

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 20 March 2023
7.30pm

Nikolai Lugansky piano

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

10 Preludes Op. 23 (1901-3)

Prelude in F sharp minor

Prelude in B flat

Prelude in D minor

Prelude in D

Prelude in G minor

Prelude in E flat

Prelude in C minor

Prelude in A flat

Prelude in E flat minor

Prelude in G flat

Variations on a Theme of Corelli Op. 42 (1931)

Interval

Etudes-tableaux Op. 39 (1916-7)

Etude-tableau in C minor

Etude-tableau in A minor

Etude-tableau in F sharp minor

Etude-tableau in B minor

Etude-tableau in E flat minor

Etude-tableau in A minor

Etude-tableau in C minor

Etude-tableau in D minor

Etude-tableau in D

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The 24 preludes – one in each major and minor key – that **Rachmaninov** composed between 1892 and 1910 clearly emulate the example of Chopin and signal the young Russian's desire to be greeted as a composer-pianist in the grand Romantic tradition. That is probably how we hear him still, yet there is a more surprising source of inspiration behind this sequence. Interviewed in America in 1910, Rachmaninov was pressed for the story behind his ubiquitous C sharp minor prelude. He replied: '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 his listeners: '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.'

We will search in vain for the inspiration behind Rachmaninov's *10 Preludes* Op. 23. Written, with the exception of the fifth, in the early months of 1903, they attest to the astonishing return of creativity that followed the disastrous première of the First Symphony in 1897. After a period of depression, there came a sudden rush of fluent and expressive masterpieces, including the Second Piano Concerto and Sonata for Cello and Piano. Some have suggested that the *Preludes* – like the many songs he composed around the same time – were the result of financial necessity (he had just married his first cousin, Natalya Satina, and would soon have a growing family to support). Yet that is to overlook the enormous artistic ambition they embody – and it is certainly hard to imagine many amateur pianists tackling their considerable virtuosity. Rachmaninov regularly programmed individual preludes in his many recitals, although he never performed them as a set. When heard together, their sophistication becomes palpable, and a coherent sense of architecture emerges out of Rachmaninov's handling of recurrent melodic motifs and imaginative exploration of the harmonic relationships linking the individual movements.

So what of the inspiration behind the *Etudes-tableaux*? Like the *Preludes*, their title alludes to the legacy of Chopin, yet the addition of 'tableaux' suggests some kind of visual stimulus, perhaps even a hidden narrative. Are we, then, closer to Musorgsky's *Pictures from an Exhibition* and the whole world of 19th-century programme music? The fact that Rachmaninov disclosed five short programmes behind the selection of *Etudes-tableaux* that were orchestrated by Respighi in 1930 might suggest as much. Yet these 'secret explanations' are so trite, derivative and unilluminating that they can be conveniently dismissed as confessions of their composer's carefully guarded inner world.

Not that Rachmaninov was oblivious to painting. After all, his brooding symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead* (1909) refers explicitly to Arnold Böcklin's painting of the same name. Yet, as he warned audiences in 1941, there was little point in trying to deduce what lay behind his works: 'When composing, I find it of great help to have in mind a book just recently read, or a beautiful picture, or a poem. Sometimes a definite story is kept in mind, which I try to convert into tones without disclosing the source of my inspiration. By that I do not mean that I write program music. Since the sources of my inspiration are never revealed, the public must listen to the music absolutely.'

The first book of *Etudes-tableaux* (Op. 33) was composed in 1911, and Rachmaninov followed this with a second one (Op. 39) in 1916-7. Listening to these 'absolutely' helps us get a sense of their daring exploration of new forms and ideas. For many years, Rachmaninov had been dismissed by hostile critics as an outdated hangover from the 19th Century and compared unfavourably to the more adventurous figure of Skryabin. In the *Etudes-tableaux*, especially the Op. 39 set, he responded to such criticism by experimenting with an edgy, laconic and occasionally sardonic musical language, without ever sacrificing his abiding love of melody.

The *Etudes-tableaux* Op. 39, were the last works that Rachmaninov composed in Russia before he emigrated, first to Scandinavia and eventually to the United States. There, he overhauled his piano technique, expanded his repertoire to include works by other composers, and set about establishing himself as the world's greatest living virtuoso pianist. This gamble paid off financially, but it came at a cost. Little time remained for composition, and for a time, it seemed as though Rachmaninov's inspiration had dried up, just as it had after the debacle of his First Symphony. Yet the six works written in emigration, though small in number, are among his greatest compositions. The *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* Op. 42 are not, in fact, based on a theme by the Italian Baroque master, but on an anonymous theme, 'La folia'. They date from 1931, and like the *Variations on a Theme of Chopin* Op. 22 (1902-3) from nearly three decades earlier, show Rachmaninov's creative dialogue with the musical culture of Western Europe (by contrast, he largely avoided the kind of folkloric nationalism pursued by other Russian composers). Yet where the Chopin variations declare Rachmaninov's allegiance to 19th-century Romanticism, the Corelli variations suggest something of the world of interwar Neoclassicism. To be sure, there is nothing of the brittleness of Hindemith or Stravinsky here, yet Rachmaninov was more attuned to musical modernism than is often grasped. He spoke warmly of Poulenc, for instance, and if you listen carefully, you may capture a suggestion of Rachmaninov's genially humorous personality, as well as his more familiar melancholy.

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