

## **Rachmaninoff plays Rachmaninoff liner notes**

Besides being a great composer, Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) was also a marvellously accomplished and original performer on the piano, an instrument which has never lacked outstanding players. He cut gramophone recordings between 1919 and 1942, a period during which many improvements were made in the quality of recorded sound. Yet by 21<sup>st</sup>-century standards Rachmaninoff's work for the gramophone sounds relatively primitive, thin and lacking the full resonance of which the piano is capable. These Zenph re-performances, which completely eliminate the technological limitations of the past, use computerised captures of attacks, key-speeds, pitches, durations, plus interpretative nuances including those added by Rachmaninoff's always subtle pedalling. And all this is done on a 1909 Steinway concert grand in optimum condition such as the composer always played himself.

These re-performances are programmed in the order of their original recordings. Indeed, the sequence begins and ends with Rachmaninoff's paraphrases of items by his friend Fritz Kreisler, *Liebesleid* and *Liebesfreud*. These are in both pianistic and harmonic terms elaborate, sophisticated settings of what initially were simple tuneful encore pieces. The perfumed luxuriance of such performances immediately establishes what an extraordinary pianist Rachmaninoff was and each gives a bewitching demonstration of the real meaning of *rubato*.

Next comes the Prelude in C sharp minor Op. 3 No. 2, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most popular classical pieces, which Rachmaninoff had to play wherever he went. From the 1890s onwards it made his name familiar to the musical worlds of Western Europe and America when his other work was still unknown. A short yet instantly memorable experience, however grim, it has a sinister opening, a surprisingly quiet continuation, an agitated central section and a mournful tolling conclusion during which the music evaporates into silence. The whole is a genuinely imaginative statement and although Rachmaninoff had to play it countless times this recording shows that he never went stale on it.

It is followed by two further paraphrases, illustrating his insight into the vast resources of the piano. From 1929, the *Flight of the Bumble Bee* derives from an episode in the opera *Czar Saltan* and the lightness and humour of Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestration is suggested by the directness and simplicity of Rachmaninoff's textures. The result has

always been used by pianists as an effective encore piece, but the magical 1933 transformation of the Scherzo from the incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a perfect evocation of midsummer madness, has all the delicacy and enchantment of Mendelssohn's other fairy pieces. This is one of Rachmaninoff's most vivid paraphrases and his performance is pianistically superlative, his delight in his own nimbleness being obvious and a clear extension of the deftness of the composition.

Although reluctant to admit it, Rachmaninoff quite often had visual ideas in mind when composing and his two sets of *etudes-tableaux* are his main pianistic acknowledgement of this. Yet he was seldom specific as to what pictorial impulse lay behind a piece. A partial exception was that when Respighi orchestrated Op. 33 No. 7 Rachmaninoff hinted that the subject was 'a fair' although this cheerful image is rather contradicted by the burning intensity of his own recording. The *Etude-tableau* Op. 33 No. 2 seems to conjure its melody out of its accompaniment, these being different aspects of the same musical idea. Really these pieces, rather than examples of programmatic or pictorial notions, are essentially studies in composition which exploit a variety of themes, investigate the transformation of specific climates of feeling via keyboard textures and sonorities. This performance unites extreme refinements of both compositional and playing techniques.

Dating from 1896, the six *Moments Musicaux* are not like the rather domestic little miniatures by Schubert from whom Rachmaninoff presumably borrowed the title. On the contrary, they demand a pianist who is both a perceptive musician and a virtuoso. Op. 16 No. 2 is one of the virtuosic pieces, yet the detail, rather than being ornamental, has become functional, essential to the musical argument. This is beautifully demonstrated by Rachmaninoff's 1940 recording, where the text is slightly revised. The texture is often intricate and there are swift rises and falls in the dynamics and the music's intensity, and one feels that it is here, rather than in such things as the Prelude Op. 3 that Rachmaninoff for the first time got some of the specific qualities of his own playing into his music.

Done in 1922 but also revised for this 1940 recording, a paraphrase of one of his songs, *Daisies* Op. 38 No. 3, comes next. The original was a perfect song, conceived all of a piece in a single breath of subdued stillness, the poem being by 'Igor Severyanin' (Igor Lotaryef 1887-1941). On this recording, the different strands enter as if from separate human voices in eloquent conversation. Such playing was the result of exceptional independence of fingers and hands on Rachmaninoff's part.

