

## Rachmaninoff

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### CD 1

Piano Concerto No. 1 in F# minor op. 1  
 Piano Concerto No. 4 in G minor op. 40  
 Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini op. 43

### CD 2

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor op. 18  
 Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor op. 30

Stephen Hough *pf*  
 Dallas Symphony Orchestra  
 Andrew Litton *cond*

Hyperion CDA 67501/2 (2 CDs: 2hrs 26 minutes: DDD)  
 Notes and translations included.

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When Robert Craft invited Stravinsky to make a prediction about the 'music of the future', the latter replied, with characteristic acerbity, 'mostly it will very much resemble "the music of the present" – for the man in the satellite, super Hi-fi Rachmaninoff'.<sup>1</sup>

This prescient prophecy was published only a few months after the launch of the first artificial satellite and three years before Yuri Gagarin's momentous exploit. Almost half a century later, a rather higher proportion of humanity than Stravinsky obviously expected remains earth-bound, but the power of Rachmaninoff endures, as the reception given to this highly acclaimed set of recordings testifies. Stravinsky's barely concealed resentment is further underlined by his reply to Craft's next question to the effect that '(m)asterpieces aside, it seems to me the new music will be serial'.<sup>2</sup> While Stravinsky's modernist creed seemed more in touch with an increasingly technocratic age which has subsequently largely rejected it, Rachmaninoff comes more and more to epitomize the late nineteenth-century trend described by Carl Dahlhaus as an 'alternative to the realities of the world following the Industrial Revolution' and as 'the expression of an alternative culture'.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it was in the highly industrialized United States that the exiled Rachmaninoff was so warmly received, where he made his recordings, and where his five major late works were conceived and first performed. Hollywood took Rachmaninoff to its heart,

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<sup>1</sup> Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Stravinsky in Conversation with Robert Craft* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962; originally *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky*, 1958): 144.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*: 144.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, 'Neo-Romanticism', in *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, trans. Mary Whittall (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1974; pbk edition, 1989): 8, 10.

using his music in numerous movies and absorbing something of his influence in the characteristic sound of at least seven *ersatz* piano concertos on film.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps this very popularity and susceptibility to bowdlerization and debasement have militated against full acceptance into academic and critical canons. Such canons, which tend to embody the 'high modernist' doctrines of progress and development, can all too easily neglect or underestimate works of art that appear peripheral or epigonal. Even the recent *Cambridge Companion to the Concerto*, which aims 'with broad remit' to examine the concertos that have made 'important contributions to musical culture',<sup>5</sup> contains only passing references to Rachmaninoff. Several of these refer to him as a performer, and others, briefly in comparison with the music of other composers; nowhere is there a discussion of any of the works themselves comparable to those afforded to the concertos of Hummel, Cramer, Dohnányi or Busoni, for example. No doubt it was considered inappropriate to include him in the chapter on the nineteenth-century piano concerto; but then he doesn't figure in that on the 1900–1945 period either.<sup>6</sup> Rachmaninoff's first three concertos were written well within the accepted limits of the 'long' nineteenth century (op. 1 in F# minor: 1891, revised 1917; op. 18 in C minor: 1901; op. 30 in D minor: 1909), while the last two concerted works (op. 40 in G minor: 1926, revised 1941; op. 43, the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*: 1934), though conservative in idiom, nevertheless breathe a recognizably twentieth-century atmosphere, though hardly 'the air from another planet'.

There are good reasons for regarding the Rachmaninoff concertos, in particular the second and third, as among the high points of the nineteenth-century concerto – even as its culmination – and the appearance of a new set of complete recordings is necessarily an important event. Also, the composer's own recordings of the same works have recently been reissued on the Naxos Historical label (L8.110601/2), and Alexander Ghindin has recorded the original versions of the first and fourth concertos in revelatory performances with the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Vladimir Ashkenazy for Ondine Records (ODE 977-2). Perhaps most significant of all, a new critical edition of Rachmaninoff's complete works from Russian Music Publishing, in association with Bärenreiter, is currently in preparation. This will include letters and documents as well as the scores, the surviving sketches and the original versions of works subsequently revised. It seems that, at last, Rachmaninoff is about to receive the critical respect and scholarship that are his due.

