

AllMusic Review by James Leonard - 4 1/2*/5*

As everyone with a thesaurus knows, urgency rhymes with emergency. And these performances of **Rachmaninov**'s works for piano and orchestra by **Stephen Hough** with **Andrew Litton** leading the **Dallas Symphony** are nothing if they are not urgent. **Hough**'s tempos are quick and strong and vital, with plenty of rubato and lots of accelerando. Of course, there's nothing wrong with that. Go back and listen to the old **Rachmaninov** recordings to hear the roots of **Hough**'s impetuous and romantic interpretation. But those are only the roots: **Hough** is himself a consummate virtuoso with a blazing technique and a passionate temperament and he has something to say about **Rachmaninov**, and in **Rachmaninov**'s style, he says it urgently, often even ecstatically. Listen to the climax of the closing movement of the Concerto in D minor: **Hough** pushes forward by holding back and explodes in incandescent chords of surpassing bliss. Not since the '50s **Horowitz** recording has any pianist so perfectly represented the heart of the music by being so true to himself. **Litton**, an old hand at **Rachmaninov**, is a superb partner and the **Dallas Symphony** sounds like a thoroughbred orchestra. If you love **Rachmaninov**'s works for piano and orchestra -- and what red-blooded listener doesn't? -- hearing **Hough**'s recording is an emergency. Hyperion's live sound is faithful and true.

RACHMANINOFF Concertos (complete).¹ Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini • Stephen Hough, pn; Andrew Litton, cond; Dallas SO. • HYPERION CDA 67501/2; SACDA 67501/2 (2 CDs/Hybrid multichannel SACDs: 145:35) Live performances: Dallas 4-5/2004

When I first reviewed this release two issues back (28:1), I was working from preliminary copies that needed both sonic and editorial fine tuning. Even so, I was enthusiastic. The arrival of the final versions gives me a chance to repeat my endorsement with a crescendo. First, the sound— which was better than average even on those interim versions—is now simply breathtaking (a word I used advisedly), especially on the SACD surround sound tracks, which give the orchestra more depth and breadth than the CD version. Nothing aggressively spectacular here, no excessive spotlighting or window-rattling bass effects. But for the way the SACD offers the illusion of being in a real concert hall, with real

acoustic character, the sound is unmatched by that on any other recording I own. Simply as a system demonstrator, this release replaces the Paavo Järvi recording of the suites from Prokofiev's *Romeo* as my top choice. Recording Engineer Jeff Mee and Recording Producer Andrew Keener certainly deserve special thanks. These are vastly different from most demonstration discs, though, because (atypically) the performances are entirely worthy of the sonic excellence they get: I can't think of any other cycle of these works, even the composer's own, that draws quite so much musical interest from the scores. It's not that the performances are excessively busy, much less ornate: for all the stunning range of their articulation, for all their attention to secondary voices, Hough and Litton never let the details interfere with the flow of the music. Even though the four concertos were all set down within a space of three weeks (the *Rhapsody* was recorded a year earlier), there's not a single measure, from beginning to end, where you sense that the performers are coasting. Nor do they let their listeners coast—this is playing full of daring decisions and imaginative surprises, playing that resists any easy categorization.

Thus, for instance, the opening of the Second Concerto is shocking in its radical refusal to linger. It takes Rachmaninoff and Moiseiwitsch about 17 seconds to build to the eighth measure *ritardando*; it takes Kapell and Richter a few seconds longer—and Pak draws it out to well over half a minute. Hough charges through the opening seven measures in 12 seconds flat. But how much can you generalize about the cycle's interpretive outlook from that decision? Not much. You certainly can't conclude that Hough and Litton lean toward the brusque—for the Moderato theme at measure 16 of the First's first movement is, in its gorgeous string slides, even more opulent than it is under Stokowski in the composer's recording.

Likewise, the concentrated momentum of the last movement of the Third does little to prepare you for the skittishness of the finale of the Fourth. It's hard to say it without falling back on clichés—but everything on these two CDs sounds freshly considered, and the more you listen, the more imaginative it sounds.

