

Sergei RACHMANINOV (1873-1943) - LONG MusicWeb Review Howard Shelley

The Complete Piano Music

Howard Shelley

recorded from 1982 to 1991

HYPERION 8-CD set CDS44041/8

Total duration: 7hrs 28 mins

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Brief content description of each of the eight CDs

CD1:

Morceaux de Fantaisie Op. 3 (1892)

Ten Preludes Op. 23 (1903)

CD2:

Morceaux de Salon op. 10 (1893/4)

Moments Musicaux op. 16 (1896)

CD3:

PiaNo. Sonata No. . 2 in B flat minor op. 36 (1913) original version

Morceaux de Fantaisie in G minor (1899)

Three Nocturnes (1887/8)

Four Pieces (?1888)

CD4:

Thirteen Preludes op. 32 (1910)

Prelude in F Major (1891)

Prelude in D minor (1917)

CD5:

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CD6:

Piano Sonata No. 1 in D minor op. 28 (1907)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor op. 36 (1931) revised version

CD7:

Variations on a Theme of Chopin Op. 22 (1902/03)
Variations on a Theme of Corelli Op. 42 (1931)
Melodie in E major Op. 3 No. 3 (1940) revised version

CD8:

TRANSCRIPTIONS:

Rimsky-Korsakov – *The Flight of the Bumblebee*
Kreisler – *Liebeslied*
Bizet – Minuet from *L'Arlésienne* Suite No. 1
Schubert – *Wohin?*, from *Die schöne Müllerin*
Mussorgsky – Hopak from *Sorotchinsky Fair*
Bach – Prelude, from Violin Partita in E Major
Bach – Gavotte from Violin Partita in E Major
Bach – *Gigue* from Violin Partita in E Major
Rachmaninov – *Daisies* Op. 38 No. 3
Mendelssohn – Scherzo from 'A Midsunmmer Night's Dream'
Rachmaninov – Lilacs, Op. 21 No. 5
Behr – *Polka de V R*
Tchaikovsky – *Lullaby* Op. 16 No. 1
Kreisler – *Liebesfreud*

Introduction

These recordings were issued in an 8-CD box set in 1993 bringing together recordings made between 1978 and 1991 which are still available separately. I had heard one or two of them over the years and had been impressed but it has only been over the last few weeks that I have realised an ambition and had the opportunity of listening to the full set.

I was greatly impressed.

I had known that, over the years, many of my fellow reviewers had been equally won over by Shelley's poetic, refined readings that consistently demonstrate his complete empathy with Rachmaninov's idiomatic style. Nicholas Rast, for instance, singled out this set for inclusion in the 'Instrumental' section of *BBC Music Magazine's Top 1000 CDs Guide* (BBC Worldwide Publications, 1998). Shelley's recordings also had excellent reviews in the *Penguin Guide to Compact Discs* and *Gramophone's Classical Good CD Guide*.

What struck me immediately when I began to assess this 8-CD set was the insightful notes by Robert Matthew-Walker, especially his introductory heading: 'Rachmaninov's solo Piano music – the need for reassessment'. In this

introduction, Matthew-Walker reminds us that Rachmaninov's reputation rests mostly on the four Piano concertos and the Paganini Rhapsody. Little else was known, virtually every other work ignored after his death in 1943 until the 1973 celebrations of the centenary of Rachmaninov's birth, when interest in his symphonies, operas and chamber and recital music was rekindled. Of his solo piano music perhaps, only his famous Prelude in C sharp minor (one might say infamous in that he was haunted by it and expected to play it as an encore at so many of his recitals) remained well known.

It is interesting, too, to note how the Russian Revolution marked a watershed in the composer's life and how his priorities had to shift in consequence. In the 26 years from 1891 to 1917 Rachmaninov composed 39 works with opus numbers, but during the remaining 26 years of his life he added only six more. In exile, from 1917 to 1943 he had to support his family and so an exhausting round of recitals claimed much of his time that might otherwise have been devoted to composition. But then, for a good part of this period, he felt himself out of joint with the times and intimidated by the new fashions in musical styles.

Rachmaninov was of course famed as a virtuoso pianist of legendary accomplishment. As a pianist he had no peer. His music written for solo piano understandably has considerable technical insight. But Rachmaninov's piano writing is certainly not empty display, it was never written just for effect. There is great subtlety and artistry in every piece – music of the highest calibre.

Comparing these Shelley recordings with those of Rachmaninov *, one is impressed with how Shelley so closely identifies with Rachmaninov's idiomatic style. Here, consistently, is virtuosity of a very high order together with refinement and elegance, wit, expressive power, beauty and poetry. There is subtlety of light and shade, dynamics and expression. There is considerable thought and eloquence given throughout even extending to the pauses. Take just one example. Listen to the amazing sensitivity and technical skill in Shelley's playing of the Prelude No. 5 in G major from the Op. 32 *Thirteen Preludes* - the conjoining of multiple ripple patterns so lucidly and so lovingly portrayed.

[* **RCA's 10-CD set (RCA Victor Gold Seal 09026 61265 2) 'Sergei Rachmaninov - The Complete Recordings' published in 1992** comprised recordings of Rachmaninov, himself, as soloist in his Four Piano Concertos and Paganini Rhapsody, and, as conductor, of his Third Symphony and the *Isle of the Dead*; plus solo Piano recordings of music by many composers – as well as some of his own compositions including three of his *Etudes Tableaux* (in C and E flat from Op. 33 and in A minor from Op. 39) and eight Preludes including three recordings of that famous one in C-sharp Minor that haunted so many of his recitals.]

