



Arcadi Volodos in recital

Thursday 7 March 2019 7.30pm, Hall

Schubert

Piano Sonata in E major, D157

Six moments musicaux, D780

interval 20 minutes

Rachmaninov

Prelude in C sharp minor, Op 3 No 2

Prelude in G flat major, Op 23 No 10

Prelude in B minor, Op 32 No 10

Romance, Op 21 No 7 (arr Volodos)

Serenade, Op 3 No 5

Étude-tableau in C minor, Op 33 No 3

Scriabin

Mazurka, Op 25 No 3

Caresse dansée, Op 57 No 2

Énigme, Op 52 No 2

Flammes sombres, Op 73 No 2

Guirlandes, Op 73 No 1

Vers la flamme, Op 72

Arcadi Volodos piano

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Welcome

A warm welcome to this evening's recital, given by one of the most lauded pianists of today, Arcadi Volodos. He is an artist who combines a palette of many colours, the silkiest of touches and a probing intelligence, allied to a technique that seems to know no bounds.

Arcadi Volodos is also something of a musical explorer and tonight's programme very much reflects that. To begin, an early sonata by Schubert, written when he was just 18, and full of hints of what was to come in his mature keyboard works. Schubert's ability to turn even the briefest of pieces into miracles of nuance and character is beautifully demonstrated in the *Six moments musicaux*.

From here, Arcadi Volodos takes us to Russia and two composers very close to his heart.

His sequence of six pieces by Rachmaninov includes his own transcription of a song the composer wrote while on honeymoon ('How beautiful it is here') and begins with the famous Prelude in C sharp minor.

Scriabin was born a year before Rachmaninov but there the similarities end, for rather than being part of a Russian Romantic tradition Scriabin very much followed his own course. The result was music of astonishing febrile energy and a harmonic sound-world that combined delicacy and inherent instability to glittering effect, not least in the late masterpiece *Vers la flamme*.

It promises to be a very memorable concert. I hope you enjoy it.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Piano Sonata in E major, D157 (1815)

1 Allegro ma non troppo

2 Andante

3 Menuetto: Allegro vivace – Trio

Six moments musicaux, D780 (1823–7)

1 Moderato in C major · 2 Andantino in A flat major · 3 Allegro moderato in F minor · 4 Moderato in C sharp minor · 5 Allegro vivace in F minor
6 Allegretto in A flat major

Although the piano sonata was to become one of the pillars of Schubert's mature music, not least in the three masterpieces that he produced in the final year of his short life, his relationship with the form had rather uncertain beginnings. By the time he composed his first piano sonata in February 1815, when he was 18 years old, he had already written at least 10 string quartets and his first two symphonies. Yet the Sonata in E major, D157 is one of a number of such works on which the young Schubert made substantial progress but never quite completed in a conventional sense. In the case of D157, there is no finale. Indeed, surviving fragmentary sketches for numerous other sonata projects from this time suggest that he was feeling his way into the form, conscious perhaps of the intimidating presence of Beethoven.

The first movement is dominated by jubilant scales and arpeggios and doesn't convey the melodic fecundity of the great song composer Schubert would become. But harmonically it is more adventurous, not least in the brief development section, which begins with an immediate deflection to the remote F major. The soul of this sonata is found in the E minor slow movement, which is more characteristic of the mature Schubert, not least in its lyrical poise and sense of interior stillness. The third movement, a Minuet in B major with a central Trio section in G major, is placed as a traditional dance movement in a four-movement scheme, and so of course doesn't bring tonal closure by returning us to the home key. We don't know why Schubert didn't compose a finale.

For all its charms, the E major Sonata is unmistakably the work of a young composer in the throes of rapid development. We can see the extent of this growth in the *Six moments musicaux*, D780. We can't be certain exactly when these pieces were composed – the autograph is lost – but No 3 was published in an album of Christmas and New Year music in December 1823 and No 6 in a similar volume a year later, each given a fanciful title by the publisher. The remaining four pieces were probably composed in 1827, and are generally more subtle and emotionally ambiguous. The set was published, in pidgin-French, as *Momens musicaux* in July 1828, just four months before Schubert died.