As one of those obsessive collectors whose habit threatens the architectural integrity of his house, I try to avoid the word “definitive”—and as I said in the original review, this set doesn't really “replace” such classics as the Richter/Wislocki Second or the Horowitz/Reiner Third (although the more I live with Hough and Litton's restless Fourth, the more Michelangeli's polished elegance seems beside the point). Still, this is an inspired release, and would easily be my first choice if I had to be limited to one.

Peter J. Rabinowitz

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Sergei RACHMANINOV (1873-1943) - 2 MusicWeb Reviews

Piano Concerto no.1 in F sharp minor op.1 [26 :02], Piano Concerto no.2 in C minor op.18 [32 :26], Piano Concerto no.3 in D minor op.30 [38 :23], Piano Concerto no.4 in G minor op.40 [24 :35], Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini op.43 [23 :44]
Stephen Hough (piano)

Dallas Symphony Orchestra/Andrew Litton

Rhapsody recorded 29th June 2003 and the Concertos recorded live during April and May 2004 at the Eugene McDermott Concert Hall, Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center, Dallas

HYPERION CDA67501/2 [74:41 + 70:54]

There was a time when cycles of standard repertoire came from the "greats" of the industry while the smaller companies delved into lesser-known fare. Curiously, Rachmaninov cycles have recently come from two of the smaller companies which, happily, nonetheless continue their explorations of the byways of music; that by Oleg Marshev and the Aarhus Symphony Orchestra under James Loughran on Danacord ([DACOCD 582-3](#)) and the present issue from Hyperion. To tell the truth, the former has been sitting on my shelves for a couple of years in multiple copies that I received as a result of having written the booklet notes, so this seemed a good moment to assess it together with Hough and Litton.

Certainly, the two offer remarkably different interpretations, so I hope that the following comments will make it clear to you which you are likely to prefer. In a certain sense, it could all be summed up by contrasting Hough and Litton's total timing of 145:35 for the five works with Marshev and Loughran's 165:38 – almost another concerto-worth of extra time and necessitating a third CD. However, Danacord offer the set at three for the price of two, so don't let economic considerations worry you.

Another difference is that the Hyperion comes with a manifesto nailed to its door in the form of a preface by the pianist. I'm not sure this sort of thing is to be encouraged since it seems to me a form of "Solti-itis", a word I derive from that incomparable knight's practice, during a long career, of preceding his major releases with a plethora of interviews in which he explained how and why his forthcoming interpretations were superior to all previous ones. And there were many, critics included, who were hoodwinked into believing they really were so. In the same way, I have already seen some write-ups of Hough's Rachmaninov (no reference to KS on this same site, though he is certainly more enthusiastic than I am) which have virtually taken Hough's introduction, turned it from the first person into the third, and called that a review.

So let us examine some of his points. One regards the use of portamento slides in the strings. Now, if we take the first orchestral statement of the principal theme of Concerto 1, first movement, following the opening flourishes, it is evident that

Litton has studied the Rachmaninov/Ormandy recording very carefully, for the same portamentos are reproduced in exactly the same places, and the same goes for a couple of fairly radical tenutos on single notes. As an exercise in style it is fascinating, even wonderful. I am not sure that the Dallas orchestra has quite the saturated weight of string tone commanded by Ormandy's Philadelphia at its peak, though it is difficult to judge this on the strength of recordings made more than 60 years apart. There is no doubt that this band has acquired infinitely more bloom and depth of sound since it recorded the Symphonic Dances so dryly under Donald Johanos in the 1970s.

Fascinated as I was by the exercise, I wondered whether it was going to be a bit too much of a good thing in the course of all five works, but this was not put to the test since the orchestra evidently felt that, having done their duty towards early 20th Century stylistic conventions on those two pages, enough was enough and they revert to a typically modern, squeaky-clean manner of playing; if there are more than three or four portamentos in all the remaining four works put together I'll eat my hat. There is no attempt, for example, to emulate Stokowski's swooping strings in the 18th variation of the Rhapsody, to name one obvious point, and moments like the high-lying string writing at the end of the 4th concerto's first movement or the lyrical theme in the finale of the 3rd seem to cry out for the odd slide here and there. Indeed, there are some unredeemed bands here in Europe (though not that of Aarhus) which still provide such things even without any declared agenda. Perhaps I would have made less of this point if it hadn't been for the pianist's declarations.

