



RACHMANINOV

Piano Concerto No. 2

Études-tableaux, Op. 33

Boris Giltburg, Piano
Royal Scottish National Orchestra
Carlos Miguel Prieto

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873–1943): Piano Concerto No. 2 • Études-tableaux, Op. 33

Fritz Kreisler (1875–1962): Liebesleid • Franz Behr (1837–1898): Lachtäubchen, 'Polka de W.R.'

To play the opening of Rachmaninov's *Second Piano Concerto* is a singularly powerful experience. You wait for silence – the piano starts on its own, there's no need to maintain eye contact with anyone – and when the hall seems to have disappeared, you let the first chord sound, as quietly and distantly as possible, and be answered by a low F, like the clapper of a giant bell beginning to ring. Seven more chords follow, each louder than the previous one – there's a growing sense of tension, even of dread at the implacable approach of that sombre tolling. As the crescendo reaches its highest point, four heavy notes dissolve into roiling arpeggios, and the way is paved for the entrance of the main theme.

That Theme... Sitting at the piano, within reach of the first violins, the entrance of the orchestra is literally breathtaking. It's a physical, visceral sensation: some 40 string instruments in unison playing one of the most passionate, full-blooded, emotionally charged melodies ever written (*not* hyperbole!). The piano part, mostly written in the middle and lower register, has very little chance of cutting through and becomes just one texture within the enveloping orchestral sound. But that doesn't matter at all: the music sweeps you up and – absorbed within its harmonies, climbing with the long line to the first climax of the piece, the first 'point', as Rachmaninov called those climaxes – you feel like part of something much bigger. It's exhilarating, almost awe-inspiring, and it takes all your concentration not to become overwhelmed.

And these are just the first three minutes, less than 10 per cent of the concerto. Climaxes abound throughout, with the piano sometimes fighting for its life against the combined forces of the orchestra. The emotional intensity dial is almost constantly at maximum – though Rachmaninov's emotions are always genuine and sincere, and the fast sections contain more than enough muscle to allow for a lean and taut interpretation. Juxtaposed with these heights are numerous beautiful moments of respite, most strikingly in the second movement, but also the lyrical second theme of the first

movement (finally the piano gets to play a melody too!) and the slightly exotic second theme of the finale, which returns in triumphant splendour at the very end of the movement as the 'point' of the entire concerto, with a huge sound produced by all, a drenched pianist, and the roof in danger of falling down.

Speaking of the second movement, it is a world of its own, protected both from the undercurrent of deep sorrow which runs through the first movement and from the extroversion and dazzling virtuosity of the finale – though there's a taste of the latter at the end of the middle section, just before the main theme returns. The gradual brightening of the chords at the very beginning seems to clear the afterimage of the darker first movement; they lead to unhurriedly flowing triplets on the piano, followed by a floating melody played first by the flute, then by the clarinet: for me it's the gentleness and warmth of early sunbeams on the dew-covered grass before a summer's day. The middle section introduces some emotional and technical turbulence, but things calm down and the piano triplets appear again, though hushed and subdued this time, like a frozen landscape. To thaw it, it is the strings who reprise the main theme. Rachmaninov knew so well what he was doing – I can't think of a surer way to make the heart overflow than this reprise, combining the sweet sensation of homecoming with the lush, warm sound of the violins. Finally, there's a coda, which is pure fairy-tale music: the heroes of the story slowly recede into the distance of their 'happily ever after'.

A small aside: within that beautiful movement lurks one of the trickiest ensemble places of all Rachmaninov piano concertos – at 2:02, when the piano plays the original theme, and the orchestra accompanies. The accompanying triplets are here played by violins in pizzicato and the two clarinets, and the challenge is one of acoustics: sitting at the piano you hear the violins very well, but can hardly hear the clarinets, as their sound projects into the hall, going, as it were, over your head. Sitting in the audience, though, one will easily hear the

clarinets and hardly the soft violin pizzicatos, as those are too delicate to carry a long distance. Finally, the clarinets often can't hear the pianist clearly, as most of the piano's sound also projects into the hall. The resulting danger of this acoustic triangle is that the clarinets and the piano may drift apart. It's a problem which can be solved, but one which we almost always encounter during the first rehearsal.

