



RACHMANINOV

Morceaux de Fantaisie
Morceaux de Salon

Three Nocturnes • Four Pieces

Boris Giltburg



Sergey
RACHMANINOV
(1873–1943)

Morceaux de Fantaisie, Op. 3 (1892)		20:39
1	No. 1. Élégie in E flat minor: Moderato	5:20
2	No. 2. Prélude in C sharp minor: Lento	4:02
3	No. 3. Mélodie in E major (1892 first version): Adagio sostenuto	4:14
4	No. 4. Polichinelle in F sharp minor: Allegro vivace	3:39
5	No. 5. Sérénade in B flat minor (1940 revised version): Sostenuto – Tempo di Valse	3:24
Three Nocturnes (1887)		11:48
6	No. 1. Nocturne in F sharp minor: Andante cantabile	4:31
7	No. 2. Nocturne in F major: Andante maestoso – Allegro assai	3:06
8	No. 3. Nocturne in C minor – E flat major: Andante – Allegro moderato	4:11
Four Pieces (1887–88)		13:07
9	No. 1. Romance in F sharp minor: Andante	2:33
10	No. 2. Prélude in E flat minor: Allegro	2:53
11	No. 3. Mélodie in E major: Andante	3:49
12	No. 4. Gavotte in D major: Allegro	3:52
Morceaux de Salon, Op. 10 (1894)		30:46
13	No. 1. Nocturne in A minor: Andante espressivo	5:04
14	No. 2. Valse in A major: Allegro assai	3:43
15	No. 3. Barcarolle in G minor: Moderato	4:17
16	No. 4. Mélodie in E minor: Allegretto	4:04
17	No. 5. Humoresque in G major (1940 revised version): Allegro vivace	3:50
18	No. 6. Romance in F minor: Andante doloroso	3:58
19	No. 7. Mazurka in D flat major: Tempo di Mazurka	5:50
Morceaux de Fantaisie, Op. 3		4:33
20	No. 3. Mélodie in E major (1940 revised version): Andante con moto	

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873–1943)

Morceaux de Fantaisie • Morceaux de Salon • Three Nocturnes • Four Pieces

Rachmaninov's earliest published cycle of piano pieces, the *Morceaux de Fantaisie, Op. 3*, was composed at some point in 1892, after the 19-year-old composer graduated with the highest honours from the Moscow Conservatory. Even though the autographs of the individual pieces are undated, we know that the first piece to be performed in concert (on the 26 September 1892, in what essentially was Rachmaninov's public debut as a pianist) was the C sharp minor *Prélude*, destined, for better or worse, to become Rachmaninov's signature work.

The *Prélude* deserves a lengthy aside. Personally, to this day I find it impossible not to fall under its spell, no matter how often I have played or heard it. From the three opening notes – ominous, severe, almost impersonal – the atmosphere is so palpable, the tension so superbly built, that the music grips you at once. The sound of bells in these descending notes is unmistakable – Rachmaninov's music is forever suffused with it. But at the same time, for me there is a grounded, rock-hewn quality to the music, with the measured pacing of its chords, the slow, tectonic shift of harmonies underneath. The increasingly turbulent agitation of the middle section (though how lovely the very brief moment of light in the shift to A major at [2](#) 1:48!) leads to a reprise where the once-subdued bells erupt in manic, overwhelming clangour. The dynamic is quadruple *forte sforzando*, the music is written on four staves – this is a moment larger than life, both aurally and on the page. As it subsides, the *Prélude* ends with a series of chords over a repeated bass – a single tolling bell, dying away – in which the middle right-hand voice contains the first notes of the Dies irae motif. This medieval plainchant was Rachmaninov's musical *idée fixe*, and this, as far as I know, is its first occurrence in Rachmaninov's music. The very last chords of the *Prélude* reach up unexpectedly – a final supplication and simultaneously a moment of clear light, illuminating the desolate landscape.