Hough also speaks of "the characteristic rubato of the composer's playing", the "flexible, fluent tempos, always pushing forward with ardour" and the "teasing, shaded inner-voices forming chromatically shifting harmonic counterpoint to the melody". With regard to the latter, I didn't honestly note any inner line which was brought out by Hough and missed by Marshev, though if you search the catalogue for unperceptive performances you will obviously find some. Turning to the "characteristic rubato", it is again the first concerto in which Hough seems to be experimenting most systematically, offering numerous impulsive spurts countered by languorous hesitations, sometimes even to a greater degree than the composer himself. What I miss is Rachmaninov's own ability to do all this while retaining a certain aristocratic detachment; in other words, Hough has reproduced the manner but not always the substance of Rachmaninov's pianism. All the same, while the composer's performance has a greater range, Hough's mercurial approach has its attractions in a work which, though so heavily revised in 1917 as to form a harmonic bridge between the 3rd and 4th concertos, nevertheless retains its youthful character.

Hough has harsh words to say about many interpreters of the 2nd concerto: "To take too slow a tempo, with numerous ritardandos, for the first subject of the first movement of Rachmaninov's Second Concerto means that one of the longest melodies in the repertoire becomes fragmented and earthbound". This sort of sweeping comment, designed to evoke images of a host of unjustly famous ignoramuses vying with each other to muck up great music, is better avoided. Come on, Mr. Hough, who are these nitwits? Let's have some names. Do you mean Richter? Rubinstein? Ashkenazy? I think we should be told.

In the event, Hough presents a swift, surging first movement, attractive but just a shade breathless. If one is going to preach stylistic awareness, I feel there are other things to be taken into consideration too. For a start, it's marked "Moderato". Now "moderato", more than a tempo, is a mood, or an atmosphere. There is a certain range of tempi at which a "moderato" mood can be achieved and it may be that Rachmaninov could make this tempo sound "moderato"; I have to say that Hough's tempo is, to my ears, "allegro". Another issue is the metronome mark. Heaven forbid that such romantic music should be played metronomically but since the marking is there we may as well have a look at it, and in fact Marshev's slower tempo is spot on, as were Farnadi and Scherchen (Westminster, long deleted), while Richter with Kondrashin was fractionally slower still, enabling the conductor to dig deeply into the various tenuto markings in the string melody. All of these seem to me to realize more satisfactorily the idea of "moderato", and the melody is neither fragmented nor earthbound as they present it. Marshev uses the extra space to give greater weight and ardour to the music, and the suspicion arises that Hough's faster tempi may derive from a lack of real weight to his tone. In the lead-back to the recapitulation, for example, he fails to dominate the orchestra as Marshev (let alone Richter!) does.

At the same time, Marshev also has the measure of the melancholy poetry of the second movement, assisted by some long-breathed phrasing from Loughran and the orchestra. Hough again misses the spirit of the "Adagio sostenuto" marking – to my ears this is an "Andante". Both pianists have a tendency to make a ritardando at the end of every bar in the early stages of the movement, something which Richter shows not to be necessary.

Still, my impressions were still positive at the end of the 2nd Concerto, but I'm afraid the 3rd left me quite unmoved. Hough begins the "Allegro ma non tanto" at about the tempo most pianists reach in the "Più mosso" section and the overall impression was that he was merely skating over the surface of the music, albeit it gracefully and pleasantly. This deplorably superficial account left me wondering if the music had not lost its appeal for me and it was actually at this point that I decided to try the Marshev cycle. Marshev and Loughran's steadiness seemed a little homespun beside the fleet sophistication of Hough, but the music rang true,

it seemed to well out of the composer's soul, revealing those "six feet of Russian gloom" of which Stravinsky spoke. My faith in the music was restored. I also found the (studio) recording richer, clearer and more full-toned than the Hyperion and I wonder if recording live is necessarily such a good idea, even if you have such a distinguished producer as Andrew Keener in charge of the proceedings. In all truth, once a performance has been edited from a considerable run of concert performances, does it sound any more live than a good studio effort? These didn't really sound like live performances and the burst of applause at the end seemed an unwarranted intrusion.