Howard Shelley

For complete biographical details of Howard Shelley I would refer readers to his agent's web site – www.carolinebairdartists.co.uk/html/cbartists.htm

Howard Shelley is not just renowned as a concert pianist (especially celebrated as an interpreter of Rachmaninov *par excellence*) but also as a conductor with the London Philharmonic, London Symphony and Royal Philharmonic Orchestras and many other orchestras throughout the world. He has held positions of Associate and Principal Guest Conductor with the London Mozart Players in a close relationship of over twenty years and he has toured with them across the globe. Shelley has also been Principal Conductor of Sweden's Uppsala Chamber Orchestra and works closely with Camerata Salzburg. He has worked with many other chamber orchestras.

He has made many recordings for Chandos, Hyperion and EMI including this award-winning set of Rachmaninov's complete solo Piano music, plus Rachmaninov's concertos, plus series of Mozart, Hummel, Mendelssohn, Moscheles and Cramer concertos as well as all Gershwin's works for Piano and orchestra and a series of British concertos including Alwyn, Bridge, Howells, Rubbra, Scott, Tippett and Vaughan Williams.

The Reviews

**Howard Shelley plays the complete Piano Music of
Sergei RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)
HYPERION CDS44041/8**

CD1:

***Morceaux de Fantaisie* Op. 3 (1892)**

No. 1 Elégie in E minor

No. 2 Prelude in C sharp minor

No. 3 Mélodie in E major

No. 4 Polichinelle

No. 5 Sérénade in B flat minor

Ten Preludes Op. 23 (1903)

No. 1 in F sharp minor

No. 2 in B flat minor

No. 3 in D minor

No. 4 in D major

No. 5 in G minor (1901)

No. 6 in E flat major

No. 7 in C minor

No. 8 in A flat major

No. 9 in E flat minor

No. 10 in G flat major

recorded on 15, 16 September 1982, 19 April 1983

HYPERION CDS44041 [59:34]

Available separately on HYPERION CDA 66081

Appropriately, one might think, this first CD kicks off with Rachmaninov's five-piece *Morceaux de Fantaisie* of 1892. The set includes that **Prelude in C sharp minor** a piece that was to haunt him throughout his career as a virtuoso pianist. It was composed, the first of the set, in 1892 for the 19-year-old composer-pianist's professional debut. It was to become his most internationally famous composition and travelled the world with him. 1920s New York even had a jazz version played by the Paul Whiteman Band, which incidentally Rachmaninov enjoyed. It certainly spread the fame of the young composer, so much so that by the time he reached his late twenties, he was known to a large international public. On the other hand, its immense popularity came to be a curse to him when he became a touring virtuoso; so many audiences insisted on hearing it as an encore. Howard Shelley's thoughtful reading plumbs its depths, the opening section suggesting some dark, mysterious tragedy before the grand theme defiantly asserts itself.

The C sharp minor Prelude is the second of the five *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, dedicated to Arensky. Heard together, they demonstrate an impressive emotional range. The opening piece is an eloquent, heart-felt 'Elégie', the 'Mélodie' with its plaintive ostinato is tenderly romantic, the whimsical 'Polichinelle' points towards the bombast and the bravura romanticism of the Piano concertos, and the Spanish-like 'Sérénade' is attractively pensive and slightly melancholy. Shelley delivers very characterful readings that delight the ear and stimulate the imagination.

The Ten Preludes include two popular favourites: the attractive proud melody and flowing romanticism of No. 2 in B flat minor, and the splendour of the assertive No. 5 in G minor with its meltingly lovely trio that surely equals anything in the concertos.

The first of the Preludes in F sharp minor is beautiful, sylvan, dreamy; the enigmatic No. 3 in D minor is slightly assertive and vaguely militaristic; Nos. 4 in D major and 6 in E flat major return to tenderness and dreams with yet more touching melodies enchantingly and most poetically played. Nos. 7 in C minor, 8 in A flat major and 9 in E flat minor have rippling chords in common; although pleasant enough, they do not reach the same level of inspiration as the others in the set. The lovely final Prelude in G flat major is a deeper creation, bitter-sweet and nostalgic.

CD2:

***Morceaux de Salon* op. 10 (1893/4)**

Nocturne in A minor

Valse in A major

Barcarolle in G minor

Mélodie in E minor

Humoresque in G minor

Romance in F minor

Mazurka in D flat major

***Moments Musicaux* op. 16 (1896)**

Andantino in B flat minor

Allegretto in E flat minor

Andante cantabile in B minor

Presto in E minor

Adagio sostenuto in D flat major

Maestoso in C major

recorded on 11, 12 April 1985

HYPERION CDS44042 [56:17]

Available separately on HYPERION CDA66184

Rachmaninov's *Morceaux de Salon*, composed during December 1893 and January 1894, were conceived during a period of depression and consequently the inspiration tends to be second-drawer.

The opening 'Nocturne' quotes from Tchaikovsky's 'memorial' Trio, written in memory of Nicholas Rubinstein. It is a curious piece beginning in melancholy and shifting to a rhythm that is hardly associated with a Nocturne or lullaby for it almost canters rather than gently rocks. The pieces are deemed 'salon' and the beginning of the second 'Valse' seems to confirm this description but the piano writing soon becomes so decoratively complex and so virtuosic that the music is elevated above the genre. As Robert Matthew-Walker observes "... in the relative major, [it] exhibits a ghostly textural reminiscence of Chopin's A flat major trio." Shelley makes the rippling waters of the comparatively well-known 'Barcarolle' glisten. The Mélodie follows logically on from the 'Barcarolle' the Piano musing over the ripples before the melody broadens out to a more overt statement of its beauty. The playful 'Humoresque' is full of *joie-de-vivre* with a touch of poignancy. 'Romance' is more inhibited and elusive, a poem of regret. The final item is a 'Mazurka, the longest piece of the set at nearly five minutes, is brash and confident, majestic and fiery.