The popularity of the *Prélude* cannot be overstated – it almost single-handedly established Rachmaninov's fame abroad, long before audiences had a chance to hear him in person. Later in life, it followed him everywhere, from London restaurants to New York jazz bands. As a performer he could not escape it either – audiences demanded it after every concert, and reviewers unfailingly mentioned whether he gave the listeners 'the *Prélude*' or not.

Finally, Rachmaninov came to hate it. 'Many, many times I wish I had not written it,' he said in an interview some three decades after its composition. 'I have a feeling that the public comes to my concerts only to hear me play that one selection – that they sit through the rest of the concert just waiting for it.' 'Don't you think it's good music?' asked the interviewer. Rachmaninov rumbled: 'It isn't bad, only I have written much better music, which is not appreciated half so much.'

This recalls Beethoven's own grumble to Czerny about the *Moonlight Sonata*, years after its composition: 'Surely I have written better things!' Both composers seemed to begrudge the overshadowing popularity of a single work and experience the disassociation of a mature artist with the work of their much younger selves: they have moved on, but the audiences have not. In Rachmaninov's case, the resentment of being defined by or even reduced to a single composition was compounded by bitterness of a financial nature: he had received nothing from the immense success of the *Prélude*, as at the time of its publication, Russia had no international copyright protection laws.

Be that as it may, I believe the *Prélude* will forever remain an icon of Romantic music – immediately recognisable, immediately gripping.

Alongside being a standalone entity, the *Prélude* served two other roles – one, as the first in Rachmaninov's epic cycle of 24 preludes in all major and minor keys (which included the *10 Preludes, Op. 23* and the *13 Preludes, Op. 32*, and took Rachmaninov 18 years to write), and the other, as indeed on this album, as the second of the five *Morceaux de Fantaisie, Op. 3*, which Rachmaninov finished composing by December 1892, and premiered in Kharkov (today Kharkiv) that same month.

The cycle as a whole is very true to its name (which may or may not have been inspired by Schumann's *Fantasiestücke, Op. 12*, two of which Rachmaninov performed at the same concert in Kharkov). The intensity and immediacy with which Rachmaninov imagines and evokes the emotional atmosphere in each of the pieces is remarkable – the heavy, deadened grief of the *Élégie*, momentarily lightened by happier memories in the middle section; the star-lit beauty of the E major *Mélodie*; the boisterous, chaotic theatricality of *Polichinelle's* character; the complex narrative of the *Sérénade*, from its movie music-like beginning, through to its swaggering accompanying strumming, the seemingly ardent melody with its undercurrent of mockery, and finally, the reveal – the openly rapacious ending. We often think of Rachmaninov's later piano cycle – the *Moments musicaux*, the *Préludes*, the *Études-tableaux* – as epitomes of powerful emotional storytelling in piano miniature form, but Rachmaninov's imagination was just as powerful at 19, in my opinion!

The cycle found success from the beginning, with an early reviewer declaring some of the works ‘masterpieces’. Whereupon Tchaikovsky, an early admirer of Rachmaninov’s talent and his mentor, commented with a smile: ‘So, Seryozha, I hear you are writing masterpieces already!’ Tchaikovsky’s friendship carried tremendous importance for Rachmaninov, who hero-worshipped the older composer, and Tchaikovsky’s death, less than a year later, devastated him. Rachmaninov composed his great *Trio élégiaque No. 2* in Tchaikovsky’s memory, and having finished it in December 1893, immediately began working on a cycle of seven pieces, which he premiered alongside the *Trio* in January 1894.

These pieces, which were eventually published as *Morceaux de Salon, Op. 10*, are character pieces, mostly light, in contrast to the tragic character of the *Trio*. But two connections do exist: the opening piece of the cycle, a *Nocturne*, is in A minor – the key of Tchaikovsky’s own great *Trio* – and its heartfelt and pure melody could well have been written by Tchaikovsky himself. A second link is in the sixth piece of the cycle, a *Romance*, which is full of halting lament and heartbreak, like an overspill of Rachmaninov’s grief.