Stephen Hough's achievement in recording the concertos live in concerts (at the Eugene McDermott Concert Hall, Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center, Dallas) all within the space of two months (April–May, 2004) is Herculean (the *Paganini Rhapsody* had already been recorded on 29 June 2003). In relation to the vast number of previous recordings, listeners may have preferences for different performers in different concertos, but there can be few complete recorded

<sup>4</sup> David Butler Cannata, Introduction to Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff – A Lifetime in Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001): xli/xlii. Cannata gives lists of films that use Rachmaninoff's music, music inspired by Rachmaninoff's style and, making no claim to comprehensiveness, several of the many popular songs that are *contrafacta*.

<sup>5</sup> Simon P. Keefe, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Concerto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 2.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen D. Lindeman, 'The nineteenth-century piano concerto'; David E. Schneider, 'Contrasts and common concerns in the concerto 1900–1945' both in Keefe, *Cambridge Companion to the Concerto*: 93–117, 139–60.

collections to surpass this one, taken as a whole. Hough's readings have the integrity and confidence that are the result of devoted scholarship and total commitment to the task of newly revealing this familiar music. The performances have freshness and vividness, and present a unified overall view of the works that pays due attention to the qualities of the composer's own performances without being slavishly bound to them or replicating all their details.

At several points, particularly in the best-known second and third concertos, some of Rachmaninoff's own tempi seem surprisingly brisk in relation to what has become commonly accepted. Hough adopts the composer's approach to the opening of the D minor concerto. There is no metronome mark, and most performers pay more attention to the *ma non tanto* marking than to the *Allegro*, but Hough follows the composer's example, giving it urgency and a certain restlessness, which increase considerably at the *Più mosso*, where the semiquaver toccata figuration is wonderfully crisp and clean – again, like the composer's. He adds a marked *accelerando* towards the following *Più vivo*, which, though authorized neither in the score nor in Rachmaninoff's performance, contributes to the sense of direction and momentum, further animating and informing the structure of the whole movement, particularly the later passage leading to the central climax of the development section. Rachmaninoff had deep doubts about the structure and length of several of his works, and made cuts in this concerto of passages that seemed episodic or static, notably in the third movement, but also, in the first movement, of the eight bars before figure 11. Hough proves that the composer's fears were unfounded if the performer has a sure grasp of the structure and overall drama of the whole. This is even clearer in the third movement, where in the long middle section the omission of the passage from two bars after figure 52 to figure 54 became not uncommon, following the composer's example. This might be understandable if we expect that, following the conventions of a 'development' section, there should be a sense of continuous forward movement through a succession of unstable tonalities; here, however, the composer gives us a series of static tableaux with frequent cadences in E $\flat$  until the surprising shift to E major (figure 55) for a brief interlude before a return to E $\flat$  and, eventually, the resumption of Tempo I, still in that key. The successful execution of this passage demands performers who can sustain the overall momentum while still finding time to highlight passing expressive details, which Hough and Litton manage well. The more serious of the composer's cuts in this movement is that in the exposition (figure 45 to four bars before 47) of the lyrical component of the second subject, which is later to become the 'big tune' of the final section. In the recapitulation it receives a slightly more emphatic presentation (which Rachmaninoff does not omit) in what is an intermediate stage of its evolution towards the final peroration. The peroration itself, as Hough carefully observes, is not simply the inflation of a fundamentally lyrical theme, as in the less subtle second concerto; it begins *Vivacissimo* with a playful fanfare-like exchange between piano and brass in exhortation to the strings, who then enter, as marked, *piano* and slightly *meno mosso*, as if reluctant to embark on the expected grandiloquence. On the second summons the jocular invocation succeeds, but Hough and Litton keep the grand gesture moving, with perhaps just a touch of the ironic detachment that can be detected in the composer's own performance.

The opening of the second concerto may well come as an even greater surprise. Contrary to what has become normal practice, there is no suggestion in the score that the opening chords should be any slower than the following announcement

of the main theme, though Rachmaninoff himself takes the introduction slightly slower than the following section. The Hough-Litton tempo for the first subject is rather brisker, and Hough's introduction is, if anything, faster still. This gives the unfortunate impression of a rather dogmatic approach, as if attempting to correct a common misconception or abuse. It is true that the chords are organically connected to the progression to be heard later at the beginning (before figure 28) of the finale (it is as well to remember that the second and third movements were written and publicly performed before the first was written), and may well need to be integrated into the design of the first movement. But the improvisatory, exploratory character of the composer's own performance lacks nothing in discipline, and in its spontaneity it has about it something of the earlier tradition of the improvised prelude (though it is doubtful if the composer entertained any conscious desire to invoke memories of that practice).

