



ONDINE

**ALEXEY
STANCHINSKY**

Piano Works

PETER JABLONSKI



ALEXEY STANCHINSKY

ALEXEY STANCHINSKY (1888-1914)

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PETER JABLONSKI, piano

A Man Who Took Off His Hat to Horses: Alexey Stanchinsky (1888–1914), A Forgotten Genius

Sometimes described as unjustly neglected, forgotten, lesser-known, Russia's most promising composer of his time, Alexey Stanchinsky was more than that: he was a rare talent, a musical genius, and a genuine innovator who consistently broke new ground in his short creative life. It is difficult to glean much about his life from the sources that are currently available. His music is rarely performed both in, and outside of, Russia. It is not surprising, then, that there is still no biography of Stanchinsky, and his name does not figure in major music history books. His works are neglected today not because his music is considered not worthy, but because it remains largely unknown, and because several factors that contributed to its neglect still need to be re-considered and re-evaluated.

Among these factors are his early death, relatively small surviving output, but perhaps the most important one is the fact that his music, almost entirely unpublished during his lifetime, was edited for posthumous publication by his teacher and colleague Nikolay Zhilyaev and a proponent of his music Anatoly Alexandrov. Zhilyaev was murdered by the Soviet regime and his work was banned, along with editions of Stanchinsky's music. By the time Stanchinsky's compositions could be published again, Russian society and the world of music was radically different, and the music of Stanchinsky's contemporaries such as Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Prokofiev, and later Shostakovich overshadowed that of Stanchinsky.

Stanchinsky's music is often described as 'experimental' – but it is a limiting description of the flight of his imagination and compositional mastery that even in his young age already transcended familiar barriers. Although obviously influenced by Scriabin's musical ideas, Stanchinsky's own music goes beyond the boundaries and directions outlined by his colleague. Likewise, his life-long interest in the music of Musorgsky and Medtner did not result in imitation, but rather enabled him to make his own discoveries in the fields of folksong and polyphony.

It has become almost a habit to portray Stanchinsky as a tragic case, with a history of incurable mental illness and an untimely suspicious death or suicide. His death, however, was not suspicious, and the mystery of his apparent suicide can be easily debunked. And while it is true that there were tragedy, heartbreak and loss, there was also much promise and hope among the dark periods of Stanchinsky's short life.

Born on 9 March 1888 into a family of a chemical engineer Vladimir Stanchinsky, Alexey's musical talent became obvious early on. First taught music by his mother, by the age of six he already composed and performed his first works. When he turned 11, the family moved to the estate of Logachyovo in Smolensk province which became for Stanchinsky a refuge where his creative talent unfolded, and where he composed the majority of his works. From 1904, Stanchinsky frequently travelled to Moscow where he studied piano privately with Josef Lhévinne and Konstantin Eiges, composition with Alexander Gretchaninov, and harmony and counterpoint with Nikolay Zhilyaev. Developing fast as a promising pianist, he performed at the Smolensk Gymnasium works by Bach, Beethoven, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, and Grieg.

Stanchinsky's musical progress and development meant that in 1907 he was accepted to study at the Moscow Conservatoire. There, he began to further his piano studies with Konstantin Igumnov, continued his work on instrumentation and composition with Zhilayev, and began studying counterpoint and form with Sergey Taneyev, formerly the Director of the Conservatoire. A stalwart of musical life in Moscow, highly respected, knowledgeable, and a successful composer in his own right, Taneyev accepted students free of charge, but only those in whose talent and abilities he was absolutely convinced. Taneyev's diaries note Stanchinsky's unusual and rare talent, and show the respect the older composer felt for his young student. He even took Stanchinsky to meet Tolstoy in Yasnaya Polyana, where the younger composer performed his compositions to the writer. 1909 and 1910 Taneyev and Stanchinsky spent a great deal of time on music lessons, and in long conversations about various topics. Stanchinsky liked visiting Taneyev in his old house, famous for being without any comforts or utilities, but nonetheless warm and welcoming. A large part of that welcome was played

by Taneyev's old nurse Pelageya Ivanovna, a peasant woman who looked after Taneyev until her death in 1910 and gave Stanchinsky tasty treats when he visited.

Taneyev was a master contrapuntist, he published a seminal treatise, *Moveable Counterpoint in Strict Style* (1909), worked on a follow-up treatise on canon and fugue, (published posthumously), and made all his students write countless fugues and contrapuntal exercises. His own compositions brought together the best of his talent and the depth of his knowledge, earning him the title 'the Russian Bach'. It was thought that in his time no one compared in mastery of counterpoint to him not only in Russia, but in the whole of Europe, with only Brahms being a close second. In the works of many of Taneyev's students this rigorous contrapuntal training is present, most obviously in the piano music of Medtner. But it was Stanchinsky who took this counterpoint training to new heights, and had he lived and composed more, we would certainly have more works that unite those principles. Holding Bach in highest estimation, he even invented his own genre, canon-prelude. Stanchinsky became one of the first representatives of neo-classicism in Russian music, imbuing classical form with new content, foreshadowing the work of Stravinsky, and composing his fugues almost half a century before Shostakovich completed his Preludes and Fugues Op. 87.

During his studies with Taneyev, Stanchinsky met Scriabin, who also studied with 'the Russian Bach', and whose music not so much influenced him, as perhaps showed the new ways that Stanchinsky was eager to discover for himself. His progress was meteoric, and piano compositions began to flow from his pen. His creative powers were no doubt also fuelled by a difficult romantic situation: he was in love with Elena Bai, the daughter of the Logachyovo estate manager, but the union was doomed: Stanchinsky's mother was vehemently against it.

A tragedy struck in January 1910, when Alexey's father died suddenly, and when shortly after Stanchinsky learned that Elena was expecting their child. Stanchinsky's mother would not hear of a marriage, and Elena was forced to leave Logachyovo. Separated forever from his father and indefinitely from Elena, whom he was forbidden to see, Stanchinsky was plunged into a deep psychological trauma: for several months he was treated in neurological clinics



Taneyev and Stanchinsky

for depression and hallucinations. He tried to, and often succeeded, in destroying his compositions in fits of desperation, but luckily some of these works were reconstructed later by his colleagues and friends, and Zhilyaev even saved some from being tossed into the fire. Stanchinsky did, however, recover enough to be able to return to his studies at the end of 1910, and resume his work with Taneyev. Perhaps from this period dates a curious story told by Leonid Sabaneyev, another student of Taneyev and later well-known music critic and composer, who knew Stanchinsky well. He remembers seeing Stanchinsky taking his hat off to a horse he met during a walk. When asked why, he answered that one cannot possibly know what goes on in a

mind of a horse, and therefore it would be prudent to be careful with such an animal (Sabaneyev, *Reminiscences about Russia*, 2005).

In March 1914 Stanchinsky performed his works at a concert dedicated to young pianists at the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire, and critics noted not only his pianistic prowess, but also singled him out as 'the most talented and original composer' who was worthy of 'a great deal of attention'. He became almost a cult figure, a talent that was burning bright with an unusual, brilliant flame, a musical comet. A few months later, Stanchinsky was finally able to see Elena for the first time since 1910 and meet their son Andrey, who was already four years old. Still, his mother continued to be against their union, a stand which ultimately led to Stanchinsky's tragic death. In September that year, he secretly went to visit Elena, but to reach her he had to cross a river. Cold autumnal night, freezing water, and strong current meant Stanchinsky's weakened heart could not withstand the shock, and his body was found the following day sixteen kilometres away from home. His death was recorded on 23 September as a result of heart paralysis.

Piano Music

Stanchinsky's existing compositions span a period of only ten years – a very short time indeed – showing variety and versatility of his talent. Nikolay Zhilyaev described Stanchinsky's talent as 'highly harmonious, in the sense that all its elements are equally complimentary, where not a single element is developed in detriment to the other and, united by a rare understanding of form, they are at the same time powerfully and uniquely evolved' (Zhilyaev, N. *Literary-Musical Heritage*, 1984). From the early 1900s his compositions were circulating in Moscow in hand-copied versions, and only four of his Twelve Sketches were published in his lifetime, with the rest appearing in print after his death. Complete edition of his piano music appeared in Russia in 1990.

Sonata in E flat minor (1906)

The date of composition, given as 1906, makes its composer a very young eighteen-year-old man who knows what he wants to say musically. Cast in one movement, in the form of a sonata allegro, it is clearly conceived by someone of huge talent, originality, and melodic and rhythmic invention. The sonata opens with a four-bar declamatory theme in the lower register, which quickly ascends in stormy figurations of tempestuous octave triplets. The lyrical and undulating main theme arrives in a quiet sonority, built on ascending triplets. This expansive, spontaneous, powerful work is demanding technically, requiring stamina and sensitivity from its performer as well as the ability to navigate and make sense of its sometimes awkward piano writing. Stanchinsky employs many effective tools to increase the tension and pathos: themes are often doubled in octaves, appearing in higher registers of the piano, with wide-ranging piano writing, and a broad dynamic palette. He masterfully navigates major-minor relationships of his themes, and unites the work by the bringing back of the lyrical major themes heard in the beginning of the sonata to its reprise, where it appears in the minor key, as if to pre-empt the changes that would take place in his life in a few short years.

Nocturne (1907)

In this work, lyrical outer parts contrast with a tumultuous chromatic middle section. The middle section contains some of the most difficult piano writing present in Stanchinsky's output that is not always 'pianistic', but nevertheless very effective in setting the atmosphere of turbulent emotional outburst.

3 Preludes (C sharp minor, D major, E flat minor, 1907) and 5 Preludes (C minor, F minor, B flat minor, B minor, C (minor), 1907-12)

Preludes in C sharp minor, C minor, F minor, D major, and E flat minor were composed in 1907, and are united by similarities in form: cast in three parts, with contrasting middle sections, and all ending quietly. They display a range of emotions, from spontaneous agitation, to quiet lyricism and sudden changes in moods and colours. Preludes in B minor and B flat minor were written in 1909, both through-composed, and are steeped in ancient Russian folk music traditions. Prelude in C (minor) was completed on 9 March 1912, and is very different from the rest of the preludes. It has only one tempo indication, *Largo*, and no other markings. It is built on octaves, fifths, and fourth – the intervals that contribute to the spacious, lucid, and somewhat 'empty' sound. It is as if the composer makes time stand still, allowing the listener to observe how the sonorities unfold, rather than being taken away by stormy and passionate moods in the previous preludes.

Three Songs without words (1904)

The composer was fifteen years old when these pieces were composed, but already his talent shines bright. Exquisitely lyrical, simple without being simplistic, they embody Stanchinsky's melodic gift. Pensive, expressive and lucid, these songs pay homage to Russian folksong, and to the best of lyrical European traditions.

Mazurka D flat major (1905) and ***Mazurka G sharp minor (1907)*** are the only two works in this genre surviving in Stanchinsky's output, and are no doubt the results of his interest in the mazurkas by Scriabin, with perhaps a little nod to those by Chopin.

Tears (1906)

A short work, simply entitled *Tears*, was composed on 7 June 1906. This lyrical and melodious composition shows Stanchinsky's interest in, and love for, Russian folk music and song. Touching in its simplicity, it is a snapshot of a moment of sadness without sentimentality or heaviness. It stands out from Stanchinsky's output because its title is programmatic, while most of his other compositions entitled after the genres they were conceived in.

Variations (1911)

This work is dedicated to the composer's cousin Sofia Pshenichnikova, and is thought to at least in some part reflect upon the happy memories of their carefree childhood. Everything in this composition is clear and uncomplicated: rhythm, melodies, harmonies, and form. Stanchinsky creates an almost medieval atmosphere here, especially in the dance-like and folk-like melodic sections.

Three Sketches (1911-13)

The first of these three short pieces is fast, densely chromatic, packed with intricate rhythms, harmonies, leaps, and accents. The second sketch is set in an unusual for Stanchinsky time signature of 6/8, and foreshadows the sarcastic vein of lyricism that Shostakovich would later display in his compositions. In contrast, the final sketch is chromatic, agitated and fast, based on tritones and octaves in lower registers, set in 5/8 time.

Twelve Sketches (1911-13)

There are two polar opposite contemporary accounts, one by Prokofiev and one by Myaskovsky about these short pieces. In the early stages of his career, Prokofiev was encouraged to try his might as a music critic, and his review of Stanchinsky's first four of the Twelve Sketches is one of the few he wrote, before abandoning the experiment. It is almost impossible to read Prokofiev's text about these highly inventive compositions without sensing perhaps more than a touch of collegiate envy. His criticism is all the more curious because one can distinctly hear Stanchinsky's influence in his own works, which he later himself admitted. Myaskovsky was highly complimentary about these miniature gems, writing that 'everything in these pieces is unique': rhythm, unusual metre, fresh, subtle, rich harmonies, imaginative and refined compositional style, and beautifully clear texture.

The twelve short pieces are snapshots of a kaleidoscope of moods and characters which, despite their brief duration, demand pianistic refinement, a gamut of tonal colours, invention, and utmost technical prowess.

Anastasia Belina

Author wishes to thank Igor Prokhorov for his invaluable help during preparation of these booklet notes.

Peter Jablonski is an internationally acclaimed Swedish pianist. Discovered by Claudio Abbado and Vladimir Ashkenazy and signed by Decca at the age of 17, he went on to perform, collaborate, and record with over 150 of the world's leading orchestras and conductors, including the Philharmonia, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Mariinsky, La Scala Philharmonic, Tonhalle Zurich, Orchestre Nationale de France, NHK Tokyo, DSO Berlin, Warsaw Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Philadelphia and Cleveland Orchestras, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Valery Gergiev, Kurt Sanderling, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Riccardo Chailly, Daniele Gatti, and Myung-Whun Chung, to name a few.

He has performed and recorded the complete piano concertos by Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Bartók, and all piano sonatas by Prokofiev. Hailed as an 'unconventional virtuoso', during his three-decade-long career he developed a diverse repertoire that includes works by Barber, Gershwin, Szymanowski, Lutosławski, Copland, Stenhammar, and Nielsen, with most recent additions by such Scandinavian and European composers as Valborg Aulin, Elfrida André, Laura Netzel, Johanna Müller-Hermann, and Alexey Stanchinsky.

He worked with composers Witold Lutosławski and Arvo Pärt, and had a number of works composed for, and dedicated to him, including Wojciech Kilar's First Piano Concerto, for which he won the Orpheus world premiere performance award at the Warsaw Autumn Festival. He remains a supporter of today's composers and regularly gives world premieres of new works, together with those that have been neglected by music history.

Jablonski's extensive discography includes recordings on Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, Philips, Altara and Octavia labels, and now Ondine. He has received numerous awards for his recordings, including the Edison award for best concerto recording of Shostakovich's First Piano Concerto, Rachmaninov's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, and Lutoslawski's Paganini Rhapsody with Ashkenazy and RPO for Decca.

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