Although it took some time for Schubert's contribution to the piano sonata genre to be taken seriously, his mastery of the lyrical character piece was far more quickly recognised. The six pieces of the *Momens musicaux* are bonded by a certain consistency of style and expressive economy, and on the whole follow Schubert's favoured sectional structure and ternary form. They make use of his exceptional gift for establishing and sustaining distinct rhythmic gaits, allied to a poetic concentration that is often hauntingly beautiful.

The yodelling theme of No 1 gives way to a more flowing middle section, and both are characterised by typically Schubertian swings between major and minor. The gentle opening of the A flat major No 2, with its *siciliano*-style dotted rhythm, is offset by a barcarolle-like second section in F sharp minor, and both

are subtly varied on their returns. No 3 in F minor, the earliest of these pieces and still one of Schubert's most popular miniatures, finds a kindred spirit in the famous G major ballet music from his incidental music to *Rosamunde*, and has garnered a number of arrangements, by, among others, Fritz Kreisler (for violin and piano), Francisco Tárrega (guitar) and Leopold Godowsky (a spiced-up version for piano). No 4 in C sharp minor contrasts a bare two-part

texture in the outer section with a lilting major-key middle section, rarely rising above *pianissimo*, that is hinted at again in the brief coda. No 5, the only one of these pieces in a genuinely brisk tempo, returns us to F minor and is based on a driving dactylic rhythm. No 6, a straightforward Allegretto in A flat major with a central Trio in D flat, returns us to the predominant mood of ruminative lyricism.

interval 20 minutes

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873–1943)

Prelude in C sharp minor, Op 3 No 2 (1892)

Prelude in G flat major, Op 23 No 10 (1903)

Prelude in B minor, Op 32 No 10 (1910)

Romance, Op 21 No 7, arr Volodos (1902)

Serenade, Op 3 No 5 (1892, rev 1940)

Étude-tableau in C minor, Op 33 No 3 (1911)

In June 1892, when the 19-year-old Rachmaninov graduated from the Moscow Conservatoire, he won the institution's highest accolade, the Great Gold Medal, for his opera *Aleko*. With help from his teacher Nikolai Zverev and advice from Tchaikovsky, he also secured a deal with the publishing house of Gutheil. Fuelled by this ultimately temporary optimism, he wrote the Prelude in C sharp minor, which would later be published as part of his *Morceaux de fantaisie*, Op 3. This piece brought Rachmaninov both fame and notoriety, and whenever he performed, especially in England and America, he felt compelled to play it, usually as an encore.

The arresting opening, with its Lisztian evocation of tolling bells and its layered chords, offers an example of Rachmaninov's skill in achieving the maximum impact from his material. The *Agitato*

central section brings a more lyrical idea, a falling sequence that is another hallmark of the composer's melodic style and which grows to a cadenza that is cut off in its prime by the climactic return of the opening tolling bells. The all-engulfing sonority of these huge chords recedes to a quiet conclusion.

Rachmaninov returned to the genre of the piano prelude a decade later, once again on the back of a surge of creative confidence, having emerged from writer's block to compose his ever popular Second Piano Concerto. The Ten Preludes, Op 23 were composed between 1901 and 1903, and the final piece in the set, the Prelude in G flat major, captures the intense nostalgia and introspective melancholy characteristic of so much of Rachmaninov's music. The long-spun

left-hand melody is later joined by a right-hand countermelody, as the piano writing becomes more florid and richly luxuriant.

Just as the Op 23 Preludes were written in the wake of the Second Piano Concerto, the 13 Preludes, Op 32 – which complete the cycle of 24 keys – were written soon after the Third Piano Concerto, in 1910. The epic No 10 in B minor is one of the greatest of the set – the composer told fellow-pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch that it was his favourite – and its inspiration was a painting by Arnold Böcklin, *The Return* ('Die Heimkehr'). The entire piece is tightly constructed, being based on the opening *siciliano* dotted rhythm, and the music builds mightily to an early climax which is followed by an extended emotional release. The blurring of B major and B minor at the end, reminiscent of the close of the first movement of Mendelssohn's Op 28 Fantasy, confirms a hazy emotional ambiguity that is often present in the Russian's later music.

