

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 25 September 2023
1.00pm

Louis Lortie piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

6 Moments musicaux D780 (1823-8)

*No. 1 in C • No. 2 in A flat • No. 3 in F minor •
No. 4 in C sharp minor • No. 5 in F minor • No. 6 in A flat*

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Moments musicaux Op. 16 (1896)

*No. 1 in B flat minor • No. 2 in E flat minor •
No. 3 in B minor • No. 4 in E minor •
No. 5 in D flat • No. 6 in C*



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Rachmaninov's title is surprising. Having used reasonably generic titles for previous similar publications (*Morceaux de fantaisie* and *Morceaux de salon*) '*Moments musicaux*' stands out as it had only once before been used: for Schubert's pieces of 1828. And he doesn't just use the title: like Schubert, he offers six solo piano pieces which may be performed together or individually. Most of them (in both sets) are in a ternary form – ABA, where B is a contrasting section to A. Also, Rachmaninov's third *Moment* is often considered the most 'Russian' piece in the set, with its deep bass notes and sombre melody – perhaps a covert further tribute to Schubert whose third *Moment* was known as 'Air Russe'. Some also detect an echo of Schubert's first *Moment* (the timing of a pause) in Rachmaninov's first. This is odd because, in a performing and composing career that lasted another 47 years, Rachmaninov neither played nor recorded any of Schubert's major piano works (only an impromptu or two, and them very rarely) nor penned any further tributes. So why this title? It is intriguing, and perhaps has mostly to do with money and publishing.

The story goes that **Rachmaninov** was confronted by acute financial problems in 1896, exacerbated by being robbed of a substantial sum on a train. He had to work his way out of the crisis, not least by writing a lot of music to commission, which included '6 piano pieces' he mentions in a letter to fellow composer (and dedicatee of *Moments musicaux*) Aleksandr Zatyayevich. As a composer hoping to profit by publishing short piano pieces for the domestic market he was in distinguished company: Beethoven, Schumann, Sibelius, Grieg, Debussy and Schubert among others all did it with varying levels of integrity, but where his six pieces differ from the majority of others is that four of them are forbiddingly demanding, virtuosic showpieces of the kind most amateur pianists are more likely to enjoy listening to than contemplate tackling. So, one must ask: just how large a market did he and his publisher think would be receptive to them? And did they use a friendly, familiar title such as *Moments musicaux* in the hope of helping sales?

The title was not **Schubert's**: as was common practice in his time, publishers freely appended titles to enhance saleability of new pieces. Schubert's publisher, Maximilian Joseph Leidesdorf (himself an extremely successful composer of piano music tailored to the talented amateur performer) was a canny man. Though not the first to publish collections of popular piano pieces, he was ingenious at packaging them up. He issued annual 'Christmas Albums' of music for home performance and two of the *Moments musicaux* first appeared in them: No. 3 (1823, with the title 'Air russe') and No. 6 (1824, 'Les plaintes d'un troubadour'). The remaining four were written in 1827 and all six published in two volumes in 1828, which is when Leidesdorf's penchant for titles

deserted him – in rather inept French he called them 'Moments musical'. These have become some of Schubert's best loved works, and for good reason. Brian Newbould puts it beautifully: 'They are excellent ambassadors for his art, displaying a populist facet without compromising his true self.' And populist or not, they have expressive profundity and hold magical shifts of key and mood that beguile any listener. The yearning quality of No. 3 and No. 6 especially is profoundly lovely. These pieces lie well within the grasp of an excellent amateur (it is surely no accident that all bar No. 5 are gently paced) so offer many, many players an opportunity to share fully in the beauty of Schubert's expressive and spiritual world.

The shape and spirit of Rachmaninov's publication is utterly different to Schubert. Six pieces, three slower and introspective alternating with three that are faster and brilliant. Only two (the third and fifth) are broadly accessible to determined amateurs. Like many pianist-composers, he could not help but write with his own facility in mind. He had enormous hands which could readily stretch 12 notes on the keyboard and do so at speed, mid-phrase; so, these are not pieces for the petite. His individual fingers were also remarkably strong and independent, so one-handed five-note chords are not uncommon in this score, and he naturally thought in terms of sustaining multiple lines of melody and texture. It has been suggested that Rachmaninov's *Moments* were his response to great 19th-century pianist-composers (besides Schubert): it is easy to sense the shadow of Chopin behind the introspective nocturnes (No. 1 and No. 5), while No. 4 is an open homage to Chopin's 'Revolutionary' *Etude* with its tempestuous left-hand accompaniment. No. 6 thunders as Liszt and Schumann had thundered before it.

Returning to the question of that title, it is worth considering who the publisher was that commissioned Rachmaninov in 1896: it was not his usual publisher, Karl Gutheil, but *his* biggest competitor, Pyotr Jurgenson. From humble beginnings he had built the biggest and most prestigious music publishing house in Russia with the most famous Russian composer of the day – Tchaikovsky – at its heart. Unlike Schubert's Leidesdorf, he was no composer, but his loyalty and compassion towards his composers was remarkable. It extended to intervening in their personal affairs when called upon, and even putting himself at financial risk to help them: he had done it with Tchaikovsky (accepting works for publication which were unlikely to earn him much) and it is easy to imagine that when Tchaikovsky's protégé, Rachmaninov, was faced with financial crisis, he might step in with a helpful commission then chose a friendly-sounding title to market it. There is, however, no documentary evidence on the subject at all - so we will never know for sure.

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