

Master of the keys

Most of our 100 pianists doubtless relish performing the music of their No. 1 choice, and his skills as a player clearly earn their admiration in equal measure

1 *Sergey* RACHMANINOV

(1873-1943) *Russian*

What would we know of Rachmaninov's playing if his recordings did not exist? Much could be deduced from the music he wrote. There is the vast range of virtuoso technical resource, with implied power and stamina to match. The melancholic lyrical gift would be self-evident. So would the incisive rhythmic instinct – and, to judge from the later works at least, the tight-reined clarity with which Rachmaninov the pianist would unerringly shape one musical paragraph after another.

The recordings confirm all this. And they also tell us both more and less. Without them it would be impossible to know quite how phenomenal Rachmaninov's rhythmic gift was – at once ultra-precise and springily propulsive, not unlike Prokofiev's, but unleashing a momentum that's less motor-driven, more like a tidal surge. This was surely the quality that enabled everything else to be so special – the way that a phrase spontaneously tugs against, or yields to the underlying pulse, so that every musical option seems possible.

The tonal quality, too, is spellbinding. The opening bars of the G flat major Prelude (which you will hear on the set below) are among the simplest Rachmaninov wrote, yet you know at once you're in the presence of something extraordinary. How many other pianists could phrase the right-hand's repeated chord-pattern with that kind of suppleness, or bring such fullness and focus to the left-hand melody? In an interview in 1936, Rachmaninov said: 'Interpretation demands something of the creative instinct. If you are a composer, you have an affinity with other composers... knowing something of their problems and their ideals. You can give their works colour... So you make music live. Without colour it is dead.'

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What the recordings can't tell us is how the younger Rachmaninov played. Before he left revolutionary Russia in 1918, he seems mainly to have performed his own piano music, alongside much composing and conducting. Afterwards, life in Europe and America meant a full-time piano career, and with it the need to build a repertoire. Bach, Beethoven (notably the *Appassionata*), Borodin, Chopin, Debussy, Grieg, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Schubert, Schumann (*Carnaval* was another favourite) and Tchaikovsky all came to feature in Rachmaninov programmes besides his own works. He would practise for up to 15 hours a day and toured extensively.

All of this seems to have been his way of dealing with the personal tragedy of his uprooting from Russia. So, evidently, was the famous public reserve, reflected in his contained, expressionless manner at the keyboard. Stravinsky, who once referred to his compatriot and

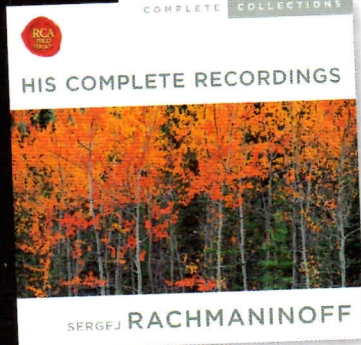
fellow-exile as 'a six-and-a-half-foot-tall scowl', also remarked less waspishly: 'His silence looms as a noble contrast to the self-approbations which are the only conversation of all performing and

most other musicians. And, he was the only pianist I have ever seen who did not grimace. That is a great deal.'

But had it always been like that? We shouldn't forget the unmistakable roguish streak that emerges in the Mendelssohn and Musorgsky transcriptions on the CD pictured here. And did Rachmaninov play rather more expansively in his earlier days, as a work like the Second Piano Concerto suggests? Meanwhile the recorded legacy presents its own evidence. After hearing one of Liszt's more devastating performances (of Beethoven's 'Emperor' Concerto), Wagner remarked that pianism of this order 'annihilates everything else'. Rachmaninov's playing has the capacity to leave you with the same impression.

IN HIS OWN WORDS *'I have never been quite able to make up my mind as to which was my true calling – that of a composer, pianist, or conductor. These doubts assail me to this day.'*

ESSENTIAL RECORDING *Sergey Rachmaninov: His Complete Recordings (RCA 82876678922 (10 discs) £29.99)*



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