

A close-up portrait of a young man with dark hair and striking blue eyes, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. His right hand is visible, resting on a dark wooden surface, and he is wearing a simple silver ring on his ring finger. The background is dark and out of focus.

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CLASSICS

Rachmaninov
Preludes & Melodies

Alessio Bax

RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)

PRELUDES & MELODIES

Preludes Op. 23 (1903)

1	No. 1 in F sharp minor: Largo	[3.44]
2	No. 2 in B flat major: Maestoso	[2.58]
3	No. 3 in D minor: Tempo di minuetto	[3.55]
4	No. 4 in D major: Andante cantabile	[4.30]
5	No. 5 in G minor: Alla marcia	[3.35]
6	No. 6 in E flat major: Andante	[3.23]
7	No. 7 in C minor: Allegro	[2.12]
8	No. 8 in A flat major: Allegro vivace	[3.16]
9	No. 9 in E flat minor: Presto	[1.36]
10	No. 10 in G flat major: Largo	[3.36]
11	Prelude in F major, Op. 2 (1891)	[3.30]
12	Canon in D minor (c. 1890)	[1.15]
13	Prelude in E flat minor (1887)	[3.06]
14	Melodie in E major (1887)	[3.15]

15	Gavotte in D major (1887)		[3.26]
16	Prelude in D minor, Op. Posth (1917)		[2.53]
17	Fragments, Op. Posth (1917)		[2.15]
18	Lilacs, Op. 21 No. 5 (1913)		[2.41]
19	Daisies, Op. 38 No. 3 (1922, rev.1940)		[2.30]
20	Vocalise, Op. 34 No. 14 (1912)	arr. Bax	[6.25]
21	Sorochintsy Fair: Hopak (1924)	M. Mussorgsky, arr. Rachmaninov	[1.46]
22	Liebesleid (1921)	F. Kreisler, arr. Rachmaninov	[4.33]
23	Liebesfreud (1925)	F. Kreisler, arr. Rachmaninov	[6.45]
Total timings			[77.06]

ALESSIO BAX
PIANO

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Artist's Note

I have been wishing to record a Rachmaninov disc for a long time. One of my earliest musical memories is listening to him play his own recordings. For a time, I felt he was totally incapable of wrongdoing and Rachmaninov became my musical guide. These recordings are still a fixture in my playlists and provide continuous inspiration, regardless of how many times I have heard them.

Rachmaninov was a master of his instrument, but what has always fascinated me is that in spite of his great technique, he was revered for his golden tone. Another striking fact in his recordings is that together with his great personality and all of his idiosyncrasies, I still discern a lack of ego in his playing and a total devotion to the music. I am inspired by Rachmaninov, his music and his playing in my own musical life, and I pay homage to him with this disc.

The wonderful ten Preludes Op. 23 form the foundation of this album. Rachmaninov employed his unparalleled knowledge of the instrument to describe ten different images. The incredibly vivid narrative in these amazing works is so evident it

is almost palpable. At the same time, the cycle, with the first and tenth preludes functioning as bookends, depicts a beautifully variegated universe of natural landscapes, human emotions and cultural backgrounds.

Lately I have been favouring three-part programs. I find that in music, as in life, one often needs the view of a third entity to obtain a fair balance of parts. This disc is no exception. Two parts are represented by some early student works of Rachmaninov, together with two later pieces, and by a set of transcriptions.

The early works are fascinating. Written between the ages of 11 and 18, one senses the strong influence of Tchaikovsky and the Russian tradition. Yet within these gems one already hears Rachmaninov's unique language and raw emotions, and considerable demands on the pianist's technique. The pieces are snapshots of Russian life, as seen by a young musician full of aspirations and very much looking forward to his life. As a stark contrast, I've chosen two later works, *Fragments* and the posthumous Prelude in D minor, which show the darker side of Rachmaninov's psyche during difficult years. These two miniatures use few notes, and they are full of pathos and powerful silences. This is

the music of an inward-looking composer full of doubt and desperation.

Rachmaninov performed a lot of transcriptions, and it was a genre he took seriously. Whether transcribing his own vocal works or those of other composers, he poured out a wealth of imagination, pianistic know-how and soul. Having selected Kreisler, Mussorgsky and two of his other songs for this disc, I also wanted to include a piano version of his famous *Vocalise*. It is a song I have always loved, not only for its beautiful melody, but for the intense harmonic world in which the melody is set. I looked at various transcriptions, but could not find one that faithfully recreated the original's character. I humbly offer my own here.

All in all, this disc is the realization of a long-cherished dream. It is a look at the great Rachmaninov from different angles, a brief chronicle of the life and work of the last of the Romantics.

Alessio Bax, 2011

Rachmaninov: Preludes & Melodies

Pianist-composer Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) sparked controversy from the beginning. Was his music merely “artificial and gushing”, as the 1954 edition of the *Grove Dictionary of Music* stated – and popular, as fellow musician Percy Grainger asserted, only because of its complete “absence of the experimental and the iconoclastic”? Or was Russian composer Cesar Cui more on the mark when he claimed that Rachmaninov was at times too odd, adventurous and downright ugly?