It's perhaps all too easy for us to relate the path which the concerto follows – from the passion, darkness and pain of the first movement, through the dreamy idyll of the second, and to the unequivocal victory at the end – with Rachmaninov's own life story: his depression and inability to compose following the disastrous premiere of his *First Symphony* (ruined by an apparently drunken Glazunov on the conductor's podium) and his fight to overcome it with the help of a hypnotherapist, one Dr Dahl, to whom this concerto was dedicated. But then again, towards the end of his life, Rachmaninov said in an interview that when composing, he was only trying to make the music express simply and directly what was in his heart – so perhaps there is truth to such a reading. Whatever the case, the music is among the strongest works Rachmaninov ever composed, and I can't help being tremendously thrilled before every performance, waiting to find myself in that silence, about to play the opening chord.

'There are numerous places in my concertos and symphonies that were written in a single breath, while each of my short pieces always required meticulous care and hard work.' This quotation from Rachmaninov seems to me to describe well the contrast between the *Second Piano Concerto* and the *Études-tableaux*, Op. 33. The writing in the concerto is lovingly generous: long-breathed lines and broad landscapes painted with large brushstrokes; pure, fervent emotions; rich piano writing and even richer orchestration. The *Études-tableaux*, Op. 33, on the other hand, are perhaps the most chiselled, economically written cycle to come out of Rachmaninov's pen. Like good short stories, everything superfluous has

been removed, until nothing but a clear and concise musical idea remains.

Those miniatures were written between August and September 1911, exactly one year after Rachmaninov composed the *13 Préludes*, Op. 32, thus completing his cycle of 24 preludes. Both opuses were composed at Ivanovka, a country estate some 450 km south-east of Moscow, which was Rachmaninov's summer residence for nearly 30 years, between 1890 and 1917. Rachmaninov found the quieter, less hectic country atmosphere very productive, and established a general pattern of intense composing periods in Ivanovka during the summer (even if in his letters he often berates his perceived lack of productivity) and concert performances during the rest of the year.

It is sometimes commented that in the *Études-tableaux* Rachmaninov discovered new means of expression, and that they show a compositional complexity going far beyond that of the *Préludes*. I would like to propose a counter-argument: it seems to me that there's not much to distinguish the last set of the *Préludes* (Op. 32) and the first set of the *Études-tableaux* (Op. 33) musically and stylistically, and the names could easily be swapped between one set and the other.

Some similarities are immediately noticeable, as there are two corresponding pairs between the sets: the *Prélude No. 4 in E major*, Op. 32 and the *Étude-tableau No. 7 in E flat major*, Op. 33, both festive depictions of a fair that share a distinct Russian character; and the *Prélude No. 6 in F minor*, Op. 32 and the *Étude-tableau No. 6 in E flat minor*, Op. 33, both stormy, brooding virtuoso pieces, written mostly in hushed tones, like controlled whirlwinds of sound which sometimes explode to destructive effect.

There are also strong textural connections between the G sharp minor *Prélude No 12*, Op. 32 and the C major *Étude-tableau No. 2*, Op. 33, while the D minor *Étude-tableau No. 5*, Op. 33 has a counterpart to its dark fairy-tale character in an even earlier work, the D minor *Prélude No. 3*, Op. 23.

But beyond these direct links, the two sets are connected through a similar approach to composition,

both in the technical aspect of piano writing (leaner, more transparent textures), and in the way the musical ideas seem to lie closer to the surface, more immediate and gripping – and there's a definite move away from the purer Romanticism of previous works to something which is more bristly, angular, modern. In this, both cycles seem to belong together, a single stage in Rachmaninov's evolution as a composer.

My (unscientific) guess is that having finished the preludes cycle, Rachmaninov may have wanted to write more piano miniatures, but not necessarily to start another preludes block. Perhaps he felt that one full cycle was enough, perhaps he didn't want the obligation of writing another 24 pieces, or indeed preferred not to be bound by the rigid demands of a cycle progressing through all the keys – so he came up with another name for the new pieces. *Études-tableaux* is a strong, intriguing name, not used before or since as far as I'm aware, but in the end those pieces could just as well be called preludes; on balance they are neither more nor less technically demanding than his 24 *Préludes*. And the other way around – many of the *Préludes* are just as evocative and have just as strong a story-telling element as those pieces in *Op. 33*, and so, I believe, could easily be called études-tableaux.

