

Raffi Besalyan
The Return

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF
ARNO BABAJANIAN



Sergei Rachmaninoff

Préludes

1. Op. 3, No. 2 in C sharp minor - Lento 3:51
2. Op. 23, No. 5 in G minor - Alla marcia 3:52
3. Op. 23, No. 6 in E flat major - Andante 3:11
4. Op. 23, No. 7 in C minor - Allegro 2:54
5. Op. 32, No. 5 in G major - Moderato 3:07
6. Op. 32, No. 10 in B minor - Lento 4:41
7. Op. 32, No. 12 in G sharp minor - Allegro 2:43

Etudes-Tableaux

8. Op. 33, No. 6 in E flat minor - Non allegro 1:48
9. Op. 39, No. 1 in C minor - Allegro agitato 3:36
10. Op. 39, No. 5 in E flat minor - Appassionato 5:04
11. Op. 39, No. 6 in A minor - Allegro 3:03

Variations on a Theme of Corelli

12. Theme: Andante 0:57
13. Variation 1: Poco piu mosso 0:39
14. Variation 2: L'istesso tempo 0:32
15. Variation 3: Tempo di Menuetto 0:38
16. Variation 4: Andante 1:00
17. Variation 5: Allegro (ma non tanto) 0:22
18. Variation 6: L'istesso tempo 0:24

19. Variation 7: Vivace 0:27
20. Variation 8: Adagio misterioso 0:58
21. Variation 9: Un poco piu mosso 0:57
22. Variation 10: Allegro scherzando 0:39
23. Variation 11: Allegro vivace 0:25
24. Variation 12: L'istesso tempo 0:35
25. Variation 13: Agitato 0:32
26. Intermezzo 1:19
27. Variation 14: Andante (come prima) 0:58
28. Variation 15: L'istesso tempo 1:18
29. Variation 16: Allegro vivace 0:30
30. Variation 17: Meno mosso 1:05
31. Variation 18: Allegro con brio 0:36
32. Variation 19: Piu mosso. Agitato 0:32
33. Variation 20: Piu mosso 0:58
34. Coda: Andante 1:31

Arno Babajanian

35. Prelude 1:47
36. Melody 2:10
37. Elegy 3:31
38. Vagharshapat and Dance 2:14

Total time: 1:05:42

The Return

Thoughts of home dominate much of the music Raffi Besalyan performs here. Rachmaninoff's "B-Minor Prelude" was inspired by *The Return*, a painting by Arnold Böcklin, and although it was written before his emigration the work was a constant companion in his exile, a favorite for his own recitals and a reminder of his years in Russia. Similarly, the folk-inspired piano music of Arno Babajanian recalls a distant homeland. Based in Moscow for much of his adult life, Babajanian looked back to his native Armenia in music that mixed the folk idioms of his people with the virtuosic pianism of the Russian school. And now Besalyan, an Armenian pianist based in the United States, brings their music together in a program infused with warm memories, evocations of far off places, and reminders of earlier times.

By 1931, Sergei Rachmaninoff had been exiled from Russia for over a decade. His homeland was still very much in his thoughts, as was demonstrated by a letter in the *New York Times* to which he was co-signatory, drawing attention to the brutality of the Soviet regime. On a visit to Switzerland that year, he decided to build a holiday house, a replacement for Ivanovka, the beloved *dacha* he had lost in the Revolution. So he bought a piece of land overlooking Lake Geneva and as building commenced he turned his attentions to composing a new piano work, the "Variations on a Theme of Corelli."

In fact, the theme he used, "La Folia," is not by Corelli at all, but a traditional Portuguese dance melody. Corelli had used it in his Op. 5, "Sonate a Violino e Violone o Cimbalo," as have many composers since. Another was Liszt, who incorporated it into his "Spanish Rhapsody," a work Rachmaninoff had been performing since 1919.

Another possible source was the violinist Fritz Kreisler, who was Rachmaninoff's regular duo partner. Three years earlier, Kreisler had written his own set of variations on the theme.

Rachmaninoff's substantial set was completed in just three weeks, and when it was published, carried a dedication to Kreisler. The work was premiered by the composer in October 1931 in Montreal, to immediate and lasting acclaim. Yet it was the last major composition that Rachmaninoff wrote for solo piano, and the only one he produced after leaving Russia.

Rather than composing, performing was the primary focus of Rachmaninoff's later career, but the piano music of his Russian years remained central to his repertoire. Even before emigrating, the "C#-Minor Prelude" had become Rachmaninoff's calling card, his most famous solo piano work and the one he was asked most often to play. He first performed it in 1892 at a concert that marked his public debut as a pianist. Even before the end of the century, the prelude had reached a huge international audience, thanks largely to Rachmaninoff's cousin Alexander Siloti, who presented it in recitals in Western Europe and the United States in 1898. In later years, the composer came to resent the fame that this short, early work had achieved. But it remained his most popular recital piece, audiences demanding it as an encore with shouts of "C-Sharp!"