Alongside these are a carefree *Valse* (with wonderfully contented languor in the middle section [14] 1:16] and a blindingly brilliant coda [3:21]), a moody *Barcarolle* (I particularly love the reprise at [15] 2:34, where the opening melody is joined by the fast figurations we first heard at 1:35), a lilting, sincere *Mélodie* in E minor with a bright middle section in G major [16] 1:48], an endlessly characterful *Humoresque* – possibly the highlight of the cycle! – and a majestic *Mazurka* in D flat major.

Rachmaninov often included individual pieces from both opuses in his recitals, and gradually altered them in performance, as we can hear from his own piano rolls and acoustic recordings in the 1920s and 1930s, which sometimes depart quite significantly from the printed score. In 1940 he codified some of these changes in revised editions of the *Mélodie, Op. 3, No. 3*, the *Sérénade, Op. 3, No. 5* and the *Humoresque, Op. 10, No. 5*. In my opinion, the revised *Sérénade* and *Humoresque* are clear improvements over the early versions; the harmonies are richer and more complex, the virtuoso passages show the full genius of Rachmaninov’s unique piano writing at the peak of his powers, and overall the characterisation is more sharply defined. The revised *Mélodie*, however, differs so much from its original version, that it feels almost like a ‘cover version’ by the mature Rachmaninov of his younger self’s piece. I wanted to include both versions on this album, as I feel both are equally valid: the purer, early chordal version, with its innocent beauty as pristine as a marble statue, and the more worldly revision, the stately *Adagio sostenuto* transmuted into a flowing *Andante con moto*, the melody now surrounded by lush figurations, with just a hint of jazzy chromaticism – perhaps a light fingerprint of the many years of Rachmaninov’s life in America.

The two other cycles on the album are among the earliest pieces that have survived in Rachmaninov’s hand – the *Three Nocturnes* are from late 1887, when Rachmaninov was just 14 years old, and the *Four Pieces*, which are stylistically and compositionally more advanced, are tentatively dated to 1888 (although there is no consensus on this). The *Nocturnes* capture a touching snapshot of a young mind wavering between childhood fantasies and more grown-up feelings. Working on them, I found myself thinking of Beethoven’s *Concerto No. 0, WoO 4*, written at a similar age. Beethoven at 13 showed complete mastery of form but very little imagination, with very little that hints at his mature style. Rachmaninov at 14 was the opposite: pure imagination, with very little interest in form or structure! Melodic ideas flow freely and generously, and there is tangible atmosphere throughout (even if it comes with a trace of sentimentality – something mature Rachmaninov resolutely shunned, both as a composer and a performer). We can also hear definite snippets of Rachmaninov’s musical DNA in the harmonies and melodic lines. It is as if the raw material is already there, but still fragmented and unformed. In terms of structure, the pieces could perhaps more justly be called ‘Fantasies’, as all contain multiple loosely-connected sections, similar to fantasies by Mozart or Beethoven.

Still, many lovely moments are to be found: the marching section in the middle of the first nocturne [6] 1:59] showing off Rachmaninov’s large-chord technique, the summer-day melody of the second nocturne [7] 0:57], or the early incarnation of the sound of bells in the third [8] 0:40]. It is also interesting to see that Rachmaninov must have been writing for his own hands, with little concern for the fact that most normal people would not be able to play those very large chords – something which almost never occurs in his mature works.

The *Four Pieces* already feels like a big step forward in terms of compositional maturity, even if the untamed imagination of the *Nocturnes* here feels a little more restrained, or controlled. Rachmaninov must have felt the progress himself, as he originally intended the pieces to be his *Opus 1*; though he also must have felt that there he still had a way to go – his eventual *Opus 1* was his *First Concerto*, a mature, passionately inspired masterpiece.

