

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 1 April 2023
7.30pm

Rachmaninov 150th Birthday Concert

Steven Osborne piano

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

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

I. Allegro moderato

II. Lento

III. Allegro molto

Interval

Prelude in D Op. 23 No. 4 (1901-3)

Etude-tableau in D minor Op. 33 No. 5 (1911)

Prelude in G Op. 32 No. 5 (1910)

Etude-tableau in C minor Op. 33 No. 3 (1911)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 36 (1913 rev. 1931) *arranged by Steven Osborne*

I. Allegro agitato

II. Non allegro

III. Allegro molto

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30

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The first years of the 20th Century had been exceedingly busy ones for Rachmaninov. As well as conducting dozens of performances at Savva Mamontov's Private Opera in Moscow and then at the Bolshoi Theatre, he returned to composition after the fiasco of the première of his First Symphony in 1897. Between 1900 and 1906, he completed a series of masterpieces that included the Cello Sonata, the Second Piano Concerto, and two operas – *Francesca da Rimini* and *The Miserly Knight*. Exhausted, he headed to Dresden, where he lived until April 1909.

Germany certainly offered rest and relaxation. It also offered new inspiration. Rachmaninov heard works by Richard Strauss and Wagner, and he produced a burst of compositions that attested to the freedom he felt by being away from Russia. If the Second Symphony has its share of Slavic nostalgia, other works show him to be more receptive to foreign influences. He planned an opera, *Monna Vanna*, based on a play by Maeterlinck; another cosmopolitan work was *The Isle of the Dead*, inspired by a black-and-white reproduction of Arnold Böcklin's famous painting. The Third Piano Concerto was designed for an American concert tour in the winter of 1909-10.

Perhaps the least well-known work of this period is the Piano Sonata No. 1, composed in early 1907. Rachmaninov programmed it rarely – and not at all after he left Russia permanently in 1917. He wrote disparagingly of it, fearing that 'no one will ever play it because of its difficulty and length, and perhaps too – and this is the main reason – because of its dubious musical merits.' Even after the cuts that he made on the advice of his friend, the pianist Konstantin Igumnov, the sonata lasts around 35 minutes in performance. One reason for its vast scale can be found in Rachmaninov's reading: 'I was lured into such length by the programme, or, to be more precise, by one guiding idea: that of three contrasting types from one outstanding literary work.' That work was Goethe's *Faust*, and the sonata's opening movement seems to evoke the tormented, tumultuous personality of Faust himself. This is followed by a slow movement that suggests the purity and innocence of Gretchen. The finale conjures up an energetic Witches' Sabbath and the diabolical world of Mephistopheles.

In the end, Rachmaninov did not share his programme with audiences. Goethe's tragedy may have provided him with an initial form of inspiration, yet the resulting richness of the sonata's themes and the sophistication of their treatment and development require no extramusical commentary, only a profound sense of imagination. So what of the *Etudes-tableaux*, Op. 33, composed in 1911? Their title hints at some kind of visual element, and in 1930, Rachmaninov disclosed short programmes behind five of the studies that Respighi orchestrated that year. Yet these 'secret explanations' are so trite and derivative that they can be dismissed as confessions of their composer's

carefully guarded inner world. In fact, when the *Etudes-tableaux* were finally published, Rachmaninov omitted the two numbers heard this evening, which were only rediscovered in 1948. He cannot have felt too negatively about them, though, as he recycled part of the C minor *Etude-tableau* in his Fourth Piano Concerto in 1926.

The 24 preludes – one in each major and minor key – that Rachmaninov composed between 1892 and 1910 clearly emulate the example of Chopin, yet there is another source of inspiration behind this sequence. Interviewed in 1910, Rachmaninov claimed: 'A prelude, in its very nature, is absolute music, and cannot with propriety be twisted into a tone-poem or a piece of musical impressionism.' He went on: 'its primal function is to give intellectual pleasure by the beauty and variety of its form. This was the end sought by Bach in his wonderful series of Preludes, which are a source of unending delight to the educated musical listener.' As he cautioned audiences: 'If we must have the psychology of the Prelude, let it be understood that its function is not to express a mood, but to induce it.'

Rachmaninov spent the spring of 1913 in Rome. There, he composed his favourite work, a cantata for soloists, chorus and orchestra based on a Russian translation of Poe's *The Bells*. He may have found himself in Italy, yet it was the soundscape of Imperial Russia that he heard in his inner ear. As he recalled: 'The sound of church bells dominated all the cities I used to know - Novgorod, Kyiv, Moscow. They accompanied every Russian from childhood to the grave, and no composer could escape their influence. All my life I have taken pleasure in the differing moods and music of gladly chiming and mournfully tolling bells.'

The other work that Rachmaninov began in Rome was his Piano Sonata No. 2, which is filled with the pealing of bells, especially at the sonorous climax of its first movement. Yet the sonata is more than a piece of decorative scene painting, still less a nostalgic evocation of a Russia that was soon to be swept away by warfare and revolution. Underneath its characteristically lush surface is an astonishingly rigorous command of form and structure, and the whole sonata is bound together by the repetition of key themes and motifs, suggesting the example of Liszt's great B minor sonata. Eventually, Rachmaninov came to feel dissatisfied with what he saw as the sonata's length and complexity, and in 1931, he undertook a thorough revision of his sonata, radically excising a number of passages he deemed superfluous. Not everybody has been convinced by Rachmaninov's revisions, not least Vladimir Horowitz, who produced his own edition of the sonata in 1943. Following Horowitz's example, Steven Osborne performs his own version of Rachmaninov's towering score.

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