Rachmaninoff's career as a recitalist was particularly influential to his composing in the first decade of the 20th century. The music of Chopin featured regularly in his performances and informed many aspects of his own solo piano works. The "Op. 23 Prelude" set was composed

between 1901 and 1903, the same period in which he was writing his “Variations on a Theme of Chopin.” Rachmaninoff’s preludes are longer and more sophisticated than Chopin’s, but are often similar in melody and texture. The Sixth Prelude of the set, in Eb Major, was composed on May 14, 1902, the day that Rachmaninoff’s wife gave birth to their daughter Irina. The mood of the music here reflects the composer’s joy and contentment at becoming a father for the first time.

The “Op. 32 Prelude” set was composed in 1910. Its thirteen Preludes, combined with the ten of Op. 23 and the earlier “C# Minor,” make up a cycle of 24 works covering every major and minor key, just as in Chopin’s Op. 28 set. But unlike Chopin’s shorter preludes, Rachmaninoff’s were not intended to be performed together, and the composer himself only ever programmed selections. As in the earlier preludes, Op. 32 echoes many of Chopin’s melodic shapes and accompanying textures, although both are given a distinctly Russian accent. Rachmaninoff preferred his piano works to be appreciated in the abstract, but a coincidental remark prompted him to disclose the inspiration for the Prelude No. 10, the “B Minor.” The pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch, a close friend and a regular performer of Rachmaninoff’s music, commented one day over lunch that this prelude suggested a return. “Stop” said Rachmaninoff, grasping his colleague by the shoulder, “it is The Return.” Moiseiwitsch had not seen the painting to which Rachmaninoff referred, but when he later did so, he concurred that it was very similar to the mental picture the music evoked.

Rachmaninoff often relied on undisclosed programmatic ideas for inspiration. The two sets of “Etudes-Tableaux,” Opp. 33 and 39, make explicit through their name the pictorial dimension of the music. However, the individual movements are untitled and so no specific subjects are given. The first set was composed in 1911, soon after the completion of the “Op. 32 Preludes,” and the second in 1916-17, making them the last substantial works he wrote before leaving

Russia. In 1930, Ottorino Respighi orchestrated five of the preludes, prompting Rachmaninoff to confide in him the covert subjects of those movements. Among the works they discussed was “Op. 39 No. 6,” which Rachmaninoff admitted was based on Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, a story that he often read to his daughter at the time.

Both Rachmaninoff and Chopin can be heard as influences in the music of Arno Babajanian. His studies in Moscow from 1938 exposed the Armenian composer to a wide range of styles, and the greater political freedom of the Khrushchev period when he began his professional career in the 1950s allowed him to explore many of these ideas in his works. The “Piano Trio in F# Minor,” written in 1952, established his credentials as a composer of concert music, but he was also well-known for his cinema work, and particularly for the title song he wrote for the film *Song of the First Love* released in 1958.

The four works presented here demonstrate how Babajanian was able to incorporate aspects of Armenian musical identity into the Russian piano idioms he had become acquainted with through his studies in Moscow. The line of inheritance from Chopin via Rachmaninoff is evident in the “Prelude.” The slow movements of Rachmaninoff’s concertos are reflected in the “Melody” that follows. “Elegy” was written towards the end of Babajanian’s life in 1978, composed in memory of fellow Armenian composer, Aram Khachaturian. Many decades earlier, Khachaturian had played a decisive role in Babajanian’s career, recognizing the younger musician’s talent when he heard him perform at the age of just five. The final work in the program, “Vagharshapat Dance,” is an early composition dating from 1947. It is one of Babajanian’s most popular works, skillfully infusing distinctively Armenian colors with an approach to piano figuration inherited directly from Rachmaninoff.

— Gavin Dixon







Raffi Besalyan

Hailed as “a true heir of the mainstream of Russian pianism, like Horowitz” (*CHOPIN Magazine*, Japan), “a keyboard phenomenon that needs to be heard by everyone interested in pianists and the piano” and “a pianist of formidable ability” (*Fanfare Magazine*, USA), and “a master of his art” (*The Record Geijutsu Magazine*, Japan), Raffi Besalyan has established an international reputation as a magnetic and passionate performer. Active as a recitalist, orchestral soloist, and chamber musician, Besalyan appears in many important music venues worldwide. Critics on both sides of the Atlantic have praised his performances for their virility, poetry, and extraordinary technical command. Armenian-born American pianist Besalyan made his formal New York debut in Carnegie Hall after winning the Artists International Competition, and was subsequently invited to perform at Merkin Concert Hall in the Artists International “Outstanding Alumni-Winners” series. The *New York Concert Review* described him as “Technically brilliant . . . Besalyan played with a great deal of temperament, speed and power . . . audacious spirit and poetic substance, deeply felt tenderness.” Most recently, Besalyan made his Chicago debut in the famed Orchestra Hall at Symphony Center as the featured guest artist for the Chicago International Music Festival. Among his competition awards are top prizes received from the Josef Hofmann International Piano Competition, the New York Frinna Awerbuch International Competition, and the MTNA National Piano Competition. In recent years, Besalyan has dazzled his audiences in North and South America, Europe, Russia, and Asia, appearing as a soloist with the Osaka Symphony Orchestra (Japan); the Orchestra Sinfonica Del Festival Di Chioggia in Venice (Italy); the Yerevan Symphony Orchestra (Armenia); the Belgorod Symphony (Russia); the Kharkov Symphony (Ukraine); the New Jersey Festival Orchestra; the Owensboro Symphony (Kentucky); the Tulare Symphony (California); and the Moscow