Rachmaninov composed around 80 songs, which spanned his creative career. The 12 songs of Op 21 were mostly written in the spring of 1902, and share the language of the Op 23 Preludes. He put the finishing touches to these songs while on honeymoon near Lake Lucerne in Switzerland, and 'Zdes' khorosho' ('How beautiful it is here') is dedicated to his new wife Natalia. Originally setting words by Glafira Galina, this exquisite song creates a miniature world of ethereal calm and wonder. Arcadi Volodos's glorious

transcription adds to the harmonic and textural lushness, while allowing the melody to sing out above the sumptuous chromatic richness.

The Serenade is the final piece in the *Morceaux de fantaisie*, Op 3, one of the original companions of the C sharp minor Prelude we heard earlier. Composed in 1892, and revised in 1940, this Spanish-style character piece in B flat minor becomes increasingly elaborate as the melodic line circles the dominant F with ever-widening and more florid figuration.

The first of two books of *Études-tableaux*, Op 33, was composed soon after the Op 32 Preludes, in 1911. There were originally nine pieces in the Op 33 set, but three were withdrawn – one later appeared in the Op 39 set, and two others were published posthumously in 1948, and are now generally reinstated as part of Op 33. The third *Étude*, in C minor, was one of these. It's not clear why Rachmaninov withheld it, although it does contain a magical harmonic sequence that was later put to good use in the Fourth Piano Concerto, which although not completed until 1926 was already being planned. Perhaps the composer felt he couldn't duplicate the idea. In any case, the *Étude* begins in an ominous C minor, the chordal chromatic manoeuvrings being rooted by tolling bell-like sonorities, before the music opens out in a gloriously tranquil C major, the chromaticism now resolved to thoroughly diatonic arpeggios, played *pianissimo*, creating a mood of rapt stillness.

Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915)

Mazurka, Op 25 No 3 (1899)

Caresse dansée, Op 57 No 2 (1908)

Énigme, Op 52 No 2 (1907)

Flammes sombres, Op 73 No 2 (1914)

Guirlandes, Op 73 No 1 (1914)

Vers la flamme, Op 72 (1914)

Scriabin was an almost exact contemporary of Rachmaninov, and in many ways an isolated figure in Russian musical history. Like Rachmaninov, he studied the piano with Nikolai Zverev, and then at the Moscow Conservatoire with Vasily Safonov. Despite his small hands (he could reportedly stretch no more than a ninth), he was a star in a class of stellar pianists. He passed his piano exams with flying colours, but he failed to graduate in composition. Nevertheless, his attentions turned increasingly to composing, and in this he was a true original. From the outset his voice was unusual, even unique. He was always able to improvise, and even when he was considered to be primarily a pianist, he would create pieces in a style that owed much to Chopin, whom he idolised, albeit already flavoured with his own distinctive harmonic idiom. Indeed, harmonically Scriabin stands as one of the great post-Wagnerian innovators. His early enriched Chopinesque style was transmuted – thanks in

part to the influences of Liszt and Wagner, as well as Nietzsche, mysticism and Theosophy, and in musical terms to a developing harmonic language based more on unsettling fourths than on traditionally stabilising thirds – into music that is erotically voluptuous in its chromaticism, and by turns extravagant and refined in its gestures.

Emblematic of Scriabin's early debt to Chopin are his sets of mazurkas, especially Op 3 (1889) and Op 25 (1899), which embrace a deeply ethnic genre so strongly associated with the Polish composer that anyone who subsequently writes in the form does so in open acknowledgment of this fact. True to the idiom, Scriabin's mazurkas jump kaleidoscopically between joy and melancholy. The E minor Mazurka, Op 25 No 3, sets a fragmentary melodic profile against falling chromatic harmonies in a manner that captures this sadness with aristocratic restraint.