Concerto no.4 is a special case; derided from its earliest performances (in several versions), not even the composer's own recording succeeded in planting it in the repertoire. That the work could be made to sound truly wonderful was demonstrated by Michelangeli in his sole Rachmaninov concerto recording, yet paradoxically this did nothing to revive the work's fortunes in the concert hall. The impression was that Michelangeli's own genius was at least as much responsible for the result, and lesser pianists fought shy. Marshev and Loughran make no attempt to imitate Michelangeli; they take the work steadily, at face value, and their sincerity shows it to be a powerful and rewarding work (it is actually my own favourite, but I seem to be alone in this). Basically, Hough and Litton do the same but, as is their wont, with faster tempi. Some may prefer this; I love, for example, the extra swagger Marshev and Loughran's slower tempo allows them to find in the D flat section of the finale (two bars after fig. 49).

Hough's Rhapsody, unlike the Concertos, is a studio recording and seems to benefit, with a clearer perspective (and transferred at a higher level) and with less tendency to screw up the tempi more and more than the pianist shows when playing live – something which might be very exciting in the concert hall but is not so good for repeated listening. In any case, Hough's lightness and effervescence are harnessed to good effect in this particular work, especially when the famous 18th variation is by no means underplayed. If we compare Hough (02:57) directly with Rachmaninov (02:35) we find that, while Hough is not slavishly imitating the composer, he is recognizably playing the same music; turning immediately to Marshev (03:38) he almost seems to be playing something else. However, taken in context Marshev's warmth and sincerity are moving. Overall Marshev gives a tougher performance, some of the ostinato variations suggesting parallels with Prokofief.

It must be clear by now that, of the two cycles, it is Marshev's which I recommend. Taking the discs separately (which at present you can't), Hough's coupling of 1 and 4 with the Rhapsody has a lot going for it. Marshev's no.1, which I haven't mentioned so far, has the same leisurely ardour as the rest of his cycle and I thoroughly enjoyed it while thinking that perhaps Hough's approach was

preferably for this youthful music. But Marshev disappoints nowhere and is better recorded, whereas a cycle which has a superficial no.3 and a lightweight no.2 is not really in the running.

At which point one may ask if buying a complete cycle is the best solution, for a number of the best performances come from pianists who recorded only one or two of the concertos. You will probably seek the Richter/Kondrashin or Farnadi/Scherchen recordings in vain but Richter's DG version with Wislocki is presumably available. Ashkenazy's finest Rachmaninov concerto recording came, not in his cycle with Previn but in his one-off version of no.3 with Ormandy. Horowitz in no.3 was in a class his own, as Rachmaninov himself recognised. His last recording, with Ormandy, opened out the traditional cuts but even so it is probably the version with Reiner which represents him at his peak. The piano dominates the sound picture shamelessly, but in view of the massive sound Horowitz could get out of the instrument, this may not quite as unrealistic as is often supposed. Michelangeli in no.4 remains unrivalled.

By the way, some people might wish to insinuate that the fact that I wrote the booklet notes for the Marshev cycle makes me biased in its favour. Let me assure them that, having been duly rewarded for my work *once* I will receive no benefit, economic or otherwise, from future sales, reissues or the like and so have no reason whatever to push it except on the ground of its merits. Though of course, since my name is vicariously associated with it, I am pleased to find that it is a cycle which I can wholeheartedly enjoy.

Christopher Howell

In an era when performance practice issues, right down to careful research into the regional dialects used for vocal music, are all the rage, it seems rather unusual that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been left out of the fray. Andrew Litton and Stephen Hough have taken some steps to bring more recent music into the discussion with these enlightening performances of the concertante works by Rachmaninov, who despite his life-span, stuck firmly with romantic ideals.

It has been the tendency in recent decades to over-sentimentalize Rachmaninov's music, thus transforming passionate lyricism into syrupy languor. Not so these performances, available in the UK and due for release in the US on 14 October 2004. Hough has taken great pains to listen carefully not only to the composer's own recordings, but also to those of artists that he most approved, specifically Josef Levhinne and Vladimir Horowitz. He and Litton have also meticulously corrected errant orchestral parts that have been so often used as to become canon.

