

Huntsville Chamber Music Guild presents

Vadym Kholodenko, piano

October 19, 2013

Program Notes

Sergei Rachmaninoff's *First Sonata* is a monumental piece—sprawling, massively virtuosic, exhausting to play and overwhelming to listen to. Rachmaninoff was well aware of its special demands; in his typical pessimistic and self-deprecating way, he wrote to a friend about the sonata: “Nobody will ever play this composition, it’s too difficult and long and possibly—and this is the most important—too dubious musically.” These words were in some ways prescient—the *First Sonata* is not played nearly as often as the still formidable but comparatively manageable *Second Sonata*. Reference books from the mid-20th century often judge the *First Sonata* to be “dubious musically”—they find it too dark, too dense, too long, too tortured, just *too*. But recent criticism has reversed this assessment, and it’s now understood as one of Rachmaninoff’s most ambitious and imaginative works.

In the same letter, Rachmaninoff also wrote: “At one time I wanted to make a symphony of this sonata, but this seemed impossible because of the purely pianistic style in which it is written.” This dichotomy characterizes the piece: on one hand, because of its bold, sweeping manner, it seems to be conceived for a great mass of instruments; on the other hand, every detail is so beautifully made for the piano that it can’t be any other way.

Rachmaninoff left hints that the sonata has a hidden programme: its three movements correspond to the three main characters in Goethe’s *Faust*. By the time Rachmaninoff wrote the sonata in 1907, *Faust* had been inspiring composers for almost a century: there are the great operas by Gounod and Berlioz, but also overtures (Wagner, for instance), oratorios (Schumann), and even symphonies (Liszt, *Faust Symphony*). The year before Rachmaninoff penned his *First Sonata*, Mahler based the gigantic second movement of his *Eighth Symphony* on a scene from *Faust*; and soon the Italian maverick Ferruccio Busoni would undertake yet another grand opera on the theme. *Faust* hypnotized Romantic composers; they were especially enthralled by its archetypal characters: the tortured intellectual Faust, the deceptive Mephistopheles, and Gretchen, the innocent, the symbol of redemption. Rachmaninoff’s *First Sonata* isn’t the first great piano sonata to sketch these personalities: pianist Alfred Brendel has compellingly shown that the Liszt *B minor Sonata* is structured around three recurring themes that correspond to Faust, Mephistopheles, and Gretchen.

Each movement of Rachmaninoff’s sonata is like a portrait—the first movement is Faust, brooding, introverted, so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he’s unable to act decisively. The second is Gretchen—a vision of serenity painted with the utmost finesse. The final movement is Mephistopheles, and he receives the most elaborate treatment: this surging music can only be described as epic. To make the demonic associations absolutely explicit, Rachmaninoff introduces a famous melody: the “Dies Irae” Gregorian chant, a setting of a portion of the Requiem Sequence about the last judgment—“Day of anger, day of wrath. . .” This melody was a favorite of Rachmaninoff’s, and in his music it signifies the inexorability of death. Here, it is accompanied by a galloping rhythm—an imitation of the chaotic, grotesque horseback ride to Hell in Berlioz’s *Damnation of Faust*; and there are indeed few wilder rides in the piano literature than this movement.

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The art of piano transcription flourished in 19th-century Europe—at first, for practical reasons. Pianos—often little spinets—were fixtures in middle-class households, and piano study had become routine in the education of the young. Publishers commissioned piano transcriptions of the great symphonic literature as a way of capitalizing on this boom, and transcriptions of symphonies, overtures, even entire operas became very popular. After all, this was long before the age of recording, so the typical music lover would have a chance to hear a given Beethoven symphony live only a few times in their life.

A second stage in the development of the transcription is exemplified by Liszt's impressive re-scoring of Beethoven's nine symphonies and Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. Liszt's versions don't alter the pitches or rhythms of the original pieces, and they don't reorder the material—but they do re-imagine the material so that it's more pianistic and showy. These technical hurdles mean that these transcriptions are no longer accessible to amateurs, but they still contribute to the general public's knowledge of the literature.

Other works by Liszt are models of a third type of transcription: the sort that radically shuffles material from its source to create a piece whose form is entirely new and may include large swathes of material by the transcriber. The great examples are the opera paraphrases, such as *Don Juan* (on themes from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*) and *Reminiscences di Norma* (on themes from Bellini's opera). Rachmaninoff's transcriptions occupy a curious position between the second and third types: the original structure is intact, but not a phrase goes by that doesn't have a twist of flavor far more Rachmaninovian than Schubertian or Mendelssohnian.

That bracing bit of Rachmaninovian spice is most evident in the Bach transcriptions; after all, the style of Bach's music is very removed from Rachmaninoff's own. While Bach's E major violin Partita is stately and elegant, Rachmaninoff's comes across as strangely ironic—as though something familiar and beloved has been cast in an unexpected light. Rachmaninoff zealots may object to this description; but how else are we to experience the Gavotte, so dignified in Bach's version and here filled with coy winks and wry asides? Similarly, there is no longer a love-lorn miller in "Wohin?", excerpted from Schubert's sublime song cycle *Die Schöne Müllerin*. Here the brook burbles along blithely, laughing at its own jests.

From these examples, we see that transcription as practiced by Rachmaninoff is an exchange: some qualities of the original are lost, but other qualities are gained. The sense of loss in Mendelssohn's *Scherzo* is not so pronounced: we can still imagine Shakespeare's fairies twirling on tiptoe, and the scenery is still magical. Tchaikovsky's gorgeous *Lullaby* is treated with refreshing earnestness—no surprise, since Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff belong to the same emotive, deep-hued Russian tradition. The "V.R." of the *Polka* is none other than Rachmaninoff's father, Vassily; this charming piece is a transcription of a bonbon by Franz Behr that was a favorite of the elder Rachmaninoff. This *Polka* is a curious case of a transcription overshadowing its model: Behr is an otherwise-forgotten figure, and it was long assumed that the work was original Rachmaninoff.

Like Rachmaninoff, Kreisler was one of the most beloved performers of the early 20th century, and so the fine pair of transcriptions that closes Mr. Kholodenko's program is a tribute from one virtuoso to another, an exuberant celebration of their performative energy and athleticism.

Notes by Daniel Pesca

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