

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 18 May 2023
7.30pm

Nikolai Lugansky piano

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Moments musicaux Op. 16 (1896)

Moment musical in B flat minor

Moment musical in E flat minor

Moment musical in B minor

Moment musical in E minor

Moment musical in D flat

Moment musical in C

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 36 (1913)

I. Allegro agitato • II. Non allegro - Lento •

III. Allegro molto

Interval

13 Preludes Op. 32 (1910)

Prelude in C • Prelude in B flat minor •

Prelude in E • Prelude in E minor •

Prelude in G • Prelude in F minor •

Prelude in F • Prelude in A minor •

Prelude in A • Prelude in B minor •

Prelude in B • Prelude in G sharp minor •

Prelude in D flat

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Moments musicaux is the third of Rachmaninov's relatively small collection of piano pieces. The style belongs to his earlier creative period, when Tchaikovsky's influence could still be felt.

I think the melodic lines of these 'musical moments', at least those in the minor keys, belong to a genre we might call 'urban romance'. We hear the same language in many of Tchaikovsky's works: music sung from the heart, from the depths of the soul, among the urban intelligentsia, the minor nobility.

The first *Moment* is the longest, a three-part piece with a sad, soulful motif. The mood is elegiac, with a small middle section in the major and a vanishing reprise. The second is exquisite, filled with tremulous intonations. The third is an elegy with a funereal rhythm. The fourth is the most popular; the continual turbulent movement of the sixteenths is borrowed from his early fugue in D minor, composed in 1891. There's a resemblance to Chopin's 'Revolutionary' *Etude*, but with a heightened dynamic and emotional temperature.

The fifth is a brief moment of happiness. One can hear distant bells, summer heat... It is a rare piece in the composer's oeuvre without drama or conflict, fully contemplative. Time stands still. The sixth is grandiose Rachmaninov, giving a full understanding of this titan of the piano. He uses expressive methods never deployed on such a scale before. Feelings of bubbling joy and triumph here evidence strength and youth, not overshadowed by defeat or loss.

The first version of the Second Sonata was created just before the First World War. It is this great artist's premonition of the coming human tragedy and, particularly, the tragedy of his motherland.

In the first movement, the monothematicism is very developed; even the contrasting main and secondary themes are based on the same motifs. This chromatic descent becomes the main theme of the sonata – both in the first movement and in the finale.

The original version was written by Rachmaninov The Composer for Rachmaninov The Pianist, without thinking of other performers. The style is large scale, appropriate for the greatest piano virtuoso of the 20th Century. Though Rachmaninov played it often, other pianists were daunted by its technical difficulties. Thus, in 1931, the revised version was made. This edition was very popular in the USSR and was performed more often than the original.

Like most Soviet pianists, I first heard the sonata in its revised form. The original wasn't performed in the Soviet Union until the 1960s when it was played by Van Cliburn, winner of the Tchaikovsky Competition. I only heard it after I had already played the revised version, but it impressed me a lot. I immediately wanted to play those fragments of beautiful music not included in the second version. There are episodes in the first movement that connect the secondary and final themes which are not only beautiful but carry an important formative load. The second movement consists of free variations on a melody in 12/8, with an improvisatory middle section. In the revised version, Rachmaninov created almost a wholly new middle section where the main motif of the first movement sounds like an *idée fixe*.

Both central episodes of this slow movement are wonderful in their own way. However, I prefer the original one - especially the movement's end.

The finale is a kind of *perpetuum mobile* with a lyrical, sensual second theme which becomes the apotheosis of the sonata in the recapitulation. I believe these reductions of the revision to be the result of age, when Rachmaninov liked verbosity less and less.

The *13 Preludes* form Rachmaninov's most intense and complex cycle of piano miniatures. While preserving his own large-scale textures, there are changes of musical language rooted in the study of Russian chants. This connection with ancient Russian culture becomes very important in *Preludes* Nos. 4, 10 and 11, and can also be felt in Nos. 8, 9 and 13.

The cycle contains several peaks: the first four preludes can be played in a single block.

- No. 1 is a rapid, joyful introduction.
- No. 2 is filled with a feeling of twilight, anxiety and fear.
- No. 3 echoes the *Etude-tableau* in E flat Op. 33 No. 6, with its imagery of a bustling fair.
- No. 4 is the first culmination; for me, it conjures the Battle of Kerzhenets in Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh*, a dreadful battle in which the entire army is killed. The exposition and reprise are particularly diatonic (especially for a late-Romantic like Rachmaninov) and echo the language of the *All-Night Vigil* Op. 37.

The next five are on a less heavy scale, and perhaps do not carry such a philosophical load:

- The famous No. 5 is an image of a gorgeous sunlit summer landscape.
- No. 6 is a brief description of a terrible, destructive storm.
- No. 7 represents a kind of mystery or paradox.
- No. 8 is an endless, anxious movement woven with *Dies irae* motifs.
- No. 9 is a picture of spring, full of vague, joyful excitement. Here, nature is not only revived but is also filled with sensuality.
- No. 10 is the longest, a philosophical journey to another world. The composer allegedly gave it the mysterious title 'Return', but I believe the content is more mystical, and if it is a return then it is Orpheus's, without Eurydice.

The last three leave room for light and joy:

- No. 11 is serene; perhaps a naïve idea of a medieval Russian peasant family, with dancing, church motifs and hints of bell-ringing.
- One of the most popular is No. 12, representing an image of a troika rushing off with its barely audible bells jingling.
- No. 13 is the conclusion of the cycle (and also the last of Rachmaninov's 24 preludes). It is a grandiose piece recalling Easter Night, the most important Orthodox holiday. After a solemn introduction, an image of silence and night appears, but the good news of the resurrection starts to sound ever louder, becoming triumphant jubilation, celebrating victory over death.

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