

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 30 March 2024
7.30pm

Alexander Melnikov piano

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

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

Variations on a Theme of Chopin Op. 22 (1902-3)

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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Throughout his life, **Rachmaninov** was fascinated by variation technique, which allowed him to combine his gift for melody and expression with his formidable technical command of long-range musical architecture. Perhaps his most famous work in this regard is the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* Op. 43 (1934). Less obviously, the slow movement of his Piano Concerto No. 3 Op. 30 (1909) also employs this technique. Similarly, two of his major works for solo piano conform to this pattern – the *Variations on a Theme of Chopin* Op. 22 (1902-3) and the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* Op. 42 (1931). To hear them in the same programme is to be able to compare and contrast works dating from very different periods, yet conforming to the same compositional principle.

The Corelli variations are one of the six numbered works that Rachmaninov wrote in emigration. As he confessed in an interview in 1934: 'When I left Russia, I left behind me my desire to compose: 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.' Yet the Corelli variations, written in 1931, suggest that Rachmaninov's muse was not entirely barren. They are not, in fact, based on a theme by the Italian Baroque master at all, but on an anonymous theme, 'La Folia' (when this was pointed out to Rachmaninov, he merely shrugged). In the interwar years, many composers flirted with neoclassicism, and even Rachmaninov – normally a passionate foe of musical modernism and innovation for its own sake – seems to have been drawn to the cult of the Baroque era. On the surface, his approach to 'La Folia' seems far removed from the brittleness and witty stylisation of Hindemith, Stravinsky or Poulenc, and his variations seem like a self-conscious hangover from the grander era of Romanticism. Yet when considered more carefully, the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* reveal a piquant handling of chromatic harmony, a terse relationship to form and an edgy rhythmic drive that can feel decidedly modern, if not explicitly experimental. They might even be seen as a musical analogue to the austere beautiful Bauhaus villa on the banks of Lake Lucerne that Rachmaninov had built shortly afterwards.

The variations on Chopin's Prelude in C minor were composed some three decades earlier and honour a composer whom Rachmaninov revered throughout his life. He programmed a substantial number of Chopin's solo piano works in his many recitals, and he honoured him by composing a similar sequence of 24 preludes in each major and minor key. Rachmaninov was clearly looking back to the 19th Century here and making a claim to be seen as the next in the line of great Romantic composer-pianists. Yet the *Variations on a Theme of Chopin* are also evidence of the new directions that his music would take in the first

decade of the 20th Century. After the catastrophic failure of his Symphony No. 1 Op. 13 in 1897 (possibly because its conductor, Glazunov, was drunk on the podium), Rachmaninov underwent a profound creative crisis, falling silent for some three years. A course of therapy from physician Nikolai Dahl unlocked his desire to compose again, and series of ambitious, fluent and confident masterpieces soon followed – including the Piano Concerto No. 1 Op. 18 (1901-2), the Cello Sonata Op. 19 (1901), and – of course – the Chopin variations. They are, at times, gloomy and introspective (in keeping with the minor key and solemn mood of Chopin's original prelude), but they end in a burst of confidence and delight, giving the lie to Stravinsky's acid description of Rachmaninov as 'a six-and-a-half-foot scowl'.

The second set of *Etudes-tableaux*, Op. 39, was the last work that Rachmaninov composed in Russia before he emigrated in late 1917 (an earlier set, Op. 33, dates from 1911). Their title may appear to allude to the legacy of Chopin, yet the addition of 'tableaux' suggests some kind of visual stimulus, perhaps even a hidden narrative. The fact that Rachmaninov disclosed five short programmes behind the selection of *Etudes-tableaux* orchestrated by Respighi in 1930 suggests as much. Yet these 'secret explanations' are so trite and formulaic that they can be easily discarded as confessions of their composer's carefully guarded inner world. Not that Rachmaninov was entirely 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.'

Listening to the *Etudes-tableaux* 'absolutely' helps us grasp 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 and even the upstart Prokofiev. In the *Etudes-tableaux*, Rachmaninov responded to such criticism by experimenting with an edgy, laconic and occasionally sardonic musical language, without ever sacrificing his abiding love of melody. Heard together at a single sitting, they also reveal a powerful sense of musical dramaturgy, moving through a turbulent sequence of minor keys, before arriving at their radiant conclusion.

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