

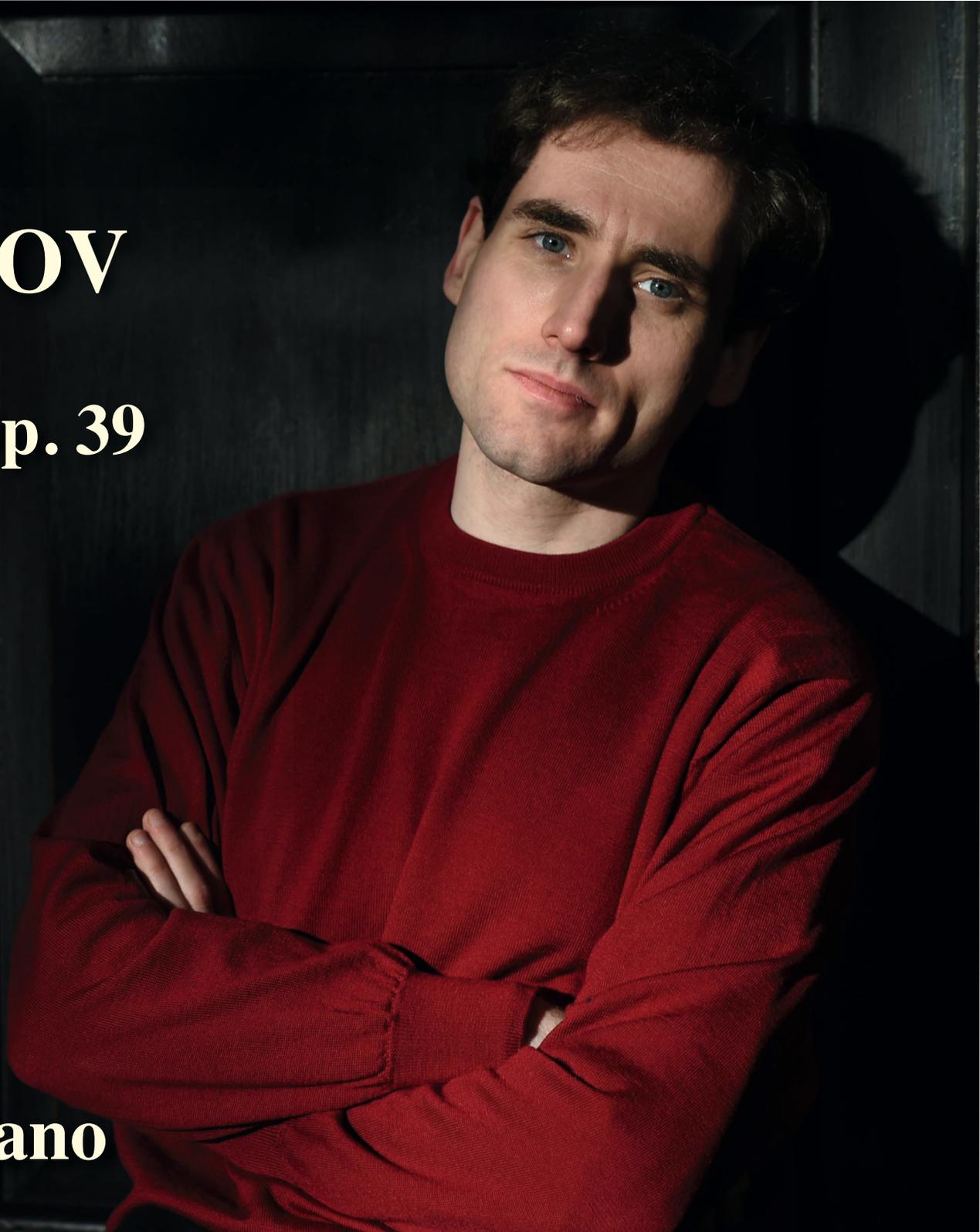


# RACHMANINOV

Études-tableaux, Op. 39

Moments musicaux

Boris Giltburg, Piano



## Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

### Études-tableaux, Op. 39 • Moments musicaux, Op. 16

A slow growl in the deepest reaches of the keyboard. Another one, a little faster, closer. A snap of sharp teeth. And then the frightened, light-fingered, hasty flight of the girl, trying to escape. That's the beginning of the *Étude-tableau*, Op. 39, No. 6, "inspired by images of *Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf*", as Rachmaninov himself wrote – but his version is no straight retelling. Having passed through the prism of his imagination, it's scarier, darker, more ambiguous.