This is playing of the highest order both from soloist and orchestra. So often, with a new recording of such well-traveled works, it is the tendency of the cognoscenti to immediately dismiss the living performer as in no way capable of comparison to some famed corpse. I am here to tell you that Steven Hough can hold his own against any Horowitz, Richter or Rubinstein. His fleet playing, clarity of line and phenomenal technique shine like beacons. There are no studio tricks to cover mistakes; these are live recordings. Andrew Litton shapes the Dallas Symphony into a taut ensemble, playing with a unity of sound and an attention to the give and take of melodic line that would be the envy of any fine choir. This orchestra sings together with abandon.

Most refreshing are the tempo choices, particularly in the more famous, often-overwrought second and third concerti. Gone are the layers of overt varnish. Mr. Hough never stretches a moment for his own sake, rather he concentrates on the lyricism and forward momentum that were the hallmarks of the composer's own playing.

I found these readings to be revelatory and refreshing. For the first time in a long time, I was actually riveted to the speakers, anxiously anticipating the unfolding story. Too often, a listener can simply take for granted that he knows what will happen next. What a treat to have a few surprises.

And, lest one think that there is no romanticism here, start your exploration of this set with the famous "18th Variation" from the Paganini Rhapsody, and you will rest at ease. Mr. Hough plays this achingly lyrical line to absolute perfection.

Program notes are peerless. The detail is meticulous and the writing style is captivating. The Dallas audiences, notorious for their noisiness and lack of decorum, (I can say that, I live here) are on their very best behavior, making for studio quality recording with Hyperion's customary finesse. I could have lived without the applause at the end of each concerto, but that is a small complaint given the extremely high quality of everything else about this set.

A must have. A revelation. Get it.

Kevin Sutton

Rachmaninov: Piano concertos/Hough SACD- ClassicsToday

Review by: David Hurwitz *Artistic Quality: 10 Sound Quality: 7*

This multichannel release raises disturbing questions about the wisdom of issuing discs in a dual format. Having first heard the stereo-only version and acclaimed it as the finest Rachmaninov concerto cycle currently available, something easily confirmed in listening to the stereo layer on this SACD set, multichannel playback sounds so different, and so signally fails to project some of the qualities that are vividly audible in normal stereo, that there's a real issue of what the engineer's responsibilities are in capturing a performance for home listening. In other words, should he try to make the performers sound as good as they can under what he may assume (for serious music lovers) will be decent if not exceptional domestic conditions, or should he try to capture the "natural" acoustic of the hall even if this robs the interpretation of much of its color and impact when heard at home? And which perspective, if either, actually represents the artist's intentions? In today's market, do we really need to further complicate things in this manner?

Let me be very specific. This multichannel recording (4.0, a fact that should be disclosed up front) places the listener in a somewhat distant balcony seat. I don't know where the microphones were, but this is how it strikes me. There's plenty of room acoustic, but this has the result of creating an excess of reverberation that lessens the impact of the orchestra, and more significantly, makes Hough's contributions sound small-scale and lacking in the coloristic variety that comes across so vividly in regular stereo. The wonderfully pointed interactions between the soloist and orchestra that are such a joy in these performances also lose some of their character in this more homogenized sonic frame. In addition, in the four concertos (which were recorded live), the rear channels capture numerous small audience noises that were previously inaudible, adding an additional level of realism, or distraction, depending on your tolerance for such things. My tolerance is pretty high, most of the time, except that I don't see any reason to put up with it in multichannel playback when I don't have to in normal stereo.

The advantage to the SACD, of course, is that listeners can choose the sound that they prefer, but to be truthful I don't think that adding yet another level of choice to the equation is necessarily a good thing. If I had been required to assess these performances based solely on the impression they make in multichannel format, there's no question that I would have found Hough's contribution less impressive simply because you can't hear it as well. Does that invalidate my initial impression? Not at all: I don't care what the artists and engineers have to do in order to create a result that strikes me as musically fabulous, and in stereo that's exactly what we have. I just can't help but wonder, however, if in seeking to capture the "realism" that the multichannel format promises, we don't risk throwing the baby out with the bath water, and letting generalized considerations of sonic naturalism make us forget what really matters: namely, technology placed entirely in the service of the artists, which captures, supports, and enhances their interpretive goals.