Chamber Orchestra, among others. The *Armenian Reporter Int'l* (New York) stated that a “standing ovation and cries of ‘Bravo’ and ‘Encore’ went to pianist Raffi Besalyan . . . [he] mesmerized the audience with his gracious, delicate, yet powerful presentation of Rachmaninoff’s Concerto No. 3.” Since his highly successful tour of Japan in 2001, Besalyan has visited the country on a yearly basis for concerts and master classes arranged by IMC Music in Tokyo and MAS Management. Articles about Raffi Besalyan have appeared in the *CHOPIN Magazine*, *Asahi*, *Sankei*, *Kobe*, *Nikkei*, and *Yomiuri* newspapers. After a recital in Osaka, *Sotokuan Press* wrote, “The entire hall was devoured by Besalyan’s glorious touch and crystalline sound . . . Besalyan was not just playing the piano, he was creating wonderful art, and treated the piano with his love for the music.” Highlights of Besalyan’s career include the Asbury University Artist Series in Kentucky; Pro Musica of Detroit; The Embassy Series in Washington, D.C.; the “Keyboard Karma” series of Vancouver; “Overture Concerts” in Nelson, Canada; a concert tour and master classes in Japan including a performance of Rachmaninoff’s 3rd Concerto with the Osaka Symphony; solo recitals in Izumi Hall and Phoenix Hall in Osaka; recitals and master classes in Tokyo; a recital tour in celebration of Niigata Nippo newspaper’s 70th Anniversary; recitals in Rachmaninoff Hall and Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatory in Russia; a performance at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.; appearances in New York with the Jasper Quartet for Brooklyn Friends of Chamber Music and with Metropolitan Opera tenor Jon Garrison; live broadcasts of solo recitals on WPR’s *Sunday Afternoon Live from the Chazen*; a fundraising recital for the Madison Symphony Orchestra in Madison (Wisconsin); and recitals with pianist Sara Davis Buechner in New York City. Besalyan’s debut solo album, *Dance, Drama, Decadence* (IMC Music, Japan), has earned international accolades since

its release in June 2012. The album received the prestigious Jun-Tokusen Award from *The Record Geijutsu*, Japan's leading classical music magazine, and was chosen as "Classical Album of the Month" by *Mainichi Shimbun*, one of Japan's largest newspapers. *Dance, Drama, Decadence* was selected as the "Best New Release of the Month" by Tokyo FM Music Bird, a prominent radio channel, where the CD premiered in its entirety. In addition, Ongaku no Tomo of Japan recommended and archived the CD as a study reference for music students and professors. *Fanfare Magazine* featured Besalyan in an extensive interview followed by rave reviews of the album, and another glowing review appeared in *American Record Guide*. Besalyan was also interviewed by Wisconsin Public Radio's Norman Gilliland on *The Midday*, and *Dance, Drama, Decadence* was aired on WPR (Madison, WI) and KHPR (Honolulu, HI). The album features virtuoso works by Rachmaninoff, Liszt, and Ravel and premiere recordings of colorful folkloristic pieces by Armenian composers Komitas and Baghdassarian. In 2014, Besalyan signed with GRAMMY® Award-winning record label Sono Luminus. He has also recorded *The Bach-Busoni Edition* Vol. 1 with Sara Davis Buechner which was released by Koch International Classics in September 2008. Besalyan received

his Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees from the Yerevan Komitas State Conservatory as a student of Sergey Barseghyan. He received an additional Master of Music degree from Rowan University under Veda Zuponic and studied at the Manhattan School of Music with legendary American pianist Byron Janis and with Sara Davis Buechner. His studies at the Moscow State Conservatory included classes with Alexei Nasedkin, Victor Merzhanov, and Naum Shtarkman. In 2014, Dr. Besalyan joined the faculty of Georgia State University in Atlanta where he is currently Assistant Professor of Piano. A former faculty member of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and Rowan University in New Jersey, Besalyan also served on the faculties of Festival Musica in Laguna in Venice, Italy, and the International Summer Music Festival at Rowan. Besalyan has been active as an adjudicator for PTNA and Osaka International Piano Competition in Japan, International Chopin Piano Competition in Asia, competitions in Italy, and for various chapters of MTNA. Besalyan is an assistant consultant on several piano projects for Dover Publications.

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The Return
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