The *Moments Musicaux* are all related using a theme stated at the outset of the 'Andantino'. It has a haunting, magical quality, and a sense of remoteness and loss. It seems almost improvisatory and for much of its span one might easily visualise an unrelenting but varying pattern of pattering rain on the still surface of a lake. This patterning is discernible too in the following 'Allegretto' but a definite

romantic idea emerges and there is material and atmosphere reminiscent of the Piano concertos. The 'Andante cantabile' is a song of Slavonic melancholy, wholly Russian, a very slow variation, deliberate and almost funereal. The 'Presto' is a deluge of left-hand sextuplets against a rising quasi-militaristic idea; while the lovely rocking 'Adagio' is a gentle sweet contemplation. The final 'Maestoso' surges majestically with the theme intricately woven into florid passage-work.

CD3:

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor op. 36 (1913) original version

Morceaux de Fantaisie in G minor (1899)

Song Without Words

Piece in D minor (1917)

Fughetta in F major (1899)

Fragments (1917)

Oriental sketch (1917)

Three Nocturnes (1887/8)

No. 1 in F sharp minor

No. 2 in F major

No. 3 in C minor

Four Pieces (?1888)

Romance in F sharp minor

Prelude in E flat minor

Mélodie in E major

Gavotte in D major

recorded on 17, 18 July 1985

HYPERION CDS 44043 [59:36]

Available separately on HYPERION CDA66198

Rachmaninov's Second Sonata in B flat minor was written at the same time as *The Bells*, in Rome where he had taken his family for a six-month sojourn in 1912/13. The first movement, at one point, actually suggests tolling bells. It is a kaleidoscopic and capricious movement: it glitters, it dances, it is pensive, it postures, there is a hint of a cake-walk and syncopation and it echoes the bravura sections of the Third Piano Concerto

The sweet reveries of the second movement enchant. As Robert Matthew-Walker in an untypical flight of fancy describes it thus (he does not mention whether this is his visual interpretation or that of the composer): "It is a quiet summer's day in Southern Russia, with the butterflies gently fluttering against the rich colours of the motionless roses and lilacs in full bloom, the grass warmed with haze, the earth full yet not damp underfoot." This is one of Rachmaninov's loveliest slow movements. The finale is bursting in energy and again there are echoes of the fiery sections of the Third Piano Concerto. Rachmaninov would revise this B flat minor Second Sonata in 1931 (see review of it on CD 6)

The remainder of CD3 comprises shorter pieces. First three separate miniatures lasting just over one minute each: the swiftly moving and rippling *Morceau de Fantaisie in G minor* (1899) was the first work completed by Rachmaninov after the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony; *Song Without Words* is a much earlier little gem (1887), sentimentally lyrical; and *Piece in D minor* is even earlier (1884) but shows an impressive early assurance, swift and romantic. *Fughetta in F major* is nicely classical, poised and lucid. *Fragments* comes from the period in the weeks immediately before Rachmaninov fled Russia and the Bolshevik revolution. It has all the nostalgia for a way of life gone for ever. *Oriental Sketch* from the same period refers not to the geographical region but to the Orient Express, Kreisler thought the repeated-note figure reminded him of that great train.

Rachmaninov's Three Nocturnes in F sharp minor, F major and C minor respectively are from 1887/8 and they are all sweetly melodic although they are hardly restful through much of their length, in tempi and dynamics. The CD closes with *Four Pieces* dating from about 1897. These are little gems too. The opening 'Romance' shares the same key and tender utterances as the First Piano Concerto; the 'Prelude' is a tussle between a repeated melodramatic figure and a more relaxed gentle melody. *Mélodie* has one of those gorgeous melting Rachmaninov tunes and the final Gavotte charms.

CD4:

Thirteen Preludes op. 32 (1910)

No. 1 in C major

No. 2 in B flat minor

No. 3 in E major

No. 4 in F minor

No. 5 in G major

No. 6 in F minor

No. 7 in F major

No. 8 in A minor

No. 9 in A major

No. 10 in B minor

No. 11 in B major

No. 12 in G sharp minor

No. 13 in D flat major

Prelude in F Major (1891)

Prelude in D minor (1917)

recorded on September 17 and 18 1982 and 20 April 1983

HYPERION CDS44044 [48:13]

Available separately on HYPERION CDA66082

Rachmaninov's group of Thirteen Preludes Op. 32 of 1910 followed on from his Third Piano Concerto premiered in New York the year previously and the Liturgy of

St John of Chrysostom. The whole set was completed within nine days in the summer (he wrote three of them on August 23rd). Hurried they may have been, but these Preludes are top-drawer Rachmaninov. As a result of this concentrated activity, maybe, the pieces show an organic unity. It is however interesting to note, as Robert Matthew-Walker observes in his programme note, "how the composer recalls the C sharp minor the begetter of the entire set of Preludes, in the pervasive cell, and uses much of the material from the first to be written (No. 5) in the remaining twelve."