The man's pianism was equally contentious: shaped by a unique personal vision, his interpretations nevertheless managed to sound inevitable, as well as technically spellbinding. Yet, this somber, introspective artist – Igor Stravinsky described him as a walking, six-foot scowl – was accused of being too cerebral. “His musical personality is that of a scholar and gentleman,” came one report in 1919, which compared him to a compatriot, Sergei Prokofiev, whose “huge, ungainly hands smote the keyboard with crude and cruel vehemence, while his music proved itself to be a Satanic orgy of twisted rhythms and nerve-racking dissonances”.

If Prokofiev evoked the wildness of a drunken Cossack, Rachmaninov's compositions, and his playing, were always models of elegance.

Nevertheless, the force of his individual vision and the uniqueness of his sound are unmistakable. Rachmaninov's music is filled with Russian soulfulness and Romantic yearning, soaring melodies and lush, tug-at-the-heartstrings harmonic textures. It's no surprise that many of his tunes ultimately became the melodies of popular songs (such as the ravishing *Full Moon and Empty Arms*). Listen to Alessio Bax's own transcription of Rachmaninov's wordless song, *Vocalise* on this recording, and the sense of enchantment he inspired becomes palpable.

In a nod to critics who found him not cutting edge enough, he once confessed that he was "organically incapable of understanding modern music". But modern audiences certainly understood him. His early Prelude in C Sharp minor, written while still a teenager, became so popular that he faced demands for it everywhere he appeared. The piece took on various nicknames around the world, including "The Day of Judgment", and "The Moscow Waltz" [sic]. Like Beethoven, with his "Moonlight"

Sonata, that initial success turned out to be so unrelenting it began to feel like a scourge.

One key to the arguments over the artistic value of Rachmaninov's music was a cultural shift that marked the arrival of the modern age. Human feeling, in the form of effusive sentimentality, was a treasured value in the nineteenth century. By the twentieth century, the aesthetic goal had become the more sober ideal of "authenticity". As critic Lionel Trilling pointed out, the very idea of earnest emotion became suspect. Though Rachmaninov's works were impeccably crafted, they served as vessels for songs of the heart – produced at a time when budding roses were regarded as far less poignant than their thorns.

Even detractors recognized his technical mastery, however, which became evident early on. As a composition student, Rachmaninov so impressed a school examination board that they decided to give him the highest grade – a five plus – until Tchaikovsky intervened and "added three more plus signs – above it, below it and to the side of it", he recalled. Nevertheless, the composer, racked with insecurity, succumbed to depression easily. After the critical failure of his first symphony, he famously sought the

help of hypnotist Nicolai Dahl. Those sessions with Dahl miraculously opened Rachmaninov's creative floodgates, resulting in his celebrated Piano Concerto No. 2, one of the most tuneful works ever written.

His Preludes, Op. 23, are cut from the same cloth as that beautiful concerto (note, especially, the themes of numbers 6 and 10). Any pianist wishing to tackle them, however, has to contend with a number of challenges. The first results from the size of Rachmaninov's hands, which allowed him to span a large section of the keyboard. It often makes his writing impossibly difficult. Then, there are the intricate, finger-breaking moments that require not just superior dexterity, but the ability to separate various elements in a complex texture – bringing out a tightly woven melody, for example, from its busy accompaniment. Finally, there is the task of conveying the emotional narrative of each piece, striking a delicate balance between structural clarity and poetic ardor.

Of these ten preludes, the first and last seem to serve as elegiac bookends. The works between display a colorful canvas with innumerable, nuanced brush strokes. Prelude No. 1, with its sad tone and trademark Rachmaninov-ian rising

and falling chromatic figures, requires a lot of the pianist. The short phrases must be shaped into an organic whole; the execution requires hand crossings and subtleties of balance. Prelude No. 2 often reminds listeners of Chopin's dramatic "Revolutionary" Etude in its use of bold, sweeping arpeggios. No. 4, a kind of cradlesong, displays Rachmaninov's ease in using all the compositional tools in his chest as layers of melody, counter-melody, imitation, and variation all blossom across the piano keys.

The most famous piece in the set is perhaps the fifth one, which is in many ways emblematic of the composer's approach. A rhythmic figure germinates throughout the opening and closing, producing a stirring martial atmosphere, interrupted by a lyrical, serenade-like section, like a plea to a distant beloved. This is music that stirs one's imagination.

By the time the pianist reaches No. 9, a certain amount of fatigue would seem natural. That's when Rachmaninov demands an athletic tour-de-force through treacherously difficult "double notes" – like a final sprint to the finish line (where the placid No. 10, waits, like a sigh, projecting a sense of final acceptance). Rachmaninov's transcriptions, including those of

his own songs, *Daisies* and *Lilacs*, along with Mussorgsky's *Hopak*, and Kreisler's *Liebesleid* and *Liebesfreud* (Kreisler returned the favour by transcribing Rachmaninov's *Daisies*) are delightful examples of music for other forces reconfigured perfectly for piano solo.