And it isn't only that the wolf wins in the end. At the beginning of the middle section [0:43], the wolves (for there are several of them now) seem to be stalking their prey, slowly advancing in anticipation of the vicious hunt to follow. Those wolves, however, are represented by the motif of Red Riding Hood herself, transposed down to the wolves' register – as if she were pursued not by wolves, but by doppelgängers, twisted, nightmarish copies of herself. To me that's real psychological horror. And what does it mean then, that the piece does indeed close with the wolf's growl and final snap?

Just as dark is the étude that follows, No. 7, which is also coloured by a deep sorrow. It begins with a slow, fragmented funeral march, interspersed with laments and the sound of a singing choir off-stage [2:03], which then leads to the middle section [3:14], a monotone, measured beat – for me it's the implacable ticking of a clock, while Rachmaninov wrote he had imagined there "an incessant, hopeless drizzle". Above it there appears a long, winding melody. A prolonged build-up culminates in an ear-shattering peal of bells [5:59], which subsides and brings back the opening march and lament. The incessant beat quietly continues underneath, then pauses; resumes; pauses again; resumes, and finally stops for good.

For me, these, and the other *études-tableaux* constituting Op. 39 are many things simultaneously. Short stories; captivating, meticulously crafted to trim all excess, yet having enough material to lead us into fully believable worlds. Movies, with accomplished cinematography and lighting (wouldn't the *Red Riding Hood étude-tableau*

make a great short film?). Tone paintings, with Rachmaninov utilizing a huge breadth of piano techniques and textures, weaving multiple voices, melodies and harmonies into a rich aural tapestry. And perhaps also dreams, in the way they come with a tangible, distilled atmosphere and mood, created right away, by the very first notes of each piece; similar to those of our dreams that come with a strong emotional association, one which requires no grounds or explanation – we just know.

I realize the list above does not include the first word of the cycle's title – *études*. The technical difficulties of many of these nine are apparent, but in my opinion, nowhere in piano literature does the term 'étude' – study – have as little meaning as when discussing Rachmaninov's *Études-tableaux*. The weight of the other elements – the emotional, the storytelling, the world-creating and atmosphere-building – is so great, that the technical difficulties are almost an inconvenience we impatiently want to overcome in order to gain access to the material underneath.

The other part of the cycle's title, *tableaux* – paintings – is fascinating. Viewing a painting usually means first experiencing it as a whole – our initial encounter – and only then absorbing the details. It is a single, unified thing. Though music, existing in time, cannot provide a direct equivalent, I feel that the after-image the *Études-tableaux* leave behind is of the same monolithic quality as that of a single painting. This might have to do with the pieces' dream-like quality of creating an immediate, strong atmosphere and maintaining it until the end. The fact that time is added to it only makes it stronger, letting a story unfold, which in a painting could only be suggested by a single frozen moment, leaving all the preceding or following ones to the imagination of the viewer.

Rachmaninov also brings to a dizzying height music's innate ability to operate on multiple levels. All of the elements – the scene, the mood, the emotion, the story, the sound – are presented to us simultaneously. A nature scene is never just a nature scene. The second étude depicts, according to Rachmaninov, the sea and seagulls,

but it is also imbued with a gentle sadness throughout, reaching an almost heartbreaking outburst towards the end [4:22]. For me, the opening of No. 5 depicts stern, sheer cliffs above a leaden stormy sea; awe-inspiring in both their magnificence and their indifference – but those waves then rise to engulf the cliffs, resulting in climaxes of such emotional power that any barrier between the music and the listener is shattered, and even as a performer one is in danger of being fully overcome.