That haunting, dream-like Prelude No. 5 in C minor is delectable. Howard Shelley bestows magic upon its gently coruscating ripples and serene lyricism. If I had to pick but one piece from this entire 8-disc set, this would have to be my choice. The other 12 preludes cover a wide variety of tempi, rhythms and moods: the dainty ballet-like figures of No. 2 in B flat minor; No. 3 in E major's bell-like figures and the bold material reminiscent of the Piano Concertos; the tenderly romantic waltz that is No. 9 in A major; the swiftly-moving restlessness of No. 8 in A minor; the folk-like quality of No. 11 in B major and the deeply-felt sorrow and fervour of No. 13 in D flat major. Then there is the heart-felt pathos and passion of the most extended Prelude (at just over six minutes), No. 10 in B minor. Another piece that haunts.

This fourth CD is rounded off with two more Preludes. The pretty Prelude in F Major was composed two weeks after completing his First Piano Concerto. It muses on material from the slow movement of that Concerto but, interestingly, it was first published not as a piano work but as the first of *Two Pieces* for cello and Piano. Listening to it, I was struck by how much it reminded me of the piano music of the English composer, John Ireland. The Prelude in D minor from 1917 was written shortly before Rachmaninov had to flee his homeland and maybe here we can detect a note of regret for the passing of the old order?

CD5:

***Etudes Tableaux Op. 33* (1911)**

- No. 1 in F minor
- No. 2 in C major
- No. 3 in C minor, Op. posth.
- No. 4 = Op. 39 No. 6
- No. 5 in D minor, Op. posth.
- No. 6 in E flat minor
- No. 7 in E flat major
- No. 8 in G minor
- No. 9 in C sharp minor

***Etudes-Tableaux Op. 39* (1916/17)**

- No. 1 in C minor
- No. 2 in A minor
- No. 3 in F sharp minor

No. 4 in B minor
No. 5 in E flat minor
No. 6 in A minor
No. 7 in C minor
No. 8 in D minor
No. 9 in D major

recorded on 19 and 20 April 1983

HYPERION CDS44045 [58:50]

Available separately on HYPERION CDA66091

The very title *Etudes-Tableaux* suggests extra-musical subjects but 'tableaux' in this context, should be interpreted as meaning the rather indefinite 'character' rather than the definite 'picture'. Rachmaninov observed: "I do not believe in the artist disclosing too much of his images. Let them paint for themselves what it most suggests."

Nevertheless we know that, in 1930, Rachmaninov provided Ottorino Respighi with some sort of programmatic guide to enable the Italian composer to orchestrate five of these *Etudes-Tableaux*. Some might argue that Rachmaninov's visualisations were somewhat contrived, and visualised *after* the pieces were composed. (The first set of nine *Etudes-Tableaux* were composed in 1911 and the second set 1916/17. Three of the original set were removed one, No. 4 being revised in 1916, and incorporated (as No. 6) into the second set; Nos. 3 and 5 from the first set were found after the composer's death and reinstated into the first set.

The *Etudes-Tableaux* contain many typical Rachmaninov fingerprints. So, rather than tire the reader with repetitive comments on all 17, I shall restrict myself to commenting on a representative selection including the five that Respighi orchestrated. No. 1 of the Opus 31 set begins assertively in march rhythm before a delicate rippling theme of considerable nostalgic beauty tries to break through the harshness. In No. 2 that pleading beauty is caught dancing in lonely remoteness. No. 3, published posthumously, is much more solemn, pensive; then a defiance that is washed away by tender, quiescent ripples before a heart-on-sleeve melody, reminiscent of those of the Piano Concertos, enters to beguile the ear. The next, No. 4 is one of Rachmaninov's call-to-arms but with soothing gentle asides. Pressing on to No. 7 in the set, and the only Op. 33 *Etude Tableau* that Respighi orchestrated, Rachmaninov suggested a scene at a fair and there is certainly, in the piano original, a jolly rowdiness about. No. 8 is another reflective piece of sylvan pellucid beauty.

Respighi orchestrated four of the nine Op. 39 *Etudes-Tableaux*. Rachmaninov's wife suggested pictures of seagulls and the sea for No. 2. On hearing it, one is immediately reminded of Rachmaninov's *Isle of the Dead* and his *idée fixe*, the

Dies irae. Both the Rachmaninov piano original and the Respighi orchestration are powerful and evocative. The Rachmaninov visualisation of No. 6 was the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood and the brusque heavy opening piano chords certainly suggest the wolf and the contrastingly plaintive little heroine. No. 7, the most extended of all the Etudes Tableaux drew an untypically detailed description for Respighi from Rachmaninov: "Let me dwell on this a moment longer. I am sure you will not mock a composer's caprices. The initial theme is a march. The other theme represents the singing of a choir. Commencing with the movement in semiquavers [sixteenth notes] in C minor and a little further on in E-minor, a fine rain is suggested, incessant and hopeless. This movement develops, culminating in C minor – the chimes of a church.

The finale returns to the first theme, a march." The imagination might suggest the funeral of a great man, mourners hunched against the rain. The piano intimates all of this and Respighi's imaginative orchestration seems to substantiate such a picture.

Respighi's orchestration of No. 9 was based on Rachmaninov's visualisation of his final Etude-Tableau as something of an oriental march and perhaps a fairground and again the piano original is equally evocative of such a scene.