The opening *Romance* could be a link to the earlier *Nocturnes*, as it, too, has a slight hint of sentimentality in the opening melody, and the unexpected change to major in the reprise feels emotionally undeserved [9] 1:43]. However, there is a striking moment in the middle [1:07] where the music builds towards an unresolved climax –this to me feels much closer to Rachmaninov’s mature music, both harmonically and emotionally. The *Prélude* is immediately appealing with the earnest entreaty of its melody and the driving energy of the right-hand accompaniment. Interestingly though (and perhaps making it less appealing to the performer!) the texture of this accompaniment – non-stop repeated intervals – is so decidedly unpianistic, that Rachmaninov never used it again, as far as I’m aware. The *Mélodie* is, in fact, a juxtaposition of two melodies: a dreamy one in E major, and a heartfelt cello-like one in C sharp minor. The transition back to E major is particularly lovely in its harmonic colours [11] 1:00]. For me the highlight of the cycle is the closing *Gavotte*, full of unabashed, sunlit fun, written in an unexpected 5/4 metre that lends it a wonderful jauntiness and energy.

Years after completing the *Morceaux de Salon*, Rachmaninov wrote to an old friend of his, Nikita Morozov, recounting his work over the summer of 1910: ‘... the worst going is with the small piano pieces. I dislike this occupation and it’s heavy going for me. There’s neither beauty nor joy in it.’ We cannot know whether this was a sentiment he shared while working on the pieces that comprise the four cycles on this album, but to me all bear the signs of a composer pouring all his heart and soul into each work. And in them, we glimpse both the young Rachmaninov finding his voice and the timeless Rachmaninov we instantly recognise today.

Boris Gilburg

Boris Giltburg



Artist-in-residence with the Dresden Philharmonie and guest artistic curator for Portland Piano International, Boris Giltburg is lauded across the globe as a deeply sensitive, insightful and compelling interpreter. Giltburg has recently appeared with the Helsinki and Essen Philharmonic Orchestras, among others, and collaborated with leading conductors including Jukka-Pekka Saraste, Dima Slobodeniouk and Jun Märkl. He regularly plays recitals in the world's most prestigious halls, including Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie and New York's Carnegie Hall. Giltburg is widely recognised as a leading interpreter of Rachmaninov, performing his complete *Préludes* during the opening weekend of the Southbank Centre's 2025/26 season, and *Third Piano Concerto* with the Philharmonia Orchestra at Bold Tendencies. In 2025 Giltburg released an album featuring Rachmaninov's *Piano Sonatas Nos. 1 and 2* alongside his own version of *The Isle of the Dead* (based on Kirkor's arrangement), which received the Preis der deutschen Schallplattenkritik (Naxos 8.574601). In recent years Giltburg has also engaged in a series of in-depth explorations of other major composers such as Ravel, Chopin and Beethoven. Giltburg is a consummate recording artist and has been exclusive to Naxos since 2015, winning the Opus Klassik Award for Best Soloist Recording for his Rachmaninov concertos and *Études-tableaux*; a Diapason d'Or for his Shostakovich concertos and his own arrangement of Shostakovich's *Eighth String Quartet*; and a Choc de Classica for his Rachmaninov concertos. He also won a *Gramophone* Award for Dvořák's *Piano Quintet No. 2* on Supraphon with the Pavel Haas Quartet, as well as a Diapason d'Or and Choc de Classica for their joint release of Brahms' *Piano Quintet*. Giltburg's blog, *Classical Music for All*, is complemented with articles in publications such as *Gramophone*, *BBC Music Magazine*, *The Guardian* and *The Times*.

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Composed at the age of 19, Rachmaninov's earliest published cycle of piano pieces, the *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, contains the *Prélude in C sharp minor*, destined to become his signature work, and the *Mélodie in E major*, much loved by Tchaikovsky. The expressive *Morceaux de Salon* show Tchaikovsky's influence and some of the grief felt by Rachmaninov after his mentor's death. With the inclusion of the melodically rich *Nocturnes* and the *Four Pieces*, the earliest to survive in his hand, this collection shows both the young composer finding his voice and the timeless Rachmaninov we recognise today.

Sergey
RACHMANINOV
(1873–1943)



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Boris Giltburg, Piano

A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet.

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