



Tuesday 18 2023, 7.30pm – 9.20pm
St Mary's Church, Petworth

Lucy Parham (piano) & Alex Jennings (narrator):
Elégie – Rachmaninoff, A Heart in Exile

Rachmaninoff	Elégie Op.3 No.1	Chopin	Waltz in C sharp minor Op.64 No.2
Rachmaninoff	Polichinelle Op.3 No.4	Scriabin	Etude in C sharp minor Op.42 No.5
Rachmaninoff	Prelude in G Op.32 No.5	Rachmaninoff	Moment Musical No.3 in B minor, Op.16
Tchaikovsky	Troika (November from <i>The Seasons</i>)	John Stafford Smith	The Star- Spangled Banner (arr. Rachmaninoff)
Rachmaninoff	Prelude in C sharp minor Op.3 No.2	Rachmaninoff	Moment Musical No.5 in D flat Op.16
Rachmaninoff	Prelude in E flat Op.23 No.6	Kreisler/Rachmaninoff	Liebesleid (Love's sorrow)
Rachmaninoff	Etude-Tableau in E flat Op.33 No.7	Rachmaninoff	Moment Musical No.6 in C Op.16

I N T E R V A L

PROGRAMME NOTES

The *Morceaux de Fantaisie* (Fantasy Pieces) Op. 3 were Rachmaninoff's first set of solo piano pieces. Written in 1892, when he was just 18 years old, they are very much in the spirit of Chopin, whom Rachmaninoff admired greatly. The five pieces are dedicated to his composition teacher, Anton Arensky, and each has its own distinctive style.

The first, *Elégie*, suggests a haunting nocturne until it reaches its powerful climax. The fourth, *Polichinelle*, is a virtuosic showpiece based on the *commedia dell'arte* character Pulcinella. Its dazzling outer sections contrast with the more lyrical central episode, and it consistently proved a great favourite with audiences at Rachmaninoff's recitals. *Polichinelle's* fame, however, is exceeded by the second in the set: the Prelude in C sharp minor, inspired by the tolling bells of the Russian Orthodox Church, so much part of the composer's childhood. Such was the piece's popularity that Rachmaninoff eventually came to detest it, even calling it "this damned little Prelude". But it earned him a substantial amount of money and remains, without doubt, his best-loved solo piano piece. It was even included in a Walt Disney cartoon, *Mickey's Opry House*. The composer told Disney: "I have heard my inescapable piece done marvellously by some of the best pianists in the world, and murdered cruelly by amateurs, but was never more stirred than by the great Maestro Mouse!"

Like Chopin and Scriabin, Rachmaninoff composed sets of preludes for solo piano, but his works in the genre are often more extended and substantial in form. "I think the Preludes of Op. 23 (1901-1903) are far better music than my first Prelude in C sharp minor," he said, "but the public has shown no disposition to share in my belief ..." Like Chopin's preludes, Rachmaninoff's two books of preludes cover all the major and minor keys, and while the composer never played them complete in his concerts, today's pianists frequently perform them as a set. From the second set, Op. 32 (1910), the gentle Prelude in G No.5 has an unstable, rocking quality, produced by its left-hand motif of continuous groups of five semiquavers. The Prelude in E flat Op.23 No.6 is one of Rachmaninoff's most personal compositions for the piano, written after the birth of his first daughter, Irina, as an outpouring of tenderness and nostalgia.

Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) first met Rachmaninoff when the eleven-year-old Rachmaninoff was studying with Nikolai Zverev in Moscow. At one of Zverev's famous Sunday soirées, Rachmaninoff played Tchaikovsky's *Troika* ('November' from *The Seasons*) "to the great man himself". An evocative and lyrical piece, it captures the essence of the Russian winter and you can clearly hear the sleigh bells in the right hand as the piece progresses. Rachmaninoff recorded *Troika* three times and he was still including it in his recitals half a century after he first played it to Tchaikovsky.

The *Etude Tableau* in E flat Op.33 No.7 was composed in 1911 at Rachmaninoff's beloved country estate, Ivanoka. It belongs to the first set of *Etudes Tableaux* and combines a military mood with the chiming of bells that pervade so much of Rachmaninoff's music. A virtuoso work, this étude belongs to a set that marked a shift in the composer's style.

The influence of Chopin (1810- 1849) on Rachmaninoff cannot be underestimated. "His exquisite sense of tone colour, his gorgeous harmonies and his always pianistic realisations of the keyboard, make his works a kind of bible for pianists," said Rachmaninoff. "It seems astonishing that since the time of Chopin no master has arisen to enrich the literature of the piano in such a magnificent manner".

Chopin's Waltz in C sharp minor Op.64 No.2 is a far more reflective and wistful piece than its predecessor, the 'Minute' Waltz Op.64 No.1. The waltz was, of course, but a popular dance in the nineteenth century, but Chopin's waltzes were never intended for the ballroom.

Scriabin (1872- 1915) was another composer who, in his early works, was heavily influenced by Chopin. He and Rachmaninoff were childhood friends and students together, but Scriabin died tragically at the early age of 43. Rachmaninoff, who was a pallbearer at his funeral, subsequently devoted many performances to his works. With its huge climax, the technically challenging Etude in C sharp minor Op.42 No.5 is post-Romantic in style, but Scriabin begins to push new harmonic boundaries in the piece.

The vast majority of Rachmaninoff's music was composed before he left Russia. He first arrived in the USA in 1918 having escaped the Russian Revolution, but found it hard to recapture the inspiration he had found as a composer at Ivanovka. He did, however, make some notable arrangements whilst in America, among them versions of the American national anthem *The Star-Spangled Banner* and Fritz Kreisler's *Liebesleid* (Love's sorrow). In his homage to Kreisler – who was Rachmaninoff's frequent partner in a violin and piano duo – he succeeded in creating a challengingly virtuosic piano masterpiece, while never losing sight of the source material's waltzing poignancy.

The *Moments Musicaux* Op.16, composed in 1896, were far more substantial and technically complex than the earlier Op.3 and Op. 10 sets of piano pieces. No.3 in B minor (*Andante*), is a funeral march; the lyrical and gentle No.5 in D flat (*Adagio sostenuto*) has a lilting left-hand figure that is reminiscent of a barcarolle. It creates a sense of peace before the concluding item in the set, No.6 in C (*Maestoso*), which is huge, noble and mighty – a kind of apotheosis. It features a repetitive chordal structure that begins *forte*; the challenge for the performer is to pace it with drive and energy whilst leaving space for the final *fortissimo* climax. While the *Moments Musicaux* are often performed as a set, such is their substance that each of them can stand impressively on its own.

Notes by Lucy Parham 2017

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