CD6:

Piano Sonata No. 1 in D minor op. 28 (1907)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor op. 36 (1931) revised version

HYPERION CDS44046 [57:09]

rec. 24 and 25 January 1982

Available separately on HYPERION CDA66047

In November 1906, Rachmaninov deciding that he needed to have a break from the tensions of social unrest in Russia and the responsibilities of conducting at the Bolshoi, settled with his family in Dresden. It was here that he worked simultaneously on three works: his opera *Mona Vanna*, the Symphony No. 2 and the First Piano Sonata. With CD6, of this set, we arrive at this latter work, the most extensive and most formidable of his solo Piano works. Howard Shelley rises magnificently to its considerable challenges realising its symphonic stature and bringing poetic sensibility to the lovely slow middle movement as well as strength and stamina in the outer movements of this masterpiece of Piano writing that spans some 37 minutes. Rachmaninov said that the Sonata's three movements were suggested by Goethe's Faust portraying *Faust*, Gretchen and Mephistopheles and the flight to Brocken as in Liszt's *Faust Symphony*. The daintiness and vulnerability of the central movement clearly suggests the femininity of Gretchen and there is wry humour in the early sections of the fiery and passionate Finale, so full of Mephistopholean strutting and mockery. Incidentally the closing section of this Sonata's Finale alludes, somewhat appropriately, to the composer's *idée fixe*, the *Dies irae*

Rachmaninov's revision of his Second Piano Sonata (originally written in 1913.)

lightens its texture and tightens its arguments thus:-

1st Movement 2nd Movement 3rd Movement.

Original version 11:19 7:36 7:21

Revised version 8:01 5:57 5:41.

[The original version is on CD 3 of this set and reviewed in the appropriate section above.]

Opinions vary as to the effectiveness of the revisions. Rachmaninov, himself, passing judgement on the original version said, "So many voices are moving simultaneously, and it is too long ..." Rachmaninov's close friend Horowitz felt that the 1931 revision was too thorough-going. Rachmaninov concurred and suggested that Horowitz might like to produce a version himself. Robert Matthew-Walker suggests pianists today are more like to be drawn to the first version but both have merits and they should both be considered. The opening movement music, in the revised version differs in character. For instance the bell-like passages seem to be emphasised more strongly while the cake-walk-like figures and syncopations are evened out somewhat. The essential character of the lovely central movement is maintained and, I think, enhanced.

CD7:

Variations on a Theme of Chopin Op. 22 (1902/03)

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

Melodie in E major Op. 3 No. 3 (1940) revised version

HYPERION CDS44047 [51:42]

rec. November 1978

Available separately on Hyperion CDA66009

These two sets of solo piano variations are from opposite ends of the composer's career. The *Chopin Variations* was Rachmaninov's first big solo piano work. The theme is one of Chopin's Opus 28 Preludes. The Corelli Variations was his last original work for solo Piano. In this instance, the theme, interestingly, is not by Corelli, but rather an anonymous tune known as 'La Folia' used by Corelli in a work of his own. The *Chopin Variations* have echoes of Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto and the *Corelli Variations* are not unlike the variations of the famous *Paganini Rhapsody* for Piano and orchestra composed three years or so later.

The form of the *Chopin Variations* is of interest. The 22 variations are grouped irregularly, giving an outline of a four-movement sonata. (First movement: variations 1 to 10; second movement: variations 11 to 18; the 'scherzo': variations 19 and 20; and the 'Finale': variations 21 and 22. In most cases, each variation is longer than its predecessor giving the impression of a cumulative journey of wholly

organic growth. The final 22nd variation has a duration, in Shelley's recording, of just over 5 minutes.

After the grandiose statement of the theme, the opening three variations proceed in Bach-like classicism; the single-line first variation becoming the counter-subject for the second and canonic material for the third. Classicism melds beautifully with typical Rachmaninov 'heart-on-sleeve' romanticism in these variations. Throughout these variations Rachmaninov exhibits an assure mastery of large-scale structure.

The *Corelli Variations* is dedicated to Fritz Kreisler, who introduced the theme (see above) to Rachmaninov. Rachmaninov had recorded Sonatas by Beethoven, Grieg and Schubert with Kreisler. Compared with the *Chopin Variations* this work is leaner and seems to have been conceived in one sweep. The *Corelli Variations* are set in Rachmaninov's favourite key of D minor. The first 13 variations share this key and they culminate in a cadenza in D flat major. As in the *Paganini Variations*, this key is the emotional heart of the work. D minor returns, for the four variations before the coda building up to a fiery conclusion.

Howard Shelley delivers bravura performances of both sets of variations, poignancy and delicacy with the utmost clarity in the fastest passages and steeliness in the more bombastic

CD8:

Rimsky-Korsakov – *The Flight of the Bumblebee*

Kreisler – *Liebeslied*

Bizet – Minuet from *L'Arlésienne* Suite No. 1

Schubert – *Wohin?*, from *Die schöne Müllerin*

Mussorgsky – Hopak from *Sorotchinsky Fair*

Bach – Prelude, from Violin Partita in E Major

Bach – *Gavotte* from Violin Partita in E Major

Bach – *Gigue* from Violin Partita in E Major

Rachmaninov – *Daisies* Op. 38 No. 3

Mendelssohn – Scherzo from 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'

Rachmaninov – *Lilacs* Op. 21 No. 5

Behr – *Polka de V R*

Tchaikovsky – *Lullaby* Op. 16 No. 1

Kreisler – *Liebesfreud*

recorded on 20, 21 and 22 February 1991

HYPERION CDS44048 [45:48]

Available separately on HYPERION CDA66486

In Rachmaninov's youth learning the classics via piano transcriptions was the norm. In those pre-radio, pre-gramophone days, one learnt largely by playing; concerts were rare events. Rachmaninov, therefore, regarded transcriptions as a normal part of music-making. Some editions of his own later works, thought to be

transcriptions (e.g. 'Daises' and 'Lilacs') are in fact the original versions.