Some listeners will miss the familiar uninhibited, but slightly naïve, emotionalism of most other accounts of these concertos, finding Hough perhaps slightly too clinical in his apparently effortless and flawless virtuosity. But if they do, they will also overlook many qualities in the composer's own recordings, and they will miss many of the subtle nuances that Hough projects so well and the loving attention to detail which he lavishes on the more tender, gentler moments. At the end of the slow movement of the fourth, for instance (3 and 4 bars after figure 40), the rising lines (almost octatonic scales) are played with a subtlety of nuance and articulation unmatched even by the composer himself. And the ornamental semiquaver octaves in the central episode of the finale of the first concerto (which begin as a diminution of the string melody) have a spontaneity and delicacy that call to mind (for this listener, at least) the fantasy and freedom of the piano birdsong in the *Jardin du sommeil d'amour* in Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphonie*.

The *Paganini Rhapsody* is possibly the highlight of these CDs. Stephen Hough had already made something of a reputation for himself as an exponent of this work; Robert Philip, for example, singles out his 2002 Promenade Concert performance as coming 'remarkably close to the spirit of Rachmaninoff's recorded performance' in its 'combination of energy, lightness and detailed flexibility'.<sup>7</sup> Like Rachmaninoff, he does not linger with excessive indulgence over the eighteenth variation, but keeps it moving at the same time as shaping it sensitively and spaciouly, particularly in its dying fall. The following variations are dispatched with vigour and energy, and the final cadence has exactly the right nonchalant wit – if anything, slightly more than in the composer's performance, where it is a little too heavy.

Hough is well served by his partners in the enterprise – Andrew Litton and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra – though at times the balance is perhaps a little in the soloist's favour, so that some of the exquisite details of Rachmaninoff's orchestration are occasionally obscured; it may also explain why the anguish of the *agitato* outburst in the fourth concerto's slow movement (figure 36) seems under-projected. However, in the first movement of the same concerto the first violins' final recapitulation of the opening theme (figure 30) is beautifully poised and exquisitely judged – truly a moment to savour.

At this point, perhaps, a plea may be made for the restoration to the standard repertoire of the original version of the fourth concerto, which seems, in the

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004): 173.

light of the Ghindin recording, a far better work than is normally supposed and, despite shortcomings of which Rachmaninoff was excessively conscious, not abnormally long or dull; it is arguably stronger and more individual than the familiar revised version, and it contains some of the composer's finest invention.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps Stephen Hough may be induced to perform and record this version in due course.

Recordings of a composer's complete contribution to a genre are a characteristic phenomenon of our time; they become symbols of an anthologized canon, as well as offering surveys of the current state of performance philosophy and the contemporary evolution of performance practice. The Hough-Litton Rachmaninoff recordings do exactly that: they combine an exploratory questioning with a scholarly awareness of the composer's own conceptions; and in opting for predominantly live recordings – a practice that is finding increasing favour – they achieve greater spontaneity than is normally possible under studio conditions. The composer's originals cannot avoid sounding like old recordings, however brilliantly the Naxos engineers have re-mastered them; but the Hyperion team have given us 'super Hi-fi Rachmaninoff', and the Hough-Litton performances help to maintain these works as very much 'the music of the present'.

Michael Frith  
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### Stanford

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String Quartet No. 1 in G major op. 44  
String Quartet No. 2 in A minor op. 45  
Fantasy for Horn Quintet in A minor (ed. Dibble)

RTÉ Vanbrugh Quartet  
Gregory Ellis *vn*, Keith Pascoe *vn*, Simon Aspell *va*, Christopher Marwood *vc*  
Stephen Stirling *hn*

Hyperion CDA67434 (68 minutes: DDD)  
Notes and translations included.

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The first two of Stanford's eight string quartets, op. 44 in G major and op. 45 in A minor, date from 1891, and were composed rapidly during August and September of that year. Although he was already a very experienced composer, with a long list of works – symphonies, operas, choral music and chamber music – to his credit, it says much for the circumspection with which Stanford approached the

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<sup>8</sup> See Geoffrey Norris, 'Rachmaninoff's Second Thoughts', *Musical Times*, cxiv (1973): 364–8; and Robert Threlfall, 'Rachmaninoff's Revisions and an Unknown Version of his Fourth Concerto', *Musical Opinion*, xcvi (1973): 235–7. Threlfall identifies three versions of the fourth concerto: the original autograph (1926); the first published edition (1928), which includes a two-piano arrangement; and the final published version (1944), already played and recorded by the composer in 1942.