Scriabin's later music becomes increasingly enigmatic, elliptical and other-worldly. Chromatically altered harmonies become so commonplace that they are used as stable consonances, while chordal writing gives way to a tendency towards airborne, fluttering textures that give the impression of delicate fragility, abundant sensuality and febrile hyperactivity, sometimes all at once. 'Caresse dansée', Op 57 No 2 is an example of this intangible exquisiteness: it never rises above *pianissimo*, while the harmony feels so elusive that it comes as a surprise when the piece ends in an incontrovertible C major. 'Énigme', Op 52 No 2 is a perfect example of the composer's fluttering writing, and the markings *Étrange*, *capricieusement* and, later, *Voluptueux*, *charmé* give an idea of the piece's fragile character. It ends without tonal resolution.

The *Deux danses*, Op 73, and *Vers la flamme*, Op 72 are among Scriabin's final compositions. 'Flammes sombres', the second piece of Op 73, was associated by Scriabin with a Dantesque scene of degraded souls delighting in evil: 'this is very mischievous music ... the eroticism is already unhealthy, a perversion ... a dance over corpses', all of which gives a clue to the rather obsessive nature of the music. 'Guirlandes', the first of the set, was for Scriabin, 'refined and ethereal, delicate and glassy ... sweetness to the point of pain'. *Vers la flamme* is one of the most famous of his late works. Described by the composer as outlining a trajectory 'from clouds to blinding light', the 'flame' of the title is the 'ocean of fire' that in Scriabin's imagination engulfs and transmogrifies the universe. The music follows an unbroken line of ascent, following its inevitable and ever-intensifying path to oblivion.

Programme note © Tim Parry

About the performer

Marco Borggreve/Sony Classical



Arcadi Volodos

Arcadi Volodos piano

Arcadi Volodos was born in St Petersburg in 1972 and first studied voice and conducting, only beginning serious training at the piano in 1987 at the St Petersburg Conservatoire. He pursued his studies further at the Moscow Conservatoire with Galina Egiazarova, then in Paris and Madrid.

Since his New York debut in 1996, Arcadi Volodos has performed throughout the world in recital and with many of the most eminent orchestras and conductors. He has worked with, among others, the Berlin, Israel, Munich and New York Philharmonic orchestras, the Philharmonia, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Dresden Staatskapelle, Orchestre de Paris, Leipzig Gewandhausorchester, Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra, and the Boston and Chicago Symphony orchestras, collaborating with conductors such as Myung-Whun Chung, Lorin Maazel, Valery Gergiev, James Levine, Zubin Mehta, Seiji Ozawa, Jukka-Pekka Saraste, Paavo Järvi, Christoph Eschenbach, Semyon Bychkov and Riccardo Chailly.

Piano recitals have played a central role in his artistic life since the start of his career. His

repertoire includes major works by Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Beethoven, Liszt, Rachmaninov, Scriabin, Prokofiev and Ravel, together with less often performed pieces by Mompou, Lecuona and Falla.

He is a regular guest of the most prestigious concert halls of Europe. This season he appears at the Vienna Konzerthaus, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, here at the Barbican Centre, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie, Munich Herkulessaal, Zurich Tonhalle, Santa Cecilia in Rome, Cologne Philharmonie in Cologne, BOZAR in Brussels, Oslo Opera House and many others. As a concerto soloist he returns to the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra under Paavo Järvi, RAI Orchestra Turin under Christoph Eschenbach, Teatro alla Scala, Milan, under Michele Mariotti, Orquesta Nacional de España under David Afkham and Monte-Carlo Philharmonic Orchestrs under Kazuki Yamada.

Since his *Gramophone* Award-winning Carnegie Hall recital debut in 1998 Arcadi Volodos has recorded a series of acclaimed CDs, including Schubert sonatas, Rachmaninov solo pieces and transcriptions and live recordings with the Berlin Philharmonic of Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto under James Levine, and Tchaikovsky's First under Seiji Ozawa. His *Volodos plays Liszt* album gained numerous prizes. His Vienna Musikverein recital from 2010 was released on CD and DVD to enormous international critical acclaim., while his 2013 solo album of Mompou won a *Gramophone* Award and an ECHO prize.

Volodos plays Brahms is his latest recording, released in April 2017, and includes the complete Opp 117 and 118 *Piano Pieces* and a selection from Op 76. This album gained him an Edison Classical Award, a *Diapason d'Or* and *Gramophone's* prestigious Instrumental Award.