Interestingly, if seen as a whole, the cycle is contained within a relatively narrow emotional range – it mostly occupies the darker, deeper, sadder regions of the emotional spectrum. There's no joy (even the marching No. 9 is not truly joyous, just triumphant), not much humour, no real relaxation. And yet within those boundaries Rachmaninov paints a very large variety of subtle shades – the troubled, unsettled turbulence of No. 1 is so close to, and yet worlds apart from the fight and proud defiance of No. 3 – to say nothing of the artless narrative with which No. 3 ends [2:34] (I keep imagining an abandoned village, with just a memory of conflict remaining – and, in the very last bars, shutters flapping in the wind). The gentle but deep and inconsolable grief of No. 2 feels very different from the warmer, autumnal sadness of No. 8. These are all personal impressions, of course – but performing the cycle in its entirety always feels emotionally full and varied, and this, jointly with the other elements described above, makes the performing experience an exhilarating delight.

In contrast to the complexity of the *Études-tableaux*, each of the six *Moments musicaux*, Op. 16 is a nearly-pure, concentrated exploration of a single idea, texture, or mood. In that way they are closer to studies – in the painterly or literary meaning of the word – than the pieces we have just discussed.

Twenty years separate the two cycles. The earlier six *Moments musicaux*, Op. 16 were completed in late 1896, some months before the disastrous première of Rachmaninov's *First Symphony* (ruined by the conductor, the indifferent and allegedly drunken Glazunov), which sent the young composer deep into depression, leaving him unable to write for over two years. The nine *Études-*

*tableaux*, Op. 39 were composed between 1916 and 1917, the last works Rachmaninov completed before leaving Russia.

While Op. 39 is often described as the epitome of Rachmaninov's musical miniatures (and the paragraphs above show that I don't disagree), the *Moments musicaux* are just as rewarding, in their own way. They trace their origins to a decidedly non-musical cause – Rachmaninov was in financial constraints and had to compose the cycle in a rush for publication – yet there's nothing hasty about them, nothing perfunctory, nothing which is not thought through. On the contrary, compared to Rachmaninov's earlier miniatures, they show new levels of complexity in his piano writing and, in some cases (in particular, the fiendishly difficult reprises of No. 4 [2:03] and No. 6 [2:48]), present technical challenges which remain unsurpassed in Rachmaninov's output.

The set is also unashamedly beautiful. This perhaps shouldn't deserve a separate mention – after all, this is Rachmaninov, the creator of some of the most beautiful melodies there are – but coming right after Op. 39, where aesthetics are less of a concern, the sheer beauty of the melodies, as well as their roundness and lack of roughness are particularly striking, I feel.

The six can be neatly divided into two groups: the slow Nos. 1, 3 and 5, and the virtuosic Nos. 2, 4 and 6. No. 1 is something of an outlier, both in form (the other five are in simple "A-B-A" form, while No. 1 adds a theme-and-variations structure); in harmony (it is the only one of the six to include both minor and major keys, the rest inhabit one world or the other; the effect here is beautiful, as the major key of the middle section [2:17] feels like a fresh spring morning after the frozen section which precedes it) [1:23]; in texture (its variations explore a variety of textures, while the others concentrate on a single one each); and finally in its tempo (I put it in the 'slow' group, and it mostly is, but the cadenza which follows the middle section and the variation right thereafter are decidedly virtuosic) [3:39-5:22]. It is almost a compact showcase in itself – but in an unselfconscious way, its inner variety and richness naturally serving the heartachingly beautiful melody, which is its theme.

*No. 2* is all moonlight and flutter, the shimmering filigree of its sonorities belying the densely covered, nearly black music pages. The middle section contains a few outbursts of rage as well as a climax of peeling bells [1:51], but the overall atmosphere remains hushed and fleeting. This is a prime example of Rachmaninov's unique piano writing – dense arabesques of light-fingered notes in both hands, surrounding and lifting up a melody. This will be intensified manyfold in *No. 4* (which is a complete contrast in mood – a raging storm of emotion, tumultuous, passionate, defiant), and brought to a true climax in the closing piece of the cycle, *No. 6*, where the thick four-layered writing makes the piano sound at times like two instruments playing at once. Separating the three virtuoso pieces are two slow musical moments: *No. 3* – a tragic narrative, part tale, part chant, part funeral march – and *No. 5* – a gentle *barcarolle*, its melody rocking on the undulating left-hand accompaniment; it is the only moment of repose in the entire cycle, and one of the very few on the entire recording.