There's a small mystery related to the publication of the *Études-tableaux*, *Op. 33*. Out of the planned nine pieces, only six were published; at the last moment Rachmaninov withdrew three of them from publication. This was done at such short notice that the publisher had no time to alter the title page, and had to use the original one, showing all nine pieces, only omitting the prices of the deleted three. Of the withdrawn études, the original *No. 4* was later reworked and published as part of the later *Études-tableaux*, *Op. 39* (the famous *Red Riding Hood and the Wolf*), and part of another one, *No. 3*, was used in the second movement of Rachmaninov's *Fourth Piano Concerto*, over a decade later. Neither of these, however, explain the abrupt decision to withdraw the three from publication in 1914. Rachmaninov evidently valued the works enough to keep

the manuscripts; compiling a list of his compositions in 1917 he noted alongside *Op. 33*: 'the deleted ones are in my desk drawer, they will not be published'.

I wish I could present a resolution to this mystery, but the truth is that we just don't know, as Rachmaninov himself left no other remark. Explaining the rejection on musical grounds seems unsatisfying – both *No. 3* in C minor and *No. 5* in D minor are complete, finished works, with strong character and personality. *No. 3* in particular, with its passage from the utter darkness of C minor to the pure, comforting light of C major is in my opinion one of Rachmaninov's most imaginative tone-poems or tone-paintings, from any period or cycle. And if one could argue that it is too long or expansive to fit the cycle – where the other pieces are all on the compact, concise side of Rachmaninov's miniatures – what then about the other rejected étude, *No. 5*, which fits the others perfectly in size and scope?

The two études were published posthumously in 1948, and with them came a question – should we play them at all, and if yes, where? As part of the cycle, where they were originally intended to be, or outside it, as an appendix, at least somewhat respecting Rachmaninov's wishes? Seeing how many pianists perform the cycle in its entirety, I'm guessing that we all find the rejected music far too appealing to accept Rachmaninov's decision, especially since we don't know the reasons behind it. As for the order, my personal feeling is that restoring them to their original places feels more natural than any other solution. There is a sense of continuity going from the ending of *No. 2* – a gradual brightening after the rain – and into the gloom of *No. 3*; and the vanishing fifths in the ending of *No. 5* flow easily into the austere, somewhat mysterious intervals opening *No. 6*, before the whirlwind breaks loose. And as a last (again, completely subjective) argument, I would mention the finality of *No. 9*'s ending – that raging anger, like that of a furious prophet, calling forth destruction and ruin upon the entire world, seems like a closing, decisive word of that tense cycle, brooking no further argument.

I wanted, however, to finish the recording on a softer note. Rachmaninov, far from Stravinsky's description of a 'six-foot scowl', possessed a wonderful and gentle sense of humour, as is evident from his personal letters and from the reminiscences of those who knew him. We can find traces of it in his 'serious' works as well (the middle section of the finale of this *Third Piano Concerto*, for instance), and abundantly in his transcriptions. The *Polka de W. R.*, written in 1911, just a few months before the *Études-tableaux*, *Op. 33*, was long considered an original composition by Rachmaninov. The tune was a favourite of his father's, hence the name (Wassily Rachmaninov), but was only recently identified as being originally written by Franz Behr (1837–1898), a German composer of numerous salon pieces. It's sparkling and quirky, full of wit and merrymaking – though always with Rachmaninov's innate sense of good taste.

Liebesleid, on the other hand, was always known to be composed by Fritz Kreisler (1875–1962), one of the greatest violinists of his time, and Rachmaninov's good friend and chamber music partner. The work is sweet and lovely in its original form (for violin and piano), but becomes quite a bit more sophisticated in Rachmaninov's treatment

– I find it a wonderful fusion of Viennese charm and Rachmaninov's sense of humour, perhaps softer and gentler here than in the *Polka*, but always present in the unusual harmonies (the very opening contains a chain of parallel fifths in the accompaniment – utter harmonic anathema according to the rules) and the webs of whimsical figurations surrounding the melody.