Writing of this recording an English critic, Frank Howes, said: ‘When he plays, the air is filled with the enchantment of sound, like Prospero’s island.’

Tchaikovsky composed his *Lullaby* (Op. 16 No. 1) in 1872 and it is the subject of Rachmaninoff’s last paraphrase, the manuscript of the transcription being dated 12 August 1941. He gave this simple piece a treatment that is highly sophisticated in both musical and pianistic terms with a Godowsky-like and quite chromatic elaboration. Thus it is far removed from Tchaikovsky’s innocent original song, being much darker. No comforting night light was left beside this cradle yet Rachmaninoff’s reading offers a most affecting account of the piece.

If a song by Tchaikovsky was the subject of his last paraphrase, Bach provided the matter for Rachmaninoff’s major work in this sphere. This was movements from the Partita No. 3 for unaccompanied violin BWV 1006 and he programmed the Prelude in 1932, adding the Gavotte en Rondeau and Gigue the following year. This was a more serious and complex undertaking than his other paraphrases, be they fragments from Russian operas by Mussorgsky or Rimsky-Korsakov, incidental music for plays by Mendelssohn or Bizet, or songs by Schubert or Tchaikovsky. In fact, the paraphrase on Bach movements was Rachmaninoff’s most extensive and ambitious work of this kind and he demonstrates a composer’s grasp of the creative processes involved.

A considerable amount of counterpoint is clearly implicit in the original violin music and this is rethought for the piano with an almost disconcerting completeness, Rachmaninoff adding his own countermelodies and in particular his own harmonies. The result is a modern amplification of Bach’s thoughts, fully comparable with similar work from Busoni and, again, Godowsky. At the same time the paraphrases of these three movements are very much in the distilled manner of Rachmaninoff’s later keyboard writing.

Max Harrison 2009  
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## Rachmaninoff as Pianist

Having completed our scientific analysis of these thirteen original Rachmaninoff performances, the 29,900 notes and associated pedal motions are ready for a musical analysis. For the first time it is possible to look at the best of “raw” Rachmaninoff, not altered by anyone (as was the case with his piano roll recordings, where he and Edgar Fairchild of Ampico would remove all the “wrong holes”). Although they reflect only a small part of Rachmaninoff’s 150 recordings for Edison and Victor, these tracks provide an excellent overview of his musical and pianistic breadth. More importantly, listening to these re-performances of the originals in modern sound will, perhaps, remind today’s pianists of a musical aesthetic that has seemingly been forgotten – especially Rachmaninoff’s aesthetic, as it applies to his own works.

Too often we hear performances of Rachmaninoff’s concert stage “war horses” – be they Étude tableaux, the Préludes, or the Moments musicaux – played with a heavy use of pedal, unbearable rubato and other Romantic excesses (in the worst sense of the word). Listening to these recordings, it does not take long to realize that Rachmaninoff’s performances display none of these characteristics.

His pedaling is sparse rather than heavy and his texture remarkably transparent (something that can sometimes be hard to hear through the noise artifacts of the original recordings). The timing of the melodic phrasing and harmonic rhythm reveals structured concepts devoid of cheap effects and meandering sentimentalism.

And there is never any bashing.

Comparing the loudness numbers in these re-performance files with performances of some of the same works made on the same piano by modern-day pianists shows the difference clearly: today’s performances are generally “heavier.” As an added challenge to our efforts, we had to consider the difference between the original piano and the acoustics of his recording studios. In each case, a balance was struck between maintaining a natural touch and attaining the dynamics that we hear on the old originals, since, given a large piano and a live room, little force is needed to produce a loud tone.

The thirteen binaural tracks – the second half of this recording – are tailored for a headphone listening experience, as if heard from the perspective of the pianist. Binaural recordings are made with two small omnidirectional microphones placed in the entrance to the ear canals of an artificial head. We positioned the dummy head at the piano bench, so that a headphone listener would be able to “get inside Rachmaninoff’s head,” to hear what he might have heard as he sat at the piano.

Overall, our goal has been one of extracting this master’s inimitable musicianship from the confines of his dated original recordings, and thus, whether through new recordings or live re-performances, to let more audiences become intimately familiar with the sound produced by those unique fingers.

*- Drs. Anatoly Larkin and John Q. Walker, Zenph Studios*

*\*Anatoly would like to thank both his and his wife’s parents in taking over his “parental duties” during the work on this album.*