We could also divide the set in another way – the first four, which are in minor keys, and the last two, which are in major. I think we could almost see two distinct cycles within *Op. 16*: one which finishes after *No. 4*, which is a

very strong stopping point, or the full one, continuing to *Nos. 5* and *6*. The first option has the advantage of brevity – the first four are a wonderfully compact 20 minutes – and unity of mood and colour between the pieces, yet I believe that by following through to the last two pieces – *No. 5* feels in this case as a cleansing, effacing the grief, pain and struggle of *Nos. 3* and *4* – and allowing ourselves a bit of light and genuine joy, we gain much more than we lose.

Rachmaninov, later in his life, complained about the torments he used to experience and the problems he used to encounter writing small-scale compositions. Thus in a letter from 1910: "I don't like this occupation, and it's hard going for me. There's neither beauty nor joy in it". And later: "In my concerti and symphonies there are many places which were written in a single breath, whereas each of my small pieces required meticulousness and hard work". And yet how wonderful it is that he did persevere despite the difficulties, for his musical miniatures clearly show him a master of the short-form genre, and in that form he left us some of his strongest, most impactful and memorable music.

**Boris Giltburg**

## Boris Giltburg



Photo: Sasha Gusov

The pianist Boris Giltburg was born in 1984 in Moscow and grew up in Tel Aviv. He began lessons with his mother at the age of five and went on to study with Arie Vardy. In 2013 he took first prize at the Queen Elisabeth Competition, having won second prize at the Rubinstein in 2011 and top prize at Santander back in 2002, and subsequently appearing across the globe. Notable débuts have included a South American tour in 2002 (and every season since), with the Israel Philharmonic in 2005, the Indianapolis Symphony in 2007, a tour of China in 2007, and at the BBC Proms in London in 2010. He has appeared with Marin Alsop, Martyn Brabbins, Jiří Bělohlávek, Stéphane Denève, Edo de Waart, Christoph von Dohnányi, Vladimir Fedoseyev, Neeme Järvi, Kirill Karabits, Emmanuel Krivine, Hannu Lintu, Vasily Petrenko, Jukka-Pekka Saraste, Lahav Shani, Tugan Sokhiev and Yan Pascal Tortelier, among others. He appeared on the EMI Début label in 2006, and then in 2012 released the Prokofiev *War Sonatas* on Orchid Classics, earning him a place on the shortlist for the critics' award at the Classical Brits. A disc of Rachmaninov, Liszt and Grieg followed in 2013. In 2014 he began a long-term recording plan with Naxos.

[www.borisgiltburg.com](http://www.borisgiltburg.com)

Pianist Boris Giltburg sees Rachmaninov's *Études-tableaux*, Op. 39 as cinematic short stories or colourful tone paintings. In contrast, the unashamedly beautiful *Moments musicaux* are concentrated explorations of a single idea or mood, from struggle and pain towards light and genuine joy. In these collections, which contain some of the composer's most affecting music, Rachmaninov shows himself to be a master of the meticulously crafted short-form genre.

Sergey  
**RACHMANINOV**  
(1873-1943)

**Études-tableaux, Op. 39 (1896) 40:11**

- |   |                                       |      |
|---|---------------------------------------|------|
| 1 | No. 1 in C minor: Allegro agitato     | 3:31 |
| 2 | No. 2 in A minor: Lento assai         | 6:04 |
| 3 | No. 3 in F sharp minor: Allegro molto | 3:16 |
| 4 | No. 4 in B minor: Allegro assai       | 4:28 |
| 5 | No. 5 in E flat minor: Appassionato   | 5:22 |
| 6 | No. 6 in A minor: Allegro             | 2:35 |
| 7 | No. 7 in C minor: Lento               | 7:15 |
| 8 | No. 8 in D minor: Allegro moderato    | 3:51 |
| 9 | No. 9 in D major: Allegro moderato    | 3:50 |

**Moments musicaux, Op. 16 (1916-17) 30:27**

- |    |   |      |
|----|---|------|
| 10 | No. 1 in B flat minor: Andantino        | 7:16 |
| 11 | No. 2 in E flat minor: Allegretto       | 3:23 |
| 12 | No. 3 in B minor: Andante cantabile     | 7:31 |
| 13 | No. 4 in E minor: Presto                | 3:09 |
| 14 | No. 5 in D flat major: Adagio sostenuto | 4:05 |
| 15 | No. 6 in C major: Maestoso              | 5:04 |

**Boris Giltburg, Piano**

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