Boris Giltburg

A note about the cover photo: it's a shot I took of the Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood, one of the iconic buildings of Saint Petersburg. Rachmaninov often spoke of the strong impression the sound of church bells left on him as a child, and it later became an integral part of his musical language. Not only in the famous prelude *Bells of Moscow* or the symphonic poem *The Bells* – we can find bells large and small throughout his entire output. This recording, too, is framed by the sound of bells: from the opening of the *Second Piano Concerto* on one hand to the tumultuous tolling of the *Étude-tableau No. 9* on the other.

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Carlos Miguel Prieto



Carlos Miguel Prieto is the leading Mexican conductor of his generation. He is known for his charismatic conducting, dynamism and expressive interpretations. Prieto was appointed music director of the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de México in 2007, and of the Orquesta Sinfónica de Minería in 2008. He is also music director of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, where he led the cultural renewal of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. Carlos Miguel Prieto is in great demand as a guest conductor with many of North America's top orchestras including the Chicago, Cleveland, Dallas, Toronto and Houston symphony orchestras, as well as European orchestras such as the London Philharmonic Orchestra, NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchester, Hallé Orchestra, Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Orchestre National de Lyon and the Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg.

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Boris Giltburg



The pianist Boris Giltburg was born in 1984 in Moscow and has lived in Tel Aviv since early childhood. He began lessons with his mother at the age of five and went on to study with Arie Vardi. In 2013 he took first prize at the Queen Elisabeth Competition, catapulting his career to a new level. He has appeared with many leading orchestras such as the Philharmonia Orchestra, Israel Philharmonic, DSO Berlin, Frankfurt Radio Symphony, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Oslo Philharmonic, Danish Radio Symphony, St Petersburg Philharmonic, Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse and the Baltimore Symphony. He made his BBC Proms debut in 2010 and has toured yearly to

South America and China. He has played recitals in leading venues such as the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Tokyo Toppan Hall, Carnegie Hall, London Southbank Centre, Bozar, Louvre, the Elbphilharmonie and Amsterdam Concertgebouw. In 2014 Giltburg began a long-term recording plan with Naxos, releasing solo works by Schumann (8.573399) and Beethoven (8.573400) to critical acclaim. His solo Rachmaninov recording (8.573469) was *Gramophone's* CD of the Month in June 2016, and most recently Giltburg's first concerto CD (8.573666) won a Diapason d'Or for his account of the Shostakovich concertos with Vasily Petrenko and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, coupled with his own arrangement of Shostakovich's *String Quartet No. 8*. His 2012 Orchid release of the Prokofiev *Sonatas* was shortlisted for the critics' award at the Classical Brits, and was closely followed by a Romantic sonatas disc (Rachmaninov, Liszt, Grieg). Giltburg is an avid amateur photographer and blogger, writing about classical music for a non-specialist audience.

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Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No. 2* is one of the most passionate and beloved concertos in the repertoire, its lyricism and virtuosity charting a trajectory from darkness through idyll to dazzling triumph. The *Études-tableaux*, *Op. 33* are richly characterised musical evocations, expressive and often explosive, that reflect a more angular, modern aspect.



Sergey RACHMANINOV (1873–1943)

	Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18 (1901)	34:49
1	I. Moderato – Allegro	11:23
2	II. Adagio sostenuto	11:35
3	III. Allegro scherzando	11:52
	Études-tableaux, Op. 33 (1911)	23:04
4	No. 1 in F minor: Allegro non troppo	2:47
5	No. 2 in C major: Allegro	2:05
6	No. 3 in C minor: Grave	4:50
7	No. 5 in D minor: Moderato	3:37
8	No. 6 in E flat minor: Non allegro – Presto	1:38
9	No. 7 in E flat major: Allegro con fuoco	1:44
10	No. 8 in G minor: Moderato	3:25
11	No. 9 in C sharp minor: Grave	3:08
12	Fritz Kreisler (1875–1962): Liebesleid (arr. Rachmaninov) (1910/21)	4:54
13	Franz Behr (1837–1898): Lachtäubchen, ‘Polka de W.R.’ (arr. Rachmaninov) (1911)	3:59

Boris Giltburg, Piano

Royal Scottish National Orchestra 1–3 • Carlos Miguel Prieto 1–3

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