



Rachmaninoff Reflections
Inon Barnatan



RACHMANINOFF REFLECTIONS

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Symphonic Dances Op. 45 (arr. I. Barnatan for Piano)

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|---|---|--------|
| 1 | No. 1, Non Allegro | 11. 51 |
| 2 | No. 2, Andante con moto. Tempo di valse | 9. 31 |
| 3 | No. 3, Lento assai - Allegro vivace | 13. 48 |

Moments musicaux, Op. 16

- | | | |
|---|--|-------|
| 4 | No. 1, Andantino in B-Flat Minor | 7. 17 |
| 5 | No. 2, Allegretto in E-Flat Minor | 3. 18 |
| 6 | No. 3, Andante cantabile in B Minor | 6. 53 |
| 7 | No. 4, Presto in E Minor | 2. 56 |
| 8 | No. 5, Andante sostenuto in D-Flat Major | 4. 00 |
| 9 | No. 6, Maestoso in C Major | 4. 37 |

14 Romances, Op. 34

- | | | |
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| 10 | No. 16, Vocalise (arr. I. Barnatan for Piano) | 5. 52 |
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Preludes, Op. 32

- | | | |
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| 11 | No. 12, Prelude in G-Sharp Minor | 2. 56 |
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Total playing time: 73. 07

Inon Barnatan, piano



A few years ago I came across an unforgettable recording from 1940, in which Sergei Rachmaninoff plays through his Symphonic Dances on the piano for conductor Eugene Ormandy, before Ormandy led the Philadelphia Orchestra in the premiere performance of the orchestral version of the work. While it's not clear Rachmaninoff knew he was being recorded (he did not allow any other live recordings of his playing), this private performance offers a rare and intimate glimpse into the powers of one of history's great pianists, and an extraordinary insight into the way he intended the piece to be performed. It also got me thinking...

Since childhood, I had been moved by the power, beauty, and complexity of the orchestral version of Symphonic Dances. Later, I loved collaborating with other pianists to perform the two-piano version (which Rachmaninoff created before the orchestral version) alongside other pianists, but hearing the composer play it alone

on a single piano, I got a tantalizing new perspective on how the score must have been conceived, and how a solo piano version could promise a new dimension of spontaneity and flexibility. All I had to do was create it.

In the spring of 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic halted so much of the travel and live performance that comprise a musician's public-facing life, I finally had my chance. I spent several weeks writing the transcription...and a several more learning to play it. In a time of great uncertainty and tragedy, spending so much time with this remarkable piece of music was a source of solace and joy.

The piece itself has a special place in Rachmaninoff's life. It was his last major work, and he wrote it while spending the summer of 1940 in Long Island (he had moved to the US in 1918 after the Russian Revolution). Conceived originally as a ballet called "Fantastic Dances",





it morphed into a symphonic work and became somewhat of a summation piece for him. He reflects on his earlier work, including in it fragments of his Third Symphony, his choral piece “All Night Vigil”, and the Gregorian theme of Dies Irae (Day of Wrath) which he used in several compositions. The most significant, and touching, self-quotation comes at the end of the first movement of *Symphonic Dances*: the music changes from minor to major, and we hear a new lyrical and poignant theme over a shimmering musical texture. That theme is the main theme from Rachmaninoff’s First Symphony, the failure of which sent Rachmaninoff into a years-long depression. He tore up the symphony score after its disastrous premiere and never performed or published it during his life (it was rediscovered after his death), so introducing it in *Symphonic Dances* was a private act. Perhaps in that transformation of a theme from its original minor-key stormy darkness to a serene and positive

conclusion lies a composer’s cathartic coming-to-terms with the past. At the end of the manuscript of *Symphonic Dances*, Rachmaninoff wrote the simple phrase: “I thank Thee, Lord.”

Rachmaninoff completed the aforementioned failed First Symphony in 1895, only a couple of years after he graduated from the Moscow Conservatory. He had put so much work into it that he felt he couldn’t compose anything further until he had heard its premiere. However, after Rachmaninoff was robbed of a large amount of money he was carrying for someone else aboard a train, he was forced to return to writing to earn enough to repay the loss. The result is the six “Musical Moments” op. 16, one of the last pieces he wrote before the premiere of the First Symphony sent him away on a self-imposed artistic hiatus. The title was inspired by Schubert’s collection of six “Moments Musicaux” and, like Schubert’s, Rachmaninoff’s *Moments* are miniatures

that could be performed individually or together as a complete work. Perhaps colored by the knowledge that Rachmaninoff wrote Moments Musicaux quickly when he needed money, we may reflexively tend to underestimate the work. But that would be a disservice to a collection of true masterpieces. Together, they take us from intimate whispers to symphonic grandeur, a journey which showcases Rachmaninoff's astonishing talent — even at age 23 — for conveying emotional sincerity through pianistic colors.

The two shorter pieces that complete the album each reflect one of the large pieces: his transcendent G sharp minor prelude is one of the many colorful miniatures that make the majority of his solo-piano output, including the Moments Musicaux. To me this prelude sounds like a song without words, with a male singer represented by the melody in the left under the right hand's shimmering texture.

The final piece is my own transcription of one of Rachmaninoff's most beloved works, "Vocalise", an actual song without words originally written for voice and piano. The aching sense of Russian nostalgia and intensity of expression seem to suggest a composer who is always reflecting on his homeland, even when forced to leave it.

Inon Barnatan

Inon Barnatan & Adam Abeshouse



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