rachmaninov made before 1917 were typical of the cosmopolitan tastes of the Russian gentry. He travelled happily to Italy and Switzerland, spent several years living in Dresden, and undertook extensive tours around Europe and North America. After the October Revolution, however, he left his homeland forever, becoming instead an itinerant émigré. Committing himself to hundreds of performances each year, he found little time for composition. At the end of his life, he looked back with regret on the quarter century he had lived abroad: 'in losing my country, I lost myself also. To the exile whose musical roots, traditions and background have been annihilated, there remains no desire for self-expression; no solace apart from the unbroken and unbreakable silence of his memories.'

There can be no doubting the profound sense of loss that characterised Rachmaninov's life between 1917 and his death in 1943, yet the six numbered works that he did compose during this period are life-enhancing testaments to his still powerful sense of creativity. The *Symphonic Dances* were completed on Long Island in the autumn of 1940; after nearly a decade living in the austere beautiful Villa Senar on the banks of Lake Lucerne, Rachmaninov fled Europe once again. He had originally thought of calling his new work *Fantastic Dances*, and there is certainly something brooding and fatalistic about their atmosphere. Like Ravel's *La valse* (1920), which conjured up the malevolence and destruction of the First World War, Rachmaninov turned to dance in order to convey the violence and brutality that had been unleashed on the world in 1939. His use of the *Dies irae* theme, which he had cited in so many other works, seemed more grimly appropriate than ever.

Rachmaninov had also considered naming the dances 'Morning', 'Noon', and 'Night'. If this seems like a subconscious allusion to Oedipus's solution to the riddle of the Sphinx ('What walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon and three at night?' – 'Man: as an infant, he crawls on all fours; as an adult, he walks on two legs and; in old age, he uses a walking stick'), then there is no sense of creative fatigue about the *Symphonic Dances*. Admittedly, there are moments of wistful introspection, and Rachmaninov includes significant quotations from two pre-revolutionary works: the unpublished and (then) unknown First Symphony, and the *All-Night Vigil* (1915). Yet he inscribed the end of the score with a triumphant 'Alleluia', a vindication of a life devoted to art, and – perhaps – a belief that peace might once again prevail. The orchestral version of the *Symphonic Dances* was premièred by the Philadelphia Orchestra in January 1941. We can only imagine the performance of the two-piano version that Rachmaninov gave with Vladimir Horowitz at a private party in Beverly Hills the following August.

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