All Rachmaninov's transcriptions are of a very high technical and artistic order. All are faithful to the spirit and character of the originals but with added dimensions of atmosphere and dramatic evocation. The writing is often very elaborate, and the chord clusters dense, challenging all but the most virtuosic pianists. Howard Shelley rises to their challenges with aplomb delivering readings full of dash and sparkle and sensitivity.

Rachmaninov's first transcription for solo piano, written at the time (September 1900) when he was undergoing psychotherapy with Dr Dahl, was the 'Minuet' from Bizet's *L'Arlésienne* Suite No. 1. Howard Shelley plays Rachmaninov's second transcription of this work made some twenty years later, published in 1923. He makes the music trip along lightly and merrily through the staccato rhythms and eloquently through the pride and languor of the middle section.

Shelley's reading of the Schubert *Die schöne Müllerin* makes the mill waters swirl and shine while suggesting the emotional turmoil of the lovesick boy; while the transcription of Mussorgsky's *Hopak* is a swift-moving, bombastic virtuoso showcase..

The Bach transcriptions are wonderfully lucid, late romanticism lying compatibly side-by-side with classical purity. Shelley's Prelude is a model of clarity and elegance, and his Gavotte refined and dainty with a hint of wry humour.

The Flight of the Bumblebee is 'busyness' personified. Rachmaninov's most famous transcription - of Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* Scherzo - has always been popular. The two sophisticated Kreisler transcriptions are delicious, lovely, lilting and sensual. Howard adds poetry and charm to the delicate, pellucid beauty of the Tchaikovsky *Lullaby*. The Behr Polka is a charming glittering salon trifle – something of the world of operetta.

Lilacs and roses adorned the gate leading to the front door of Rachmaninov's country estate at Ivanovka . Their image must have meant a great deal to the composer especially during his years of exile. The two transcriptions of Rachmaninov's own works are delectable. Both fragrantly evocative: dainty 'Daises'; and the 'Lilacs' (originally a song) arpeggios suggest lines of nodding lilacs swaying in a breeze. [There was also a 'White Lilac Lady' an admirer who sent Rachmaninov a bouquet of the flowers; yet they never met.]

Ian Lace

Rachmaninov: Complete Piano Works

Our rating: 5.0 out of 5 star rating

By [BBC Music Magazine](#)

Published: January 20, 2012 at 3:47 pm

COMPOSERS: Rachmaninov LABELS: Hyperion WORKS: Complete Piano Works

PERFORMER: Howard Shelley (piano) CATALOGUE NO: CDS 44041/8 ADD/DDD

Rachmaninov was one of the greatest pianists of his age and thus his piano music was written with great technical insight. The present issue of the complete solo piano music (also available on separate discs) brings together recordings made between 1978 and 1991.

The cellular construction of the Preludes, Op. 23, makes them effective either as individuals or as a unified set, and hearing them complete offers an unusual opportunity to reassess this music. For the Preludes, Op. 32, Rachmaninov resisted overly Romantic melody in favour of more elaborate passagework and sudden, unpredictable flights of fancy. Some of the most eloquent examples of this stylistic change can be found in the spectacularly played Etudes tableaux, Opp. 33 and 39.

Aside from fine performances of the two sets of variations to themes by Chopin (Op. 22) and Corelli (Op. 42), this collection is also valuable for its inclusion of the shorter early pieces, works in both their original and revised forms, such as the Piano Sonata, Op. 36, and the Melodie from the Morceaux defantaisie, Op. 3, and the transcriptions of works by composers such as Bach, Schubert and Mendelssohn, which provide a particularly interesting footnote. The result is a fine achievement from pianist Howard Shelley and Hyperion alike. These superbly recorded, idiomatic readings demonstrate Shelley's virtuoso pianism and affinity for this music in performances of the highest calibre. Nicholas East

Sergei RACHMANINOV (1873-1943) - Richter MusicWeb Review

Etudes Tableaux Op. 33 Nos: 9 5 6

Etudes Tableaux Op. 39 Nos: 1 2 3 4 9

Six Preludes from Op. 23 Nos: 1 2 4 5 7 8

Six Preludes from Op. 32 Nos: 1 2 6 7 9 10 12

Sviatoslav Richter (piano)

rec: Etudes Tableaux DDD 1988, Preludes ADD 1971 reissued from Olympia

REGIS RRC1022 [74.30]

Bargain price (around £6)

Richter's robustly romantic way with Rachmaninov is a byword. It is perhaps the most memorable aspect of his interpretations but we should not forget the grace he can also mobilise in naturalistic and inevitable accents. This is best heard in Op. 33 No. 5. In this he is closest to his great contemporary Medtner. James Murray's notes offer excellent insights. If there is a criticism of the Etudes Tableaux it is that in their most demonstrative moments they scream out for an orchestra. The composer's fantasy overtops the ability of the piano to express the range of emotions intended without a certain density although he defeats this in the bell-tormented Op. 39 No 7 so memorably orchestrated by Respighi. To this extent Rachmaninov can be compared with Arnold Bax whose Sonatas (especially Nos 2 and 3) often burst the bounds of what can be said with the solo piano. That said Richter is impressive and achieves a sense of spaciousness and stillness that is reserved only to the truly great pianists. In his more pellucid crystalline moments as in No 2 Op. 39 there are never any doubts about the rightness of the music for the instrument. The recording is a tad 'bassy' (much better in the older Preludes recordings) but nothing you won't be able to live with in the light of Richter's performances which define 'grand'. The tapes have been licensed from Olympia. I hope that Regis will be permitted more from Olympia's catalogue.

Reviewer

Rob Barnett



RACHMANINOFF *Études-Tableaux*, opp. 33 and 39 • Martin Cousin (pn) • SOMM 0136 (63:58)

This is Martin Cousin's third CD for Somm; I reviewed his earlier Rachmaninoff recording in *Fanfare* 30:2. Evidently his 2011 recital of music by Glazunov, Liadov, and Arensky was not received for review, but it was favorably received elsewhere. Based on the present disc and on the towering performance of the First Sonata on his debut CD, I am prepared to state that Cousin is among the most distinguished Rachmaninoff pianists of our generation.

The *Études-Tableaux* are difficult works both pianistically and musically. The first set was written in 1911, immediately following the op. 32 Preludes; the two works share many characteristics. The second set was written in 1916–17, and was the last work Rachmaninoff completed before leaving Russia for good. The unique title is suggestive, and in fact when Ottorino Respighi orchestrated five of the pieces in 1930, Rachmaninoff identified for him the artistic or literary works being evoked; he never published the descriptions, however, and did not encourage musicians or audiences to think of the works as "program music." The music is more

concentrated than that of the large-scale compositions that preceded op. 33, among them the First Sonata and the Second Symphony, and the harmonic language is more advanced.

Cousin's account is consistently lucid and authoritative. He has plenty of technique, but is never showy; his attention to detail is meticulous, but never fussy. In op. 33/3 in C Minor his voicing is ideal; his runs in op. 33/6 (E^b Minor) are wonderfully even. His op. 33/9 (C[#] Minor) is magisterial; here and in op. 39/5 (E^b Minor) he obtains a big sound without ever banging. His delineation of voices in op. 39/7 (C Minor) is superb.

Among other distinguished versions of these works, Cousin's playing is more colorful than that of Howard Shelley (Hyperion) and more refined than that of Vladimir Ashkenazy (Decca). The sound of the Steinway D is sonorous and full. This is a winner in every way, a recording that is going directly onto my annual Want List. Let's hope for more Rachmaninoff from Martin Cousin. **Richard A. Kaplan**

This article originally appeared in Issue 38:2 (Nov/Dec 2014) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

Martin Cousin plays Rachmaninov's Études-tableaux [Somm] - ClassicalSource Website

Rachmaninov Études-tableaux, Opp.33 & 39

Martin Cousin (piano)

Recorded 28 & 29 October 2012 at the Old Granary Studio, Suffolk, England

Reviewed by: Robert Matthew-Walker

Reviewed: July 2014

CD No: SOMM

SOMMCD 0136

Duration: 64 minutes

This release contains performances of a very high technical and interpretative accomplishment. Rachmaninov's two sets of Études-tableaux stand at the very end of the period of Romantic composer-pianists from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-centuries. Indeed, it might justly be claimed that they bring down the curtain on that era – certainly in terms of major contributions to it, with just the composer's Corelli Variations and rather less-significant pieces by Medtner to come, overlapping music by Russian pianist-composers of later generations. Today, a comprehensive virtuoso technique is demanded of all pianists, which is one reason why the record catalogues are not bereft of issues of this music, but having long since disproved the once-current nonsensical (and downright unmusical) assessments of Rachmaninov – as exemplified by the 1953 Fifth

Edition of Grove's Dictionary – we now know that the artistic quality of his music is substantially greater than was ever admitted more than half a century ago – and that, in his piano music especially, more than the ability to play the notes is needed.

What is required on the part of pianists who would attempt this music is a technique that can surmount the fearsome difficulties of the writing, allied to a grasp of from whence this music emanates and an understanding of the inherent individual expressive qualities of a great composer.

The music has not changed since it was written one hundred years ago, but our understanding of it has, aided by recordings of which there have been several fine issues over the years – by some of the most admired pianists before the public – but on balance none, I would claim, are superior to Martin Cousin's in terms of re-creative insight.

The technical challenges of these pieces hold no fears for him: Cousin is their complete master in terms of tackling the most demanding of passages. But more importantly, and over and against this necessary quality, his understanding and grasp of the myriad musical qualities of these pieces is total. As just one example, Cousin's realisation of the composer's varying dynamics – he knows, full well, the difference between *ff* and *fff*, and the expressive importance of such markings. These two sets of pieces can be viewed in various lights – as individual pieces or as consecutive movements within two collections, in which case rather deeper and subtler connections become manifest.

It is in such matters that the genuine musician reveals himself, although this remains but one aspect. Equally, in terms of phrasing and chording and of genuine tempo rubato playing, Cousin proves himself the complete Rachmaninov interpreter. Occasionally, I might question certain details of his approach, but it is his ability to reveal the inner expression of each etude, allied to his occasional thrilling spontaneity, which had me entranced and wanting more.

Overall, this is pianism of the best kind, with Cousin showing no tendency to sentimentalise the music. His playing throughout is suffused with genuine warmth and perception, at the same time as being wonderfully clean and precise in detail. The recording quality is splendid, and this is one of the best solo piano records I have heard for a very long time – the more so considering it faces some pretty severe competition in the catalogues. Those who do not know these extraordinarily original masterpieces are strongly advised to acquire this disc. There is none better.

RACHMANINOFF Preludes (complete) • Eldar Nebolsin (pn) • NAXOS 8.570327 (77: 44)

The technical and musical demands of the Rachmaninoff preludes are legion. A partial catalog might include: the ability to negotiate massive chords, sensitively

voiced and often in quick succession; seamless arpeggios; perfect thirds, sixths, and other double-note figurations; a wide variety of attack and release strategies; the most delicate, *leggierissimo* fioratura; infinitely calibrated effects of *crescendo*, *diminuendo*, *accelerando*, and *meno mosso*; intelligent rubato; and perhaps above all, the ability to launch and sustain a singing line. To these requirements might be added some suggestion of that special attribute (of which Rachmaninoff himself was the unexcelled exemplar) namely, the ability to suggest aural planes—a vivid foreground, mid-distance, and background—capable of revealing the most complex textures to the listener. Happily, this new recording reveals Eldar Nebolsin as a pianist equal to these demands.

After encountering Ashkenazy's recording of these pieces from the mid 1970s (Decca 475 8238), I find Nebolsin's interpretations are a breath of fresh air. Each piece unfolds as a miniature drama with its own unique character, lending the entire set great variety of mood—from serene tranquility, to ebullient joy, to the most crushing sadness. Nothing in these interpretations suggests the routine. Nebolsin is hypersensitive to each of Rachmaninoff's articulation indications, pedal markings, and dynamic subtleties. And while the performances are thoughtful, they never sound fussy. In every instance, one has the feeling that this bouquet of late-Romantic expression emanates directly from the pianist's heart.

The highest compliment that may be paid Nebolsin's technique is that, in its complete subordination to the music, one is simply never aware of it. His sound is always beautiful, whether in the transparency of the most massive fortissimos or in the rainbow of subtly contrasted pianissimos. If the soaring op. 23/2 takes flight effortlessly, its fierce left-hand figurations never obtrude on the ebb and flow of exultant musical substance. The exquisite op. 23/10 breathes all the freshness of dew on delicate blossoms opening to the morning sun; the voice leading is simply gorgeous. The great B-Minor Prelude (op. 32/10) begins with a heart-rending sadness, so immobilized and still that the subsequent chordal section assumes an awesome grandeur of uncanny power and eloquence.

The recording was made in Westleton, Suffolk, U.K., this past January and is, in all technical aspects, commendable. One hopes that, despite the inevitable vicissitudes of career-building, this 33-year-old pianist will continue to exhibit this degree of instrumental prowess in the service of a sensitive and deeply artistic musicality. Highly recommended. **Patrick Rucker**

This article originally appeared in Issue 31:2 (Nov/Dec 2007) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

Rachmaninov: Preludes/Nebolsin - ClassicsToday

Review by: Jed Distler *Artistic Quality: 8* *Sound Quality: 9*

Eldar Nebolsin first came to my attention in 1994, when the pianist (19 at the time)

recorded an exciting and energetic Chopin B minor sonata for Decca. Judging from his Rachmaninov Preludes, recorded in January 2007, Nebolsin has evolved from an unbridled keyboard whiz into a thoughtful artist who channels his virtuosity toward serving the music. He takes his sweet time over the C-sharp minor Prelude's opening section, yet his keen sense of nuance and timing not only prevents the music from dragging but also sets up a contrasting context for the torrential middle section that follows.

Nebolsin hits on a tempo for the B-flat major Prelude that addresses the grandeur Rachmaninov intends by his *Maestoso* directive yet also allows the thick climactic chords to fully sing out without slowing down the pulse. In an era where young pianists stretch out the B minor Prelude until its backbone crumbles, Nebolsin's lilting fluidity is both a corrective and a tonic.

The steady gait Nebolsin favors in the G-sharp minor reveals this popular prelude in an uncommonly urgent light, although the G major's curvaceously shaped phrases and sensitive harmonic pointing bear more than a few welcome traces of Horowitzian intoxicants. Surprisingly, the C major and C minor Preludes make a labored, heavy-handed impression and are bogged down by swirling passagework that fails to scintillate and soar. You could imagine suppler, more transparent handling of the D major's overlapping textures by clicking your ruby slippers and repeating the mantra "Sviatoslav Richter" 500 times. Still and all, the budget price and excellent engineering may attract collectors wishing to supplement the mid-price Ashkenazy reference edition. Thanks to Naxos for putting Eldar Nebolsin back on the discographical radar.

Rachmaninov: Preludes Review by James Leonard

AllMusic Review Rating: 4*/5*

Eldar Nebolsin's debut recording of the complete preludes -- that includes all of Opus 23 and Opus 32 plus the always-popular Opus 3 No. 2 in C sharp minor -- is in every way but one fully competitive with the very best. Nebolsin has the technique -- check out his incredible two-handed chords in Opus 23 No. 2 in B flat major -- and the stamina -- check out his unbelievably propulsive Opus 32 No. 6 in F minor. Better yet, he has the soul -- listen to his soaring lines in Opus 23 No. 10 in G flat major -- and the spirit -- listen to his balance between motion and stasis in Opus 32 No. 10 in B minor. Indeed, all Nebolsin lacks is the maturity to dig beneath the surface melancholy of **Rachmaninov's** music to the bone-deep gloom and doom lying at the core of the moody Russian's heart. But considering how great his accomplishment, holding Nebolsin's youth against him is almost beside the point -- after all, time usually takes care of his "problem" -- and anyone who loves the repertoire should hear this recital. Produced by **John Taylor** at Potton

Hall in Weston, Suffolk, Naxos' digital sound recorded is rich and smooth, but nicely detailed.