Alessio Bax plays all of this music, no matter how daunting, with insight, power, and emotional

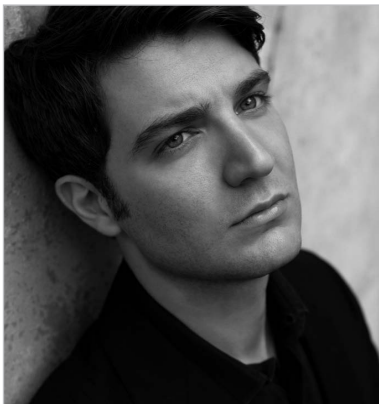
depth. He brings to mind the reaction of New York critic W. J. Henderson after hearing a Rachmaninov performance in 1930. "There was nothing left for us but to thank our stars that we had lived when Rachmaninov did and heard him," wrote Henderson. The rest of us can thank our lucky stars that Alessio Bax decided to bring this music to life again through this marvelous recording.

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BIOGRAPHY

ALESSIO BAX

Pianist Alessio Bax is praised for creating "a ravishing listening experience" with his lyrical playing, insightful interpretations and dazzling facility. "His playing quivers with an almost hypnotic intensity" says Gramophone magazine, leading to "an out-of-body experience" (Dallas Morning News). Since taking first prizes at the Leeds International Pianoforte Competition and the Hamamatsu International Piano Competition in Japan, Bax has won audiences across the globe. In 2009 he was awarded an Avery Fisher Career Grant, one of the most prestigious prizes in classical music.



Highlights of Bax's 2010/11 season included appearances as soloist with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in the UK and the Colorado Symphony under Marin Alsop, solo recitals at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Harriman-Jewell series in Kansas City, and the second year of his residency with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center as a member of CMS Two. Bax performed a noteworthy "Carte Blanche" recital at Music@Menlo in California between engagements at Schloss Elmau in Germany, a Japan tour, chamber music in Fort Worth, Lexington, and at the Bard Music Festival, and recitals and orchestral dates in Spain.

Alessio Bax's extensive concerto repertoire has led to appearances with over 80 orchestras, including the London Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic, Royal Scottish National, Dallas Symphony, Houston Symphony, Indianapolis Symphony, Rome Symphony, Spanish Radio and Television Orchestra, and the NHK Symphony Orchestra. He has worked with a number of esteemed conductors such as Marin Alsop, Alexander Dimitriev, Vernon Handley, Jonathan Nott, Vasily Petrenko, Dmitry Sitkovetsky and Sir Simon Rattle.

Bax's festival appearances include London's International Piano Series (Queen Elizabeth Hall), the Verbier Festival in Switzerland, England's Aldeburgh and Bath festivals, and the Ruhr Klavierfestival and BeethovenFest in Germany. He has performed in recital at music halls in Rome, Milan, Madrid, Paris, London, Tel Aviv, Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, New York, and Washington DC. His fall recital in Mexico City was cited as a "Best Performance of 2009" by *L'Orfeo: Música Clásica Hoy*. Also an active chamber musician, he has collaborated with Emanuel Ax, Joshua Bell, Andrés Díaz, Pamela Frank, and Steven Isserlis, among others.

Bax's 2009 CD, *Bach Transcribed*, received rave reviews from Gramophone magazine ("awesome") and Fanfare ("this disc is a must"). *Baroque Reflections*, his 2004 recording for Warner Classics, was selected as a Gramophone "Editor's Choice" and American Record Guide "Critics' Choice" ("a disc to treasure"). In 2005, Bax and pianist Lucille Chung recorded Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals* with conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya and the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. They have also recorded the complete works for two pianos and piano four hands of György Ligeti on Dynamic Records. In addition, Bax has chronicled the

complete works for piano and organ of Marcel Dupré for Naxos, and Brahms Piano Concerto No. 1, live with the New Japan Philharmonic, for Fontec. Also on Fontec, Bax released a live recording of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 with the Hamamatsu Symphony Orchestra.

In 2005, Alessio Bax was selected to play the Fugue of Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" Sonata for Maestro Daniel Barenboim in *Barenboim on Beethoven*. The documentary was produced by Channel 13/PBS, in conjunction with Bel Air Media, BBC, and NHK Japan. It was broadcast worldwide and released as a DVD box set in 2006 on the EMI label. His performances are often broadcast live on the BBC, CBC (Canada), RAI (Italy), RTVE (Spain), NHK (Japan), WDR, NDR and Bayerische Rundfunk (Germany), Hungarian Radio Television, Serbian RTE, among others.

Alessio Bax graduated with top honors at the record age of 14 from the conservatory of his hometown in Bari, Italy. He studied in France with François-Joël Thiollier, and attended the Chigiana Academy in Siena under Joaquín Achúcarro. He moved to Dallas in 1994 to continue his studies with Achúcarro at SMU's Meadows School of the Arts. He is now on the

teaching faculty there. He and his wife, pianist Lucille Chung, reside in New York City.

Alessio Bax is